# ON READING READING: FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEMS OF "MÉTA-LECTURE"

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**_Abstract**

In his essay "Sur la Lecture," Roland Barthes (1984) expresses his doubts regarding what he calls "Méta-lecture," or the reading of reading. It is nothing but "un éclat d'idées, de craintes, de désirs, de jouissances, d'oppressions." My essay proposes that the ideas, fears, desires, *jouissances* and opressions evoked when discussing reading deserve a closer examination. There should be a systematic discussion about the problems of "Méta-lecture." The discourse about reading has its own problems, tropes, and ways of expression. Regardless of where or in what context a text about reading is written, it faces the same fundamental problems in regarding its subject: reading is a black box. Some may even doubt the existence of a common conceptual intersection in the spectrum of practices referred to as reading (Honold/Parr 2018). This highlights the essential indefinability of the concept of reading. What reading is in each case can hardly be reduced to a general concept. This indeterminacy is complicated by the difficulties of observation: reading cannot be isolated as such, but can only be observed as it is performed within specific contexts. Furthermore, this act of observation itself involves reading and is thus always self-reflective. In my essay, I demonstrate the strategies employed by texts on reading from different periods (Ickelsamer 1527, Keyn 1803, Moretti 2013, Wolf 2018) to compensate for the indeterminancy of reading.

> There is a story called "Reading."
> We all know this story.
> It is a story of pictures, and of *picturing*.[1]

## 1_Reading as a Black Box

"[L]a lecture de la lecture, la Méta-lecture, n'est pas elle-même rien d'autre qu'un éclat d'idées, de craintes, de désirs, de jouissances, d'oppressions,"[2] Roland Barthes states in his essay "Sur la Lecture" (1984). The short text that Barthes drafted for a conference on writing ends with the famous statement: "[L]a lecture, ce serait là où la structure s'affole"[3]—reading is the place where structure panics. It is hard to say anything about the process of reading, Barthes argues, because he considers the text, and especially the literary text to be an object with infinite layers and possibilities. What can be observed is nothing but a burst of ideas, of fears, of desires, of delights, of oppressions. Barthes reflections on "Méta-lecture" point to the more general problems of reading reading. Regardless of where or in which context a text about reading is written, it faces the same fundamental problem regarding its subject even if the texts do not evoke this as a problem: reading is hard to observe.[4] There even have been doubts about the existence of a common conceptual intersection in the spectrum

of practices referred to as reading.[5] This highlights the essential indefinability of the concept of reading. What reading is in each case can hardly be reduced to a general concept. In a sense reading is both an empirical and a linguistic black box. That is if we want to grasp the act of reading as a whole. The first reason for this indeterminacy is the difficulty of observation: reading cannot be isolated as such but can only be observed as it is performed within specific contexts. Furthermore, this act of observation itself involves reading and is thus always self-reflective. Even if the question of reading is approached with devices like the tachistoscope or with eye-tracking software these devices produce data that has to be read.[6] One might object that there are two different concepts of reading at work but there is still the operation of pattern recognition that can be found in the interpretation of data and in the observed act of reading itself.

The question of different concepts of reading leads to the second form of reading as a black box: the metaphorical quality of the word reading. If there have been doubts about the existence of a common conceptual intersection in the spectrum of practices one reason is the broad metaphorical use of the word reading. It is not only a metaphor for the process of experience itself as Hans Blumenberg has pointed out in his book *The Readability of the World* (2022 [1979]) it is also used for processes of data evaluation by non-human entities as in 'distant reading.' In a sense this metaphoricity of reading has its roots in the etymology of the word.[7] To read stems from Middle English 'reden' which means to counsel or to advise. The German 'lesen' meant to pick up or to collect; the French 'lire' comes from Wallon 'lére' which means to choose. So, when the words began to reference the deciphering of letters as this activity became more important, they were used metaphorically (as it is the case with many words). But still, there is writing about reading—by Barthes and many others. Mostly those texts are written as if the problem described by Barthes and others did not exist. They seem to know what they mean when they speak of reading. What we can observe is how the texts are, explicitly or implicitly, dealing with the impossibility to speak about the process of reading.

In this essay I will demonstrate the strategies employed by texts on reading from different periods to compensate for the indeterminacy of reading that comes to light in "Méta-lecture." The focus lies on the metaphors and allegories they find when trying to clarify what they mean by speaking of reading. The four texts I will be

discussing address reading in different contexts, scopes, and times: Valentin Ickelsamer's *Die rechte weis auffs kürzest lesen zu lernen* (1527), Johann Andreas Keyn's *Ueber die Lesesucht der Jugend, nebst einigen Vorschlägen, wie Eltern und Lehrer […]* (1803), Maryanne Wolf's *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World* (2018), and Franco Moretti's *Distant Reading* (2013).

