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Ways of Reading, Modes of Being

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Reading in Life

“I WOULD GO AND REJOIN LIFE AND FRIVOLITY IN BOOKS . . . the young girl would fall in love with the explorer who had saved her life and it would all end in a marriage. From these books and magazines I derived my most personal fantasy-world.”¹ When the young Sartre raised an imaginary sword and dreamed of being a hero after reading the adventures of Pardaillan, his yielding to the sway of the narrative was not so very different from what we all do and make happen when we read and find ourselves powerfully drawn towards different possibilities and promises of existence. Similarly, if Proust’s hero Marcel is constantly turning to books, working to cultivate their influence in his life, and harnessing his whole existential effort in his readings, this is not because his nature is other, it is not only in order to become a writer and separate himself from the patterns of common existence. Rather, for them and for us, works take their place in ordinary life, leaving their marks and exerting a lasting power.

Literature does not stand on one side, and life on the other, in a brutal, noncommunicating stand-off that belies any possibility of believing in books, a stand-off that would make Sartre’s fantastic urges (or the way Emma Bovary is swept away by literary examples) into a simple confusion between reality and fiction, an eschewing of action, a denigration of the real, and consequently, a weakening of the ability to live. We encounter, rather, forms intrinsic to life itself, impulses, images, and ways of being that circulate between subjects and works, revealing, activating, and affecting them. Reading is not a separate activity, functioning in competition with life, but one of the daily means by which we give our existence form, flavor, and even style.

What does it mean to give style to our existence? It is not something reserved for artists, esthetes, or heroic lives, but the distinctive trait of human life: not in the sense that we should coat our existence with a veneer of elegance, but because our every act brings possible forms of life into play. In this way, the ordinary and extraordinary experience of literature forms part of individual adventures, in which everyone can

reappropriate a relationship to oneself, one's language and possibilities. Literary styles offer themselves to the reader as genuine forms of life, engaging behaviors, methods, constructive powers, and existential values.

“In Swallow Style”

Opening a collection of poems by Francis Ponge, I read, for example, the title “In Swallow Style” and am suddenly captured by an exterior form, invited to follow its movement and try out, within myself, this style and this particular form of being.

Each swallow indefatigably hurls itself at—constantly practises—a signature, of its own kind, on the sky.

Steel pen, dipped in blue-black ink, you write *yourself* so fast!

That you leave no mark...

Except, in recollection, the memory of a fiery impetus, of a strange poem,

With sudden changes of direction, hairpin turns, rapid wing-glides, accelerations, gear-shifts, the way a shark swims.²

This is neither a desirable fate, nor a program for life; it is the simple form of a flight: “Each swallow indefatigably hurls itself at—constantly practices—a signature, of its own kind, on the sky.” The swoop of the poem conveys to the reader the law of the birds. The swallow actively forms a signature that I recognize: the lively signs, the blue-black commas it traces in flight. And this signature is not a mysterious code, placed in front of me in the static manner of a riddle, but the dynamic movement of the bird, its way of taking off, the very modality of its being, the style of this singular motion that the poem's phrases pursue, highlight, and qualify, and which thus energetically carries away my understanding and desire. I truly feel what it would represent, what it would mean “to be a swallow”: a certain swiftness, a certain stridency, the violence of will and emphasis of a cry . . .

Let's be a bit more human about them; a bit more attentive; reflective; serious.

Isn't their remoteness, their difference, from us due to the very fact that what resembles them in us is terribly contradicted, strained, by their other proximity—to abstract signs: flames or arrows?

(SP 181)

These swallows “proceed from us, and don't proceed from us” (SP 181), they are “like” us and also practically unattainable; they have something

similar to us, and it is this something, this comparable quality, that is assaulted, crushed, and distanced in them. Through this distancing, they perform in the sky “[what] we are unable to do, can merely long to do, can only imagine,” but precisely that which we can “imagine” (SP 181). “Just think of it!” Ponge continues, thus leading us to understand the intensities of these pulsations, and to grasp their significance (SP 183). But also to experience their perceptual possibility, and even to simulate their speed within us: “If we had to do what they do!” (SP 181). Indeed, reading means attempting something at such a speed, gaining a sense of being comparable with it, and, in repeating the words, hearing an echo of our own situation. If reading draws us along in the wake of the swallows, it is not because it confers the ability to fly, but because it seizes within us something of this same ability, its tonality and energy, and the words to speak about it. We might even say reading creates this capacity: the figures of flight, further on in the text, spur and activate the impulse that beckons, surprises, compels, and transports me. I take pleasure in answering, in reinventing myself; this style that is like an attractive variation on my own. Seized and surprised by this expressive presence, as if by a sudden gesture, caught up in this exterior form, I sketch out its possibilities within myself, or I contest them.

