

Reading from the spine

I have always been fascinated by the randomness of what sticks with a reader after the experience of reading a work of fiction. Instead of names or traits of characters, the order of events, intriguing twists, or surprising endings, it often seems to be ephemeral things like singular images, moods that are difficult to verbalize, a detail of the material world or a stray phrase. For me, such bits and pieces evoke bodily associations that make them undeniably present and affective. Once recalled, they might help recover the more “knowledgeable” content of the work, such as events, contexts, and ideas, but the bodily memories will usually demand to be considered first. This has also unavoidably affected the ways I write about literature, and the questions I end up asking the texts I interact with as a researcher.

A similar dynamic is there when I think about my early encounters with books. From my childhood, I can recall many enchanting and stimulating experiences of engaging with stories that I read or that were read to me. However, somehow the memory that always emerges as most significant, as in most repeated and most intensely felt is not one of reading stories at all. It’s reading the spines of books stored in a bookshelf. Lying in a speck of sun on the living room floor, my eyes scanning and rescanning the towering presence of the big bookshelves; exploring the shelf in a friend’s room for new reading material; being mesmerized by the abundance of spines and the promise of storied adventures at the city library. Grabbing the book, starting the adventure—I recall this with feeling, but what I don’t necessarily remember is where each adventure took me. I seem to remember my interaction with the spines, because they had the power to move me, concretely, from one book, one shelf to the next, and to direct my hands toward gestures of choosing, picking up, opening. Often the book titles were incomprehensible to me, just floating words, and the same goes for the contents of the books I selected. Still, each

spine and book was significant *as* the call to enter, move and be moved, even if it simultaneously banned entry and understanding, because of difficult content or a foreign language.

These experiences appear quite literally marginal when discussing literature or even the experience of reading. There is certainly some academic discussion of paratextual elements of fiction, including spine and cover texts and art as well as the materiality of the book object. Yet something remains unsaid about the interplay between understanding and not understanding, being intrigued and remaining puzzled, being called to enter and banned from it, that characterizes the early experiences of interacting with books that I am recalling here. What happens between a reader and a book when no “content” or “knowledge” is transmitted, but still some feeling is generated, possibly enough to lead to more and more reading and even future choices of occupation? I wish to approach this question from a personal angle, but also with an interest in understanding phenomena related to reading that keep reappearing in my research. For this purpose I’ll turn to some scholarly discussions of reading as well as the work of modernist authors, all of which address the ways our living bodies approach word-bodies on pages, our inevitable difficulties of understanding, and the potential of fiction to work with such difficulties.

The call to adventure

As a child, looking at book spines led to the acquisition some kind of encyclopedic knowledge in the form of lists and litanies: alphabetically organized names of authors, combinations of authors and titles and so on. At home, because of the preferences of my parents, I spelled out a lot of mystery and detective story titles and the names of their writers, as my eyes for some reason were drawn to the mass formed by the black-covered pocketbook series dedicated to the genre at the time.¹ I learned names from the obvious Christie to Sayers, Stout, and Westlake, and their grim, obscure, or punny titles. Another group of names I read and reread comprises Finnish Modernists such as Antti Hyry and Märta Tikkanen, as well as translated classics that were ubiquitous in a lot of bookshelves apparently because of having been “books of the month” in a popular Finnish book club.

¹ The SaPo series of the Finnish publishing company WSOY published 459 books between 1953 and 2012.

Of course, looking at book spines sometimes also led me to pick up my own spine from the floor and pick up a book from the shelf. Some I read, some I just looked at. The covers of the mysteries fascinated but also scared me with their terrified female faces or still-life arrangements of jewelry and cut-glass tumblers speckled with blood, whereas the more “literary” books often displayed abstract surfaces that made me no wiser about their content. I don’t know how much it is due to the covers that I never got into detective fiction, and why the books of the month and the homely modernists retained their interest. As a small child, of course, I would prefer books with pictures, including children’s books, but also a 1950’s *World Atlas*, whose spread with illustrations of mysterious deep-sea fish I spent hours with. Most of the content of the books I picked up, however, I have no recollection of, but I remember how the spines and covers directed my attention and affected the concrete positioning of my body in the space of the living room.