## 2_The Dog Letter: Learning to Read in 1527

One of the most important and historically earliest genres of texts that are reading reading are didactic texts on learning how to read. Valentin Ickelsamer, known as the author of the first grammar of German, published in 1527 a short reading primer entitled *Die rechte weis auffs kürzest lesen zu lernen* [The right way to learn to read in a very short time]. It was written at a time when much was at stake: As Ickelsamer explains in a short foreword, the reading primer is part of the efforts of reformers to alphabetize people so that they can read the bible and follow theological discussions for themselves. The hope of Ickelsamer who was in personal contact with Luther is to open the eyes of more people about what the protestants perceived as aberrations of the papal church. Although the didactic purpose of *Die rechte weis* is paramount, there is a fundamental hope associated with reading in this case. Learning to read means not only learning to decipher written letters but also learning to read the bible in a particular way.

The theological hope that is connected to the teaching of reading has several consequences for the conception of the reading primer. On the one hand, the problem of reading reading should not be a problem for didactic texts because the meaning of reading is reduced to the deciphering of written letters. On the other hand, these texts must build bridges for people that do not know how to read in a strict sense. In presenting ways of teaching and learning reading these texts must situate reading in the world and take examples from their subjects' experience while at the same time isolate reading as deciphering of written letters.

By attaching religious texts like the Ten Commandments or the Small Catechism as exercise material for the learners, Ickelsamer makes it very clear that those are the texts they are supposed to read, even if there are not so many other options at the time. But the entanglement of theological hope and reading goes further and is deeply intertwined with the structure of the text. Ickelsamer gives examples for the

pronunciation of the sounds of the German language. All of those examples are naturally produced sounds such as the growling of a dog (for the letter r that Ickelsamer calls "the letter of the dog") or the chirping of sparrows (for the letter c). These examples work in two ways. First, they connect the sounds to the realm of experience. In this way, Ickelsamer bridges the gap that is created by the unobservability of the individual reading process. Secondly, they situate the sounds in the realm of god's creation. In this way, Ickelsamer legitimizes reading as something that is not artificial but natural and willed by God. At the same time, it changes how his readers (and their pupils) read the world in two ways: The chirping of a sparrow is now not only the chirping of a sparrow but also the letter c and part of god's creation.[8] As it does so reading becomes a concept that has several meanings at once. *Die* rechte *weis auffs kürzest lesen zu lernen* teaches to read, to read god's word and the world in the *right* way.

## 3_Tasting Books: Reading Mania Around 1800

In 1803, almost 300 years after Ickelsamer, Johann Andreas Keyn, the rector of a school in Regensburg, wrote a short treaty *Über die Lesesucht der Jugend nebst einigen Vorschlägen, wie Eltern und Lehrer dieselbe zu mäßigen und zu leiten trachten sollen* [On the reading mania of the youth with some proposals for its moderation and regulation by parents and teachers]. It is part of a wide-ranging discussion on a supposed reading mania amongst young people and especially women in Germany around 1800.[9] Because of the intricate connection between reading and desire Keyn's text introduces, it is exemplarily both for the discussion around 1800 as well as a discussion of "Méta-lecture."

It is as if the reading mania has infected the text and produced a variety of images for reading. While he writes about the problems of regulating the imagination of his pupils, Keyn's own imagination seems to go wild. Reading books is described as eating, heating (as in the ignition of passions) and grafting. Books—not texts—appear as nourishment, fire and trees. Readers are bees that produce honey through reading or a plant that produces poison by doing the same. Reading can lead to idleness ("Müßiggang") but also to the igniting ("Entflammung") of passions. Especially the metaphor of reading as eating or even devouring books[10] and the idea of idleness and igniting of passions are topoi of the debate on the supposed reading mania. Luckily,

this seems to be the main message of Keyn's text, there are teachers like Keyn—and parents—who are the main recipients of Keyn's text—to help and guide young people. Keyn's metaphorical over-determination of reading is surely partly due to an effort to make his job seem important. In the conclusion of his essay, he brings the loose ends of his metaphors almost back together when he speaks of taste in choosing books. Taste can be, on a metaphorical level, the taste of books as nourishment and, when taste is understood as a moral category, the reasonable choice of books and reasonable ways of reading.