If this poem transports me, it is perhaps also because it is associated, in my own experience, with the image of another “signature,” another gesture that was long established in my family: the mark that the artisan baker traces on a loaf of bread, slashing the dough before placing it in the oven, signing it “in his own way,” both ordinary and inimitable. As the bread bakes, these marks, like the imprint of a feather and the sparks of the swallows, deepen to form the relief of the crust, in a way that always has something particular about it—indeed, this is the best part of the loaf, as Ponge also knows. It is called the *grigne*, and it represents, even in the reclusion of the bakehouse, an authentic stylistic practice. Studying had torn me away from the familiarity, singularity, and power of this form, but literary experience brought it back to me unexpectedly; coming alive in an analogous figure, the signature lets itself be discreetly inherited. Something of my relationship to myself and others, of what is capable and incapable in my own body and my own language, replayed and stabilized itself here; that familiarity, which a social trajectory of removal and distancing had weakened, was set back in motion by literature, which gave it a future once more. It is as if the other form of reclusion that takes place in reading brought this gesture back to me in the form of a general capacity, allowing me to remember it, to benefit anew from it, to let it shine in all sorts of arenas and forms of life.

This is, without a doubt, the kind of process that fills and enlivens the inner life of a reader. Each literary form does not present itself to her as a restful identification, but as an idea that seizes hold of her, a power that tugs the threads and possibilities of being within her. She finds herself hanging from sentences, these forces of attraction that continually feed her own combat of stylization.

Aesthetic Conduct

Reading appears, indeed, to be a dynamic of attraction and response: books bring singular configurations, each implying potential “paths” to our attention, our perception, and our capacities for action. The forms they contain are not inert paintings placed before a reader’s eyes (though paintings are not inert either), but rather *traced-out* possibilities of existence. The activity of reading makes us feel these forces within ourselves, as possible directions of our mental, social, or practical life, presenting us with opportunities to reappropriate, imitate, or dismantle them. “Following an author through his sentence,” as Proust puts it, involves the reader’s active practice of shadowing a text in its singularity, which gives way to a lively sequence of inner impulses, in a continuous adjustment of assents and nuances. Reading often amounts to a testing out of these directions, evaluating and responding to them. We do respond, since being swept away by a literary form brings attendant effects in our own life and personal reference points: the attention that we focus on this movement and its specific character draws us along with it. At the same time, we feel the vectors of our own momentum, our particular way of “signing” things, “according” to our rules, and also, of course, the possibility of modifying this way. We follow a call, drawn along by the network of tensions implicated in literary sentences, and find ourselves displaced to one place or another on the network. In his poem on swallows, Ponge describes a few spectators, who are like us; they rub their eyes, puzzled about the birds’ flight, and ponder their own position “before” the flight, which allows them to sense the limits and openness of their own situation: “where are we at?” (SP 185).

Every literary configuration thus directs us to a kind of path to follow, a “phrasing” in the existent world. To understand this dynamic, we must consider reading as a conduct, a behavior rather than a decoding. This conduct happens “in” books, a product of attention, perception, and experience, representing mental, physical, and emotional navigation within linguistic forms. It is, furthermore, a conduct both “with,” and even “directed by,” books, when they orient one’s life through the inter-

pretation and application of reading to individual forms. The aesthetic notion of “conduct” is precisely what enables us to unite a phenomenology of reading experience with a pragmatics of the relationship to the self, because it is precisely the phenomena belonging to reader experience that produce durable effects in the grammar of existence. Let us consider reading, then, as an example of aesthetic conduct, unfolding along a complete existential arc, and integrated with the other constitutive conducts in an aesthetic of daily life. In contrast to semiotic and narratological models (which tend to describe the activity of reading as a hermetically closed procedure whose value is linked to its separate nature, and which therefore struggle to *subsequently* reintegrate reading into life), literary experience thus falls in line with the other arts and with all the other practices with which it concretely dovetails in our lives.