It makes sense that such repeated actions in space solicited by books would result in vivid memories. Memory is not just a storage of past events and knowledge located somewhere inside our brain; it is a more complex, shifting structure that is inscribed onto our bodies and their habitual routes in the world. When trying to understand my early experiences with books, I am calling forth something related to what phenomenologists call “body memory.” At its simplest, body memory means the implicit know-how and skills that have been formed by habit, which cannot be recalled as knowledge but is enacted in the present efforts of my lived body (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 127). Thomas Fuchs elaborates on the concept’s implications for our understanding of bodily being:

In sum, the body is not just a structure of limbs and organs, nor merely a realm of sensations and movements. It is also a historically formed body whose experiences have left their traces in its invisible dispositions. By installing itself in every situation, the body always carries its own past into the surroundings as a procedural field of possibilities. His experiences and dispositions permeate the environment like an invisible net that spreads out from its senses and limbs, connects us with the world and renders it familiar to us. (Fuchs 2012, 20.)

We use body memory when dancing or riding a bicycle, activities that fall somewhere between automatic repetition and conscious steering. It is also enacted in pain and trauma. Reading is a

curious case, because it is often seen as a rather intellectual and disembodied activity, but in fact requires and affects the body in multiple ways, and thereby also the body memory. What I am recalling from my childhood is some kind of know-how for being-with-literature that was formed before I had much knowledge about the “content” of the art form. Tilting my head to read book spines became a habit, a learned bodily trait that I would involuntarily repeat in other people’s homes too, almost compulsively taking in all the titles whether it was rows of *Readers’ Digest*, political comics, coffee table books about modern architecture, or the endless pink and white wall of the *Sweet Valley High* series.

Even more strongly than other people’s bookshelves, I remember the thrill of going to the library, where the whole space seemed to solicit succumbing one’s body to the attraction and guidance of books, skipping or shuffling from one spine to another. The city library promised warmth and excitement in the dark winter afternoons and a tingle that is hard to define: the sense of being invited to move forward, not just towards new stories but towards possible future lives that I knew nothing of. The library space taught my body how to approach new adventures. Very early I was drawn from the children’s and young adult department over to the other side of the building, with the more impressively voluminous rows of endlessly intriguing grown-up books. I would make excursions to pick a random book, then become haunted by the long row of Prousts or the like for long enough to be called to pick one up, add it to the pile that was handed to the clerk or the checkout machine. I seem to have mostly picked ones that were way above my skill level: huge volumes, ones with intimidating grownup names, ones in foreign languages, ones that there was a lot of. When I first explored the University library of my hometown at 14, by coincidence, I marched to the philosophy shelf and carried off some heavy phenomenology to pass time with me in an armchair. My knowledge of phenomenology was limited or nonexistent, but I was convinced it was the coolest thing. I did not understand most of the words in the book I was reading, but the experience of picking it up was, in retrospective phenomenological terminology, sedimented onto my body memory.

The purpose of writing about my experiences with complex works of fiction and philosophy is not to brag about being a precocious reader. In fact, if anything was precocious in these interactions it was my interest and the intentionality of my lived body, not my level of

comprehension. I obviously understood very little of the analysis of perception in Merleau-Ponty, or the linguistic extravagance of *Finnegan's Wake*—neither did I read any of these exciting books from start to finish. Yet when I was sitting down with these books, and even when I was opening them for the first time when picking them up from the shelf, something happened: I spent time with the words, I wandered within the books from one word to the next, like I wandered in the library from one spine to the next. I was intrigued and affected. I grasped nuances, perhaps more and more each time—and then again less. Still, I kept wandering from book to book; the books kept calling. While repeating the small movements from one book to the next I was also moved on a slower and wider scale, as I ended up studying at the same university, then another, being drawn toward the ideas and topics that intrigued me. This involved some understanding of what was between the covers of the books that moved me, of course. Yet the original experience was never too far away. It kept being re-enacted in each instance of reading, and still does; I still fail to feel like I have learned much, in the sense of becoming a container for information from books that I could draw on and distribute at will, while I myself feel drawn by the book-objects.