The debate on reading mania attacks exactly the point in which reading is not observable. While someone like Barthes praises this unobservability as a precondition of reading texts in a multitude of ways the protagonists of the debate on reading mania try to take control of the individual minds of young men and especially women. It is in the metaphors that something abstract—reading—becomes concrete. The process of metaphorization becomes the metaphor of what happens in the process of reading. But as Keyn keeps producing metaphors that only almost come to a full circle at the end what we can learn about reading in his text is that reading will never lead to closure. It is almost as in Paul de Man's famous interpretation of Marcel Proust's *Recherche* in his chapter "Reading (Proust)": "*À la recherche du temps perdu* narrates the flight of meaning, but this does not prevent its own meaning from being, incessantly, in flight."[11] When there's no divine guarantee of meaning as with Ickelsamer reading becomes dangerous, at least to those whose task it is to guide the imagination of others.

From the point of view of "Méta-lecture" reading mania is a 'madness' of the readers of readers who discover that if we live in an individualized, enlightened society imagination is never the same but always at least slightly different, deferred.

## 4_In the Circus: The (Neuro)Science of Reading

With *Reader, Come Home* the neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf writes—Keyn would have been concerned—a plaidoyer for immersive reading. People that do not read— here Keyn would have agreed—"might never reach their full potential as a human being,"[12] says Wolf. The book derives much of its authority from the neuroscientific background of its author and her arguments. Wolf chooses an interesting form to address the question of reading: Taking up on an enlightenment tradition she writes

letters to her readers.[13] For the question of "Méta-lecture" Wolf's book is of interest because in the image-producing devices of neuroscience it is based on a new way of producing knowledge about reading and thus a new way of defining reading.

In the second letter subtitled "An Unusual View of the Reading Brain" Wolf tries to explain reading from her view. The letter has a well-known poem by Emily Dickinson as its motto that begins with the lines "The Brain—is wider than the Sky." The poem compares the brain to the sky, the sea and the "weight of God." The last comparison ends with the line "And they will differ—if they do—As syllable from sound—." Wolf reads the poem as a reflection on the capacity of the brain to "go beyond its original functions."[14] She makes very clear, quite opposite to Ickelsamer's notion of reading as natural, that in her view "reading is neither natural nor innate; rather it is an unnatural cultural invention." In her relatively naïve nature/culture dichotomy she separates the functions of the brain into those that are "original," "natural" and "biologically endowed" and those that are "newly developed." It is important to Wolf to point out that there is no genetic disposition for reading, it must be learned anew. New brain circuits must be built.

Wolf uses not only metaphors—rhetorical images—but drawn images to make her point.[15] What happens inside people's heads when they read, after Wolf, is a circus performance. The subchapter is called "Circuit du Soleil." In part, the idea to present reading as a circus performance derives from a play with the word 'circuit' as in brain circuits. It is itself a product of close, anagrammatic reading. Wolf's problem is similar to the one Keyn has. He (thinks he) knows the right way and the right books to read and tries to transfer this knowledge to his pupils and his readers. Wolf (thinks she) knows what reading is—at least from the perspective of a neuroscientist—and tries to transfer this knowledge to her readers. As with Keyn, the image production gets out of hand.

*Reader, Come Home*, like the other cases, undertakes the visualization of something invisible and the externalization of something internal. To reconstruct the reconstruction of the reading process in the brain the allegory of the circus presentation is only the start. The circus has three rings (or maybe five at some point). In these rings, there are many different actors, including several acrobats but also different kinds of locomotives (the word Wolf uses as an example is "tracks"). Other metaphors used along the way to describe the reading process in the brain are

"fireworks" and the "milky way" (stars as neurons). *Reader, Come Home* signals predominantly that the reading processes in the brain is complex and includes a lot of things that happen simultaneously. The circus as an allegory of reading associates reading with youthfulness, shininess, and joy. Like the fireworks and the milky way, it adds a connotation of spectacularity to reading. The result of this attempt to describe reading is attractive and raises our interest in it but it escapes our view. Reading becomes mystical and enigmatic; it is a substance that cannot be held but must be cared for. As seen in Keyn's text (and in de Man) reading cannot be grasped. When Keyn uses eating and plants as principal semantic fields, Wolf is far more visual. There could even be made a connection to digital media and their shininess that are—in Wolf's opinion—a danger to deep reading.