The breadth of possible forms of conduct requires that we reevaluate reading through a more comprehensive “stylistics of existence,” in Foucault’s alluring and enigmatic phrase.³ Our mental and social life is indeed made up of the “traces” and “intentions” of form, of effective memories and desires, which exert their plastic force (modifying its object without breaking it) on the situations and apparatuses of daily life, modulating our living configurations, our forms of perception and attention, or our entire vision of the world. We may consider this dynamic through the pragmatic, Nietzschean question of how much “art” one puts into life, and how much fluidity and boldness one shows in circulating through forms and models. It may also be appropriate to consider its less spectacular aspects: the relationship to the self and to collective structures a form allows. This activation of forces and structures is an eminent contemporary issue. Foucault, and also Deleuze, placed this type of impulse at the core of the dynamics of subjectification; they encourage me to consider the experience of literature as an activity that engages true “forms of life.” The crucial point to understand is the way that readers from different points of origin come to take texts as samples of existence, using them as real lines of movement in life. “This is what reading is: rewriting the text of the work within the text of our lives,” according to Barthes’s formula, which is in significant need of clarification.⁴

We should note that “forms of life” is a broad, flexible term; it is important to give it a more explicit, exigent meaning than it takes on in many current slogans, where the bullying voices of advertising or even contemporary art challenge viewers to “shape” their lives and treat themselves as “works.” Nevertheless, the perspective of a stylistics of existence is the most widespread thing in the world, and it has nothing exorbitant or chic about it, but manifests itself in our most common

behaviors. Indeed, we all have the task, but also the opportunity, of giving a certain aspect to our presence, accepting universal human positions on our own terms, fashioning our movements, external acts, or secret thoughts, complying with models or forming new ones. In his “Theory of Walking” (1833), Balzac was a pioneer in recognizing the way modern subjects, lacking a substantial definition of the self and a sure sense of their role, must answer a demand for diffuse creativity and, in every gesture, sketch a particular *idea* of the self and give nuance to their social contributions and expressions, even in the way they walk. Someone’s gait is, in this view, a strikingly “rich language with its instantaneous effects of a will expressed candidly! The more or less forceful lilt of our limbs, the telegraphic way in which, despite our efforts, it takes on habits. The angle or contour we make it follow is stamped with our will and bears frightening significance. It is more than speech; it is thought in action.”⁵ Let us venture our readings as we venture a footstep, in the (affectionate) knowledge that we bring to our reading something of our task of existence, the methods and forms that make up our way of life, in the nuance of an ordinary, but always reinvented, gesture.

A Moment of Individuation

This redefinition of reading as an aesthetic conduct, implicated in the larger stakes and timescale of a stylistics of existence, makes sense in the context of an individual. It depends on the conviction that reading happens to individuals, requires individuals in order to take place, and also brings into play, for every reader, the fact of being an individual, one among many, but of *this type*, “whatever singularity” one has, it is precisely this, “being such that it always matters.”⁶ The fact that reading happens to individuals (individuals who, though determined, defy definition of their identity by any simple property) is not a methodological impasse, preventing us from grasping the shared aspect and social implications of reading. What we encounter here is a call to recognize the modicum of *individuation* at work in our every gesture, spurring us to use thought itself as individuation, as it elects its proper scale and position in the multiple singularities of literature.

One may, indeed, consider reading as an individuating and disindividuating practice, a decisive moment in the construction of a “grammar of relationship to the self” and to others.⁷ Reading is, first of all, an “opportunity” for individuation: encountering books leads us constantly to recognize ourselves, to “refigure” ourselves, that is, to constitute ourselves as subjects and reappropriate our relationship to ourselves

through negotiation with other forms. Reading is also an “allegory” of individuation, a particularly delicate representation of the inherent ambivalences of constructing a “self” in a democratic space, where each individual must prove herself in the face of deceptive permanence and ill-crafted identities. The encounter with art genuinely calls into question its viewing subjects, which are simultaneously unique, equal, common, and repeated. It forces us into a passive attitude, from which we must realign our positions, letting our will yield ground; it brings us into conflict with images and their power, and summons up a little theater whose scenes and poses apply to every encounter between a subject and the exterior, with its erupting challenge demanding an answer. The subject, here, is not necessarily the “entrepreneur” of the self caricatured in liberal thought, but is also subordinate, dependent, and, in Barthes’s words, “in a receptive state that produces subjectivity.”