It seems curious that my most significant reading experiences, since childhood, involved very little “gaining knowledge,” “understanding,” or even “comprehension,” especially as I ended up pursuing thinking with literature as a vocation. One rarely reads such statements from literature professionals; however, Siri Hustvedt for one has expressed similar memories in an interview by *The Guardian*, where she explains among other things that Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* affected her “viscerally” and defined her intellectual development even though it was possibly too difficult for her:

Rereading it later, I wonder exactly what I understood at the time. It is not an easy book. I suspect that, despite my struggles with the text, I gleaned its essential message—that women were treated as outsiders to history as the eternal feminine, had always been other to man, and that these injustices ran deep. I became a feminist. (Hustvedt 2021, n.p.)

Like Hustvedt according to the same interview, I have obviously always read for knowledge and information as well; I have enjoyed plots, identified strongly with characters, and parsed texts closely for obscure meanings and contextual intricacies. Furthermore, I have been lucky to end up doing all this for my work. However, I want to explore the intriguing interaction, be it a clash

or a collaboration, between two styles of reading, which I venture are recognizable for literary scholars and book-of-the-month subscribers alike, as I see them before me and feel them in my body when I inquire myself about my early reading experiences. Why is it important to stare at books, fondle them and be moved by them physically, in space; why was it significant that I stared at Joyce and Merleau-Ponty as a young person even though I didn't "internalize" a thing? How can one be a literary scholar if one still often fails to remember most crucial plot elements, characters, structures, arguments, or examples from texts that one has even recently read and been affected by? With these questions, I turn to some companions picked up from the bookshelves of my life so far.

Reading bodies and surfaces

My childhood reading recollections are defined, on the one hand, by encountering books as foreign, intriguing things that have the power to move me by their mere presence, and on the other hand, by the experience of reading something that is too difficult to comprehend while still being moved by it. Neither aspect of reading might be reflected enough in research, even though there has been a wonderful increase in recognizing different varieties of reading that involve the body and the less intellectual parts of the mind.

The field of cognitive literary studies has increasingly considered the part played by readers' bodily being and their situatedness in different environments and relations in the variety of mental processes involved in interacting with a book. At a very basic level, some studies suggest that an encounter with a word for a thing or an action evokes embodied simulation in the one reading, activating us in the same way as a real-life encounter with a thing or performance (Gibbs 2017). Karin Kukkonen (2014) and Marco Caracciolo (2014) have explored the ways our embodiment and the way we experience the world as lived bodies affect the processing of what is read, and how our engagement in fictional worlds and characters relies on the traces of experience related to what I above have identified as the body memory, yet remains capable of creating new experiences. From this perspective, reading fiction is an interplay of the familiar and the strange, the "natural" and the artificial.

The gist of these arguments is that as readers, we are not disembodied spirits magically transported into storyworlds; neither are we computers processing and interpreting inputs of symbolic information. Thereby it also makes sense that we experience books on a variety of levels, many of them bodily and affective. Perhaps most of literature or the experience of reading fails to fit within the idea of conceptual understanding or forms of knowledge that philosophers of mind call propositional: something that could be formulated as a fact and internalized as such, like “getting married was a complicated affair for young women in Georgian England.” This is quite interesting, but in the end might have little to do with the experience of reading Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1812), or the personal or even cultural significance of the novel. Reading, however engaged or disengaged, involves us as lived bodies in a lived environment; the situation of reading, be it the city library, a bus, or a natural environment, also makes a difference (see Kortekallio 2019; Kuzmičová 2016).

While these approaches tend to address reading that involves interaction with the content of a story, they certainly offer fruitful ideas for dealing with my present interest in non-comprehension, skimming, being on the verge of understanding, interacting with words as strange, intriguing things. I can postulate that as a child, interacting with the mere existence of a book, or a novel too difficult to “understand,” gave me an entryway into the realm of literature, in a very bodily and concretely spatial sense. Perhaps in this I already experienced the “double vision” that Merja Polvinen (2017) attributes to reading: a style of being in which I am knowingly engaging with different realities, where I interact with and enact into being another world that feels real, while being rooted in where I sit or stand in my embodied self. Perhaps incomprehensible books intrigued me because they safely enforce just this barrier of worlds: I could see something on the other side, and sense that it was magical and new, but was not “sucked” in or toyed with completely. In contrast, I remember the experience of very overtly being toyed with when I visited the movie theater, where a well-meaning grownup took me to see Disney classics such as *Bambi* and *Beauty and the Beast*. I remember feeling shocked and almost physically violated for days afterwards, after riding the well-calculated affective rollercoasters of the animations on the big screen. This was and remains a question of personal sensitivity that are not shared by all children or adults—I was not that fond of actual rollercoasters either. However, the experiential memory seems informative because while being