**5_The Pathos of Distant Reading: A Joke by Franco Moretti**

Wolf sees a danger for deep reading in digital media, Franco Moretti uses digital devices to 'read' without depth (at least in Wolf's understanding of the term). As professional readers he and his colleagues are not reading the canon or individual texts but several thousand texts at once using computerized support. In his 2013 collection *Distant Reading* Moretti comments on each of the essays that previously were published in different journals. In this way, he reads his 'reading.' It is an especially interesting text regarding the question of "Méta-lecture" because we can observe the emergence of a new meaning of reading and a new way of speaking about reading being invented. About his first mention of the concept of distant reading Moretti says, commenting on his own essay: "That fatal formula had been a late addition to the paper […]. Partly, it was meant as a joke; a moment of relief in a rather relentless argument. But no one seems to have taken it as a joke and they were probably right."[16] Although the concept of distant reading is developed in the very serious realm of scholarly studies of literature the origin of the term is—at least partly —a joke. In a way Moretti's invention of the term points towards the indeterminacy of reading. Reading can only be defined as a joke: It cannot be spoken about directly, not in a literal sense, but always only figuratively. Joking as a way of speaking without really meaning it may be one proper way of addressing reading. In trying to find new methods for research on literature Moretti has the conscious experience of the indeterminacy of reading: At one point, even for Moretti it is unclear if what he

does as a literary scholar can still be called reading: "*But was it still reading, what I was doing? I doubt it.*"[17] Apparently, it still must be called reading to be accepted by the community he addresses.

When Moretti tries to define distant reading, he points out that is an antonym for close reading. In a passage that is not in the commentary but in the actual essay he writes: "At bottom, it's [close reading] a theological exercise—very solemn treatment of very few texts taken very seriously—whereas what we really need is a little pact with the devil: we know how to read texts, now let's learn how *not* to read them. Distant reading: where distance, let me repeat it, *is a condition of knowledge*: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the texts."[18] If close reading is—as its historical roots suggest—indeed a theological practice, distant reading is on the side of enlightenment. Distant reading, in Moretti's view, is an abstract method of "mastering empirical reality."[19] But in this sense "distance" is not so much a method but the central metaphor that Moretti chooses for his concept of reading. He develops a "pathos of distance" in regard to reading. Like in Nietzsche it is a distance achieved through contempt, partly also of himself.[20] The contempt of close reading, a practice Moretti was using as any other literary scholar before starting to develop distant reading, motivates the invention of distant reading. Distance in opposition to closeness is associated with abstraction, coolness, and a sense of reality. Distant reading not only points at the distance from the individual text that these methods apply it also indicates a process of reading that is at a great distance from what usually is perceived as reading in the humanities.

Close reading—in Moretti's eyes—is stuck to only one or only a few texts. In opening a metaphorical space Moretti overwrites close reading and extends the limits of what reading can be. His goal is to achieve a perspective from a distance further away. If this perspective is one that, in Moretti's words, is not only better at literary history but also has a better way to deal with "empirical reality" we are getting close to another stable of writing about reading: The vanishing point where the reading of text becomes the reading of the world. Indeed, this is what Moretti wants to achieve. In an interview, when he goes from talking about his teacher Lucio Coletti to describe his own work, he states exactly that: "He [Coletti] basically said that the scientist describes the world as it is and takes pride in showing that there are no alternatives. In

contrast, the revolutionary wants to change the world completely. This is the dichotomy at the heart of my work."[21]

## 6_Conclusion: "Méta-lecture" and Metaphors

Learning to read means learning to see the world in a different way. As Ickelsamer's reading primer texts about reading reflect and try to address the intricate connection between the reading of letters and the reading of the world by metaphors that work both ways. When there is no divine guarantee of meaning it gets more complicated. Keyn's metaphoric overdetermination of reading can be read as a symptom of this complication. While Keyn tries to define right ways to read, Wolf takes a different approach. In her reflections on reading, the concept becomes enigmatic, almost mystical. Moretti in contrast defines a new way of reading. He sees very clearly that proposing a new way of reading texts means also proposing a new way of reading the world. This shift is marked by introducing a new metaphor in the discourse about reading.