Reading provides an arena, then, for the *pas de deux* of every aesthetic relationship (and, in fact, of all experience), that is, the discontinuous response of an individual to what is comparable and incomparable in the forms she encounters. The concept of an individual should not be placed in opposition to communities, to shared, inherited genres, or to history, but requires that we take them all together in one problematic configuration, always differing, which becomes the object of a stylistics of existence. The experience of reading exemplifies the ambivalence of these processes: the effort to be oneself is simultaneously aided by literary models and captured by their efficacious, and redirective, force. In *A Lover’s Discourse*, Barthes offers a rigorous and realistic description of his own reading of Goethe’s *The Sufferings of Young Werther* that reveals just how contradictory his emotional response is; he wishes to distinguish himself in his reading, distancing himself from the hero, marking out his own nuances and singularity, but at the same time, he recognizes himself as similar, wants to blend in, even lose himself, to jump “feet together, into a puddle of otherness,” the way one can drown in a crowd, in order to rest or gather strength for the existential effort that each of us must maintain. The use of literature proves a subtle counterpoint to current media prescriptions of distinction, which assume a basic, triumphant and already-resolved notion of identity: “be yourself!” Examining the practice of reading, in this sense, allows us to observe the dynamics of individuation in all their instability, in the banality of their demarcations, agreements, and contradictions. The category of Individual, presenting itself without fixed contours, continually making and unmaking itself, is both the boon and burden of modernity.

We expose, determine, and form ourselves as subjects in every practice, as we establish ourselves through our way of life, ahead of the self, in

realities outside our own domain, but which become part of our own private realm; individuals are not only composed of a body and its non-fungible allocation of time and space, but also of the images we project and receive, the scenes we occupy or reject, the mediations that we appropriate, which bring profound rearrangements, such as, to take one example, the books that precede us, through which we simultaneously invent, recognize, or lose ourselves.

An Existential Mannerism

From this perspective, the activity of reading appears as a type of conduct, a long-term aesthetic practice, and a process of individuation, and it takes place only *in* and through a certain way. This is perhaps the most difficult, but also the most crucial point to note: the “mannerism” of reading, as of any other human practice. We must consider not simply conduct, but kinds of conduct, and not simply readings, but styles of reading. Indeed, the manner of practices in aesthetic situations is also their content: the style of reading, the “how” determines the experience that it constitutes, which then acquires its singular character. This mannerism does not mean that we ought to distinguish ourselves through books, in an illusory choice of minor differences or forms of originality to differentiate ourselves from others; it means, rather, that every reader brings an entire life vector to the situation, a profile to be shared, and aptitudes for direction and bifurcation in an inner struggle between possibilities.

Indeed, the testing ground that every human activity opens up for us is not that of bare life, but of forms of life. Our acts are not “dolled up” with style, or tinted with a varnish, and our personalities are not “affected” by a manner. Instead, style is our active capacity, our practical strength, and our ethic; manner is, ultimately, our being. “A life that cannot be separated from its form is a life for which what is at stake in its way of living is living itself. What does this formulation mean? It defines a life—a human life—in which the single ways, acts and processes of living are never simply *facts* but always and above all *possibilities* of life, always and above all power.”⁸ Our actions are the means by which each one of us explores and exposes not only what kind of being we are, but a whole manner of existing, and thereby liberates a human possibility: an image of living things and their entry in the physical world, a way of venturing outside and sustaining the effort this requires, expressive methods and kinds of behavior, all of which can, by definition, be shared and generalized. Montaigne calls this the “master-form”: a pattern within, a

process that neither “expresses” us, necessarily, fixing us irremediably to ourselves, nor “distinguishes” us, separating us from others, but that sets us in motion and exposes us at every turn.

This master form is an *idea of form* that we try out in the world, discovering it outside as much as within ourselves, and literature is directly involved in the production of such models for stylizing the self. There are those whose conception and experience of personal and social life take the form of a tidy narrative, such as Ricoeur or Sartre, for whom existential forms are inevitably narrative forms, and who related to their lives as stories. Others regard the arc of existence as a musical tune, interpreting and anticipating its particular phrasing, its harmonious or dissonant tones. When Nietzsche philosophizes in music, or Barthes begins playing the piano, or Sartre, too, begins playing the piano, albeit in a slightly different way, they are all seeking a rhythm (“and no one, not even oneself,” as Proust writes, “will ever know which tune was pursuing one with its ineffable and mysterious rhythm”⁹). Others think of life as neither story, nor melody, but as the heroic exercise of a will that enables one to actively “make oneself exist”—Nietzsche, again, but also Baudelaire, Jean Paulhan, Deleuze, or Charlus—and there are still others who view life as a battle, waged within themselves between multiple forces, multiple possibilities of existence in competition with each other—examples include Henri Michaux or Beckett, but also Plume and Albertine . . . I mention intellectuals, poets, and fictional characters, indiscriminately but advisedly, since every type of subjectivity is relevant in this context. Each of these individuals is a style, a way of doing what others also do, of grasping events, people, and things, simultaneously unifying and constantly transforming what he or she is. Indeed, every act, from a signature to a walk, brings into play one’s way of existing, actively exposing the subject to confirmation or transformation, honing one’s ways of perceiving, presenting oneself, being affected by things and giving them meaning. Heidegger, already casting existence in unambiguously *modal* terms, defines understanding as a “way of being,” in an ethic of relation—to the world, the self, and other styles. Here it is not a matter of making an aesthetic exception: reading is merely a particular case, one among many exercises in modalizing the self, the crucial mannerism at work in every kind of behavior—from ways of perceiving to crafting a gesture or an utterance . . .