physically repulsed, pushed away by immersive works of fiction like Disney movies I was able to find some kind of “deep” enjoyment in exactly the kind of reading that forbade any emotional or intellectual deep-sea diving.

This last metaphor evokes another conversation that has arisen over the past decade about different styles of reading specifically for the purposes of research and critique, sparking what has even been given the dramatic title of “method wars” (Anker & Felski 2017, 15–17). This constitutes a variety of responses to the long prevalence of an analytical close reading mode where the researcher may assume a heroic, authoritative position in relation to the text and “dig deep” to find its hidden meanings, be it political or philosophical biases or psychological diagnoses. Alternatives have been sought for quite a while, for instance in Susan Sontag’s essay “Against Interpretation” (1966) that prefers an “erotics” over a hermeneutics of art, letting art affect us instead of forcing meaning out of it, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s call for “reparative” readings instead of “paranoid” ones (1997). Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus (2009) have coined the term “surface reading” to oppose the “symptomatic” trend of literary studies; according to them, instead of looking for hidden or repressed meanings that need to be decoded readers might benefit from giving more attention to what is openly visible and literally legible in the text. Rita Felski has called attention to the ways critical reading practices ignore the feeling body of the reader, suggesting “postcritical” ways of accounting for reading as an “embodied mode of attentiveness that involves us in acts of sensing, perceiving, feeling, registering and engaging” (Felski 2015, 176).

Surface-oriented, reparative or postcritical approaches may seem problematic when we want to maintain the belief in the political import of literature, acknowledge the importance of the task and expertise of a critic, and consider the variety already inherent in practices of close reading (see Kortekallio & Ovaska 2021). Without putting on any kind of method battle gear, I want to acknowledge the that these initiatives, and many more like them,² have had the valuable result of shedding light on some of the less “intellectual” processes into light as a significant part of any

² Consider, for instance, Franco Moretti’s methods of “distant reading” (2005) in the form of graphs and maps of information, Heather Love’s “thin description” (2010) as a new kind of literary empiricism, and Craig Dworkin’s *Poetics of Materiality* (2020) that addresses significance beyond symbolism in “difficult” examples of modern poetry.

reading experience, including academic ones, while retaining the rigor of a scholarly attitude. I have been drawn to experiment with surface-oriented ways of engaging with texts and found them helpful for articulating styles of enchantment and immersion that might otherwise go unnoticed. Sometimes we can read recurring descriptions of, say, an umbrella, which will move us first and foremost *as an umbrella*, a thing that is used and felt by a lived body. We don't need to decipher its symbolic functions in relation to the idea of death or the complex associations to social class and gender that might be read into this image in a short story—I am thinking of “The Voyage” by Katherine Mansfield (1921). While I maintain that the enchantment with an umbrella is worthy of attention in itself, it also affords a repertoire of associations and affective import that again may stand as a ground for more critical and analytical ways of reading and meaning-making (see Oulanne 2021a, 111–115).

A middle ground approach might acknowledge that reading doesn't happen in a vacuum: it is influenced by a multitude of contexts in which the text and the reader meet and something new is created. Still it is never completely random or independent of what stands on the page; what is unsaid in a text requires attention beside what is said, yet we should also pay attention to what is right there in front of our eyes, the material, linguistic form it takes and the way it makes us feel. The immediate experience of the text matters, but this is always affected by extratextual elements, which a discussion of reading can also take into account: my early experiences of being summoned by books would have been different if the spaces, my location in the world, and my family background were different.