That reading is, as Barthes says, where the structure panics, and is also true for the reading of reading. As shown in this essay in writing about reading, one is confronted with the problem that reading is a black box on several levels. One major workaround for texts about reading is the use of metaphors. Those metaphors add to the fundamental metaphoricity of reading and tend to address the reading of text *and* the reading of the world. In this way asking the question of "Méta-lecture" or the reading of reading sensitizes to the hopes, fears and dreams expressed in the texts on reading. That reading seems to escape definition and has the ability—maybe due to its indeterminacy—to connect with a lot of other concepts, makes it the perfect vehicle for those hopes, fears, and dreams. It is in those moments the reading of letters seems to turn into the reading of the world. The metaphoricity of reading is very productive when writing about reading. More so: Reading is a metaphor in the sense that maybe the best allegory that we have for what happens when we read are the mechanics of metaphorization. The discussed texts work with the indeterminacy of reading rather than trying to hide it or discuss it as a problem. They do so with more or less conscience for the problems of writing about reading. But in all texts the indeterminacy of reading is the condition of connecting a specific concept of reading

in its narrow sense to a broader understanding of reading that suspends the difference between the reading of texts and the reading of the world.

## _Endnotes

1   Peter Mendelsund, *What We See When We Read* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014), 8.

2   Roland Barthes, "Lire écrire," in *Le bruissement de la langue* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1984), 37–47, here: 37. See Roland Barthes, "Writing Reading," in *The Rustle of Language*, transl. by Richard Howard (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 33–43, here 33: "[T]he reading of reading, meta-reading, is […] itself merely a burst of ideas, of fears, of desires, of delights, of oppressions."

3   Barthes, "Lire écrire," 47. See Barthes, "Writing Reading," 43: "reading is the site where structure is made hysterical."

4   See Robert Darnton, *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (New York: Norton & Norton, 1990), 155.

5   See Alexander Honold and Rolf Parr, "Lesen – literatur-, kultur- und medienwissenschaftlich," in *Grundthemen der Literaturwissenschaft: Lesen*, eds. Alexander Honold and Rolf Parr (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 2–26.

6   On tachistocopy see Friedrich Kittler, "Ein Höhlengleichnis der Moderne: Lesen unter hochtechnischen Bedingungen," *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 57 (1985): 204–220.

7   See also Vilém Flusser, "Die Schrift: Hat Schreiben Zukunft?," (Göttingen: Edition Immatrix, 1990), 79–86.

8   See Elias Kreuzmair, "Der Hundsbuchstab: Zu den Tier-Beispielen in Valentin Ickelsamers *Die rechte weis auffs kürzist lesen zu lernen* (1527)," *Zeitschrift zum Beispiel* 5 (2022): 67–83.

9   See Andrea Bertschi-Kaufmann and Natalie Plangger, "Genderspezifisches Lesen," in *Grundthemen der Literaturwissenschaft: Lesen*, eds. Alexander Honold and Rolf Parr (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 550–570. See also Dominik von König, "Lesesucht und Lesewut," in *Buch und Leser: Vorträge des ersten Jahrestreffens des Wolfenbütteler Arbeitskreises für Geschichte des Buchwesens* 13. und 14. Mai 1976, ed. Herbert G. Göpfert (Hamburg: Hauswedell, 1977), 89–112.

10   See Günter Butzer, *Fehlende Trauer: Verfahren epischen Erinnerns in der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur* (München: Fink Verlag, 1998).

11   Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading – Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1979), 78.

12   Maryanne Wolf, *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in the Digital World* (New York: Harper, 2018) [ebook], chapt. "Letter One: Reading, the Canary of the Mind."

13   Projects like "Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend" [letters regarding the newest developments in literature] (1759–1765), a moral weekly typical for the time that counted Gotthold Ephraim Lessing as one of its most important contributors did not address individuals (even if they had a fictional addressee) but the public. For some time they were published as a periodical and soon you could also buy editions with several letters printed as a book.

14   This and all following citations in this paragraph are from Wolf, *Reader* [ebook], chapt. "Letter Two: Under the Big Top. An Unusual View of the Reading Brain."

15   The images are contributed by Wolf's fellow neuro-scientist Catherine Stoodley.

16   Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London/New York: Verso, 2013), 44.

17   Moretti, *Distant Reading*, 64–65. When Moretti refers to distant reading he speaks of a specific way of reading that looks for formal patterns that can be but does not have to be computer assisted.

18   Moretti, *Distant Reading*, 48–49.

19   Moretti, *Distant Reading*, 49, footnote 7.

20   See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (Leipzig: Neumann, 1887), accessed September 8, 2023, <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/GM>.

21   Ruben Hackler and Guido Kirsten "Distant Reading, Computational Criticism, and Social Critique: An Interview with Franco Moretti," *Le foucaldien* 2, no. 1 (2016). doi: 10.16995/lefou.22.