Though only a particular case, it is a curious, and strongly relational one, operating through many different channels—power, dependence, mediation, and reciprocal support. In the activity of reading, it is the confrontation with the styles of others that activates our own and the struggle against other forms that gives us shape. Reading thus both

deputizes for and exposes our individual imaginations of form, our irreplaceable biases regarding what it is to be a subject: our own sentences are hung from literary ones, presented to us as models, whether in the form of aid or threat. In reading, individuals take on the particular forms of their practices, and literary experience becomes a resource for stylizing the self.

Studies of literature tend to overlook the multiplicity and even the competition between the respective modes of articulation of works and forms of life; even critics with a powerful belief in books may, through a blanket praise of fiction per se, or a faith in the mechanically liberating nature of all aesthetic experience (regardless of the individual involved) end up overlooking this subtle, practical modalization. If we consider Proustian reclusion, or identity-oriented “performances,” Roquentin’s “You have to choose: live or tell,” or Ricoeur’s notion that time “becomes human” in narrative, Gabriel Tarde’s eulogy of imitation, a behavior which René Girard, for his part, describes in unsettling terms, we understand that the sense of form and of its activity in one’s life can give rise to sharply diverging paths; these divergences and this power of differentiation are, in fact, the embodiment of literature. The time has come to address the need for reflection on these finely differentiated types of relations to aesthetic resources. We must demand an attentive look at all forms of life. This will require countering contemporary culture, its decoy identities, simulated permanence, destruction of experience, and indifferent, painless, and detached vision of plurality, and embracing instead our mannerism of practices, a future of nuances, modalities, and singularities.

Reorienting Our Perceptions

“The sun that glitters on the sea . . .” This fragment of a line from *The Flowers of Evil*, in the poem “Autumn Song,” is a favorite quotation of the author and the hero of *In Remembrance of Things Past*. Like Baudelaire’s glazier, Marcel sees the world “beautified” through this shard of poetry, through the seascape it describes, whose memory has left its aspect and silhouette in his mind. Cut and reduced to a description of a small but perfect image, this quotation frames the landscape and orients his gaze. Often the quotation conceals the spectacle of things from Marcel, screening his present perception. Sometimes, however, he shows more mental flexibility and strikes a path between an availability to events in the present and literary memories that enhance his perceptive capabilities. It is through the prism of those words that he views the

sunset, finding a way to unseat and reframe a situation, a region of the perceived world, a moment in life—in short, to reassemble a section of the world, to paraphrase Proust.¹⁰ This favorite quotation reveals that all reader experience can be a matter of a perceptual state and training in attention, and that it can form (but also deform) a cognitive character in contact with aesthetic structures. Reading is a veritable catalyst for the stylization of our mental lives: we often find, in literature, reasons for sharpening or reorienting our tools to apprehend the world. Moving from one turn of phrase to the next, continuously, we build our attention capacity and active modalizations of our perceptual life.

Reading offers components for the formation and deformation of our attention and how we use it, in the construction of subjective approaches and the long-term project of an individual adventure, in other words, an authentic literary factory of sensibility. This is what takes place in the long apprenticeship in receptivity of Proust's narrator: his readings inform acts of perception and attention (rather than moral conduct, for example), implying no discontinuity with his everyday constellations of perception. Presenting a giant loop that goes from childhood readings of George Sand's novels to rediscovering them with surprise in *Time Regained*, Proust's work maintains the act of reading and its parallel activities at the center of mental activity in general. The novel offers a complete phenomenology of literary experience; it guides us through the successive developments of the "practice" of reading, as Mallarmé called it,¹¹ in the course of a life, showing how it interacts with other opportunities for perception and how much it contributes to them. In this way we observe directly, through a life story, the ways in which a cognitive character acquires its folds and layers, its taste and perhaps its skills in negotiating through external forms. Proust invites us, in turn, to look up from our reading and return to the real world equipped with new tools, potent templates, and new ways of "paying attention." Indeed, Leo Spitzer identifies Proust's writing as a repository of resources for patiently cultivating one's perceptual capacities: "The difficult constructions that may occasionally trip up the reader are perhaps obstacles intentionally accumulated in order to show how difficult it is to see the world clearly."¹²