Furthermore, in my view, it is also fruitful to note that while fiction remains a special case, even theoretical or nonfictional texts invite their readers go through an experience. They, too may benefit from some of the same alternation between close and distant, deep and surface-oriented. They use metaphors, rhetorics, and all the paratextual gateways to invite readers in—they cannot be reduced to knowledge that one internalizes in the process of reading. My early experiences of reading that may have been “close” in some physical ways but were certainly not “deep.” When looking at reading from this angle, the allure of some texts, in particular experimental and “difficult” ones, may start to make more sense.

Modernist dusting

Even though I do not think that the gravitational allure of books is any stronger around highly complex and “literary” texts, it is intriguing to think about the phenomena of distant or non-internalizing reading in relation to some of the modernist texts that I have ended up studying. As a young person I was drawn to such bookshelf names as Camus, Fitzgerald, and Joyce, but it is modernist women like Djuna Barnes, Jane Bowles, Katherine Mansfield, and Gertrude Stein, whose prose and poetry have most affected what I now think about reading. These texts involve levels of sense-making from basic affective engagement with word-things to more complex comprehension of socio-cultural nuances and critical thinking. They have also called me to focus on the former rather than the latter, while also teaching me about the intimate connection between the two.

One especially intriguing case is Gertrude Stein’s work. For instance, the early experimental collection *Tender Buttons* (1914) presents an array of everyday, homely objects, food, and rooms in the form of prose poems, for lack of a better word. “Presents” seems accurate, because the text does not really describe its objects, at least not in a format that we’re used to receiving description in. The titles of short poem-like entries are often material, everyday things or food; the work marches them onto the page, and then plays with them as things and as words, possibly forming associations, but remaining obscure. This likens the book to the foreign language volumes or complex subjects that I was drawn to as a child. For an example, I pick another umbrella:

MILDRED'S UMBRELLA.

A cause and no curve, a cause and loud enough, a cause and extra a loud clash and an extra wagon, a sign of extra, a sac a small sac and an established color and cunning, a slender grey and no ribbon, this means a loss a great loss a restitution. (Stein 2014, 15)

In this short poem, quoted here in its entirety, shapes, noises and causality lead to mentions of material elements, which lead to an overt evocation of meaning and the big ideas of “loss” and “restitution,” all under a very concrete umbrella-shaped title. These elements and ideas are present on the surface of the text, but what connects them to each other or the title does not

necessarily appear immediately. In Stein's work, the materiality of language itself often becomes the moving force of the text: how the words look and sound and what they do moves the text forward and creates associations, instead of or besides the referents they may evoke. Cause calls for clash, color for cunning, meaning calls for abstract concepts which may call for an adjective ("a loss a great loss"). Like my remembered child-self in front of a bookshelf, the reader is invited to hop from word to word, perhaps making sense of them, perhaps just encountering them.

On the other hand, the cryptic appearance of the work tempts readings where the meaning would emerge out of a process of decrypting. Stein's writing has often been characterized as very difficult to approach (Frost 2013: 65; Walker 1984: xii), requiring considerable "digging" before "sense" appears out of nonsense (Rieke 1992: 2, 60). A strong case has been made, for instance, to read *Tender Buttons* as a coded expression of love between women, attaching it to the biographical information we have of Stein and Alice B. Toklas (see Frost 1994, Goodspeed-Chadwick 2014). This is a sound interpretation. However, to me reading *Tender Buttons* exclusively as code risks bypassing what is special about it, namely the form and feel of the "code" itself, the immediate encounter with the words and things on top of which other meanings can be built (see Oulanne 2016). The *tenderness* and intimacy of the work, also attached to its significance for depicting relations between women, is not found in these "ultimate" meanings; it is found on the words on the page and the visceral experience they create. It certainly does not require biographical knowledge, or answers to questions like "who is this Mildred?"

Stein frequently commented on her own writing, as in this excerpt from an interview on composing *Tender Buttons*:

I took individual words and thought about them until I got their weight and volume complete and put them next to another word, and at the same time I found out very soon that there is no such thing as putting them together without sense. (Stein 1990, 504.)

In this description, thinking appears as a practical process of measurement that involves the senses, and writing as an act of arranging bodies of words side by side. Out of these processes, "sense" emerges. This is a curious term for meaning, as it cannot help but carry with it an association to *the senses*. This kind of vision of writing a text is in contrast with a biographically

oriented reading of that text, or other readings that approach works