Reading comes to represent a kind of cognitive stylization; it calls first of all upon a very intimate capacity to deal with signs, losing one's bearings in impromptu representations. It also calls for the ability to continue a literary style in one's own life (making a path with it, against it, or in spite of it, in the terrain of the discernible world, to which reading inevitably leads one back). This leads us to the whole theme of the "layers of art" that each of us can arrange within the self, placing oneself

in expressive works and situating these works in the world. Recognizing this potential raises the stakes and reveals the full latitude of our ways of existing in daily encounters with external forms: a reconstructive dynamic, a practice of inner recovery and development of procedures, as an individual subject in conjunction with books. The gesture of reading determines forms in life; even if it creates nothing per se (if we limit the notion of creation to primary productions), it forms the self and the environment by allowing us to bring nuance and existential value to our own sensations, as everyone does.

Taking Refuge

A single line of poetry can, therefore, provide its reader with something like a path to follow and magnify, a particular way of directing one's attention. To understand this dynamic, we must consider reading as a form of conduct in itself. This aesthetic approach requires a divergence from semiotic analyses (which arose following Umberto Eco's *Lector in fabula*) and from the narratological vision of reading. Both of these describe the reader's task as a deciphering process; they view reading as a question of filling in blanks and omissions in the text, a performance staged inside a communication structure, appearing somewhat exorbitant and dissociated from everyday reality. These perspectives posit reading, accordingly, as separate from life and they take an interest in its effects on existence only at a "subsequent" point in time, in a return to the everyday after the book is closed. It would be better, however, to begin by measuring reading's effect on forms of ordinary life, observing how it finds its place at the center of individual approaches to being and doing.

Let us therefore consider reading less as an active task of deciphering than as a certain kind of conduct by a subject of experience, both body and consciousness. Reading thus represents an opportunity to test out ways of being, attitudes, rhythms through which books affect, affirm, or disorient readers along with their gestures and tendencies, their ways of perceiving and paying attention. The notion of a stylistics of attention and perception does not necessarily imply an active mode; it leads us, on the contrary, to all the concealed passive facets of reading, which activate forms of behavior in relation to an object that both affects and constrains the reader.

Everything begins with the closed-off, separate situation required for reading. This moment of refuge and passivity in fact already contains a teeming ecosystem, notions of behavior, potentialities of being, and even a future. The situation here is not one of inertia, but a dynamic

opportunity, a moment of individuation. In reading, and the way we deal with a book, we shape ourselves in the simplest possible sense: we move aside, in order to occupy a new sphere and be enveloped by it, to test out our own contours and our particular forms of separation. We invite ourselves into an exterior image; by engaging in an exchange with this new environment, we try out postures, feign gestures, and are as likely to lose ourselves in the intense environment of the book as to make an effort to remain detached from it. It is a matter of situations and capacities. There is, first of all, the mental, perceptual, and social situation in which we are placed by being shut away with a book, this environment to which reading exposes us, leaving a dormant but reusable residue in our memory. Equally important is the perceptual capacity in which books make contact with us, and the experience by which they force us to reassess our dispositions, engaging each time with the otherness of what we should not shrink from calling a new “form of life.”

The cloistered and private context of reading brings, in Jean-Christophe Bailly's words, “a very vivid impression of slow-motion,” a feeling of being “at the edge of time” resulting from the inaugural act of retreat.¹³ Being at the edge of time places us, by the same token, at the edge of things in general. The reader is, indeed, more than alone, or something other than alone, as a double escapee: first, from a community in the ordinary sense, and second, from presence itself (the exterior flow of phenomena and perceptions). Pascal Quignard is especially attentive to the reader's unique solitude: he describes a combination of escape, silence, and abandonment, with the reader alone and “dwelling in his book,” starved for intimacy and the sensation of self.¹⁴ Proust, Benjamin, and Sartre all write extensively about this reclusion, often evoking the significant childhood moment of switching from hearing books read aloud (an immersive experience, following the cadence of another voice) to reading in silence. Sartre, for example, describes the “appropriation ceremonies” through which Poulou (his childhood nickname) overcomes his own disbelief: “Are there fairies *in there?*”¹⁵ Childhood experiences, in which the body seems to be elsewhere, or alive in an imaginary mode, blurring boundaries between the self and the book, are not simply banished by an increased level of activity, since taking refuge is a constituent part of reading—it reactivates that “simple inter-human distance” that “represents a preparatory stage for each one of us”¹⁶; it structures private space, a further degree of interiority, sets up an inside and outside, and invites us to a private game centered in these boundaries. Whether the reader isolates herself and effectively protects herself from collective life, or reintegrates herself through the book's guidance, Bailly reminds us that these movements require the

reader to have the energy to change directions: some inner impulse to be elsewhere, to choose to turn around and follow a unique vector which “stretches out in [the reader’s] plain view, but which we do not see, though we are nearby.”¹⁷ This gesture has its effects: the book that inspires a detour is an opportunity to develop new practices, a new way of integrating oneself with a space-time environment, to place oneself in the world. Reading does more than offer a detour, it is a conduct or gesture in itself, and it invites us to refashion our existential, perceptual tools and capacities for attention that provide our access to our environment, and thus, to begin modifying this environment.

In every personal reading adventure, then, we start by isolating ourselves in order to engage in a relationship that redefines the forms of our perception and the modalities of our presence. The reason this seclusion is necessary is that an object of artistic value requires our attention to be simultaneously diverted, rendered more dense, and extended. The aesthetics of cognitive inspiration, with its roots in both phenomenology and neuroscience, places strong emphasis on this particularly attentive and reanimated state. In phenomenological terms, the factors that modulate the intensity of our mental lives are the forms of attention that we pay things, the way we consider them as a theme, separating them off as “what counts” for us at that moment. We think too rarely about reading using this model. It is the case, however, that in reading, as in visual critical encounters, the perceptive landscape takes shape around a new object, as our emotional interest finds new bearings. Within this dynamic we find, implicitly, an attention loop driven by regular stimulation boosts (that is, the various ways that a text can affect its reader) and reader responses to this stimulation. The reader’s attention is active in this ceaseless exchange, which centers on the new energy of the book, but which is always susceptible to diversion by other salient elements: it is a *balcony*, taking in a particular range of perspectives, and constructed out of competing, varied, and intense mental acts.

Proust offers a detailed account of the isolated experience of “immersion,” the tangible descent into fiction. His novel opens with an initiation in what he calls “the original psychological act called *Reading*.”¹⁸ The story begins by constructing a mental “crib” for the child-reader, a nest or niche “in the depths of which [the reader felt he] remained ensconced even in order to watch what was happening outside.”¹⁹ Reading appears as an incandescent zone, a space successively bundled in one’s thought, the room, and the house. It produces a “site” around itself, and we might say it does not so much find its place in a preexisting place as radiate outwards to produce a setting. Marcel finds a place to stay comfortably in his reading; he feathers his nest and conceals himself there. He first

hears his mother reading *François le champi* (*François the Waif*), “the ample sweetness” of her voice softening the rhythm of the sentences, so that the book coalesces into one continuous sphere.²⁰ Next, he is the reader, lying in bed, in a sheltered garden, or behind closed doors in a little room that smells of iris. The narrator yields completely to the passivity of immersion; he describes the searching, wandering attention at work here, the permanent transit “from inside to outside” and the sudden “slow-motion” effect linked to perception. He seizes on the fact that the readings in question are childhood ones, and thus an initiation into ways of behaving in relation to art; this is not the place to “follow” a form, let alone “extend” it into life, as will invariably be the case later, but rather, first, to test out the structures of interiority and exteriority, the power of their boundary and the cognitive effort one must make available in order to cross it.

The perceptual situation constituted by reading has all the hallmarks of what anthropology (following Edward T. Hall) calls a “proxemic” space. The latter refers to a dynamic resulting from the effects of physical distance and the possibilities of contact between people or objects when they interact; it is a dense and separate little world, in which the subject is enveloped, and more importantly, which extends her being. There is the bed and its accessories, the work table and tools, the cellular phone that I keep in my pocket, ever ready to fill the current situation with my images, my sounds, my perceptual universe, and also, of course, the book. This space is an enlarged image of the body itself, a haven for subjective expansion, a field of possibilities, objects and sensations (odors, sounds, lights) gravitating around this body, emotionally inflected, punctuated by everything within our range or field of vision, everything we can reach without moving or looking, which is slightly beyond us and with which we thus tend to identify. In this way, proxemics is not so much a question of the barriers and closure of the subject as the effect of *diffusion*, the capacity for outward movements and the tiny impulses of gestures that actively extend interiority. Its main value is that of possibility.

These dynamics, associated with the secluded arena of reading, are compatible with forms of life and the promise of action. I believe that just as everyone has a way of inhabiting a place, we also have a way of living in our books, and there is doubtless a symbiotic exchange between the two modes, involving both interior capacities and ways of occupying space so as to form our gestures. In reading, as is the case in a given setting, we find the implied notion of maintaining a certain trajectory, as the “idea” of the self unfolds, becomes visible, extends into things outside, gains courage, reassures itself through rules and tastes, but also disperses, scattering outwards in increasingly pluralized and modified forms. This

is a case in which styles of behavior tend to clearly separate individuals; for some, living in a space is work, or a game that leads them to build a nest; for others, it is a worrying obligation, a spatial closure preventing them from bounding away. The individual and the space enclose each other “mutually, like the two shell-halves of the same idea,” of the same style.²¹ Each individual is a particular way of appropriating the world and its objects, marshalling its resources and actively projecting itself, but also being affected by the world.

Closing oneself off in order to read, therefore, means not only turning one’s back on the outside, but simultaneously trying out new ties and postures in relation to what is outside, rendering a cognitive situation more dense and reconstituting oneself in an image. The borders and contours that we navigate in this way lead to the essential possibility of experience: the process of resituating oneself within external forms, often through revisiting the courage and the activity-passivity of childhood. This enables us to engage with these forms in new terms, enriching our repertoire of situations and experiences and fostering the development of a certain expertise. We then perceive the world less as an entity whose mutilations must be borne than as an arena in which we can intervene directly through our way of existing. Each reading, then, as an overall experience, brings its instrumental potential to make possible the individual’s occupation (poetically speaking) of his immediate environment; perhaps this is Levinas’s meaning when he writes that a book is not, as Husserl claims, a being, but “a modality of our being”: a reserve of dense, complete arcs that leave, in memory, the mark of their potency, from then on always poised to seize another object. Indeed, all of these effects, which take place initially in reading, have lasting repercussions beyond the written page.

TRANSLATED BY MARLON JONES

NOTES

This essay consists of translated excerpts from Marielle Maccé’s *Façons de lire, manières d’être* © Editions Gallimard, 2011.

1 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Words*, trans. Irène Cléphane (London: Penguin, 2000), 35, 49.

2 Francis Ponge, *Selected Poems*, trans. Margaret Guiton, John Montague, and C. K. Williams (Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest Univ. Press, 1994), 177 (hereafter cited as SP).

3 Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 161.

4 Roland Barthes, “Day by Day with Roland Barthes,” in *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1985), 101.

5 Honoré de Balzac, *Traité de la vie élégante*, suivi de *Théorie de la démarche* (Paris: Arléa, 1998), 123.

- 6 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1993), 1.
- 7 Vincent Descombes, *Le Complément de sujet: Enquête sur le fait d'agir de soi-même* (Paris: Gallimard, coll. NRF Essais, 2004).
- 8 Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Cesare Casarino and Vincenzo Binetti (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2000), 4.
- 9 Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, préface de Bernard de Fallois (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 307.
- 10 Proust, *In The Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, trans. James Grieve (London: Penguin, 2002), 234.
- 11 Stéphane Mallarmé, "Mystery in Literature," trans. Malcolm Bowie, in *Mallarmé in Prose*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (New York: New Directions), 51.
- 12 Leo Spitzer, *Études sur le style* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 469.
- 13 Jean-Christophe Bailly, "La tâche du lecteur," in *Panoramiques* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 2000), 73–86.
- 14 Pascal Quignard, *Le Lecteur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 18.
- 15 Sartre, *Words*, 30.
- 16 Pierre Pachet, *Aux aguets: Essais sur la conscience et l'histoire* (Paris: Maurice Nadeau, 2002), 188.
- 17 Bailly, "La tâche du lecteur," 77.
- 18 Proust and John Ruskin, *On Reading*, trans. Damion Searls (London: Hesperus Press Ltd., 2011), 18.
- 19 Proust, *In Search of Lost Time: The Way by Swann's*, trans. Lydia Davis (London: Penguin Books, 2002).
- 20 Proust, *The Way by Swann's*, 45.
- 21 Judith Schlanger, *L'Humeur indocile* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2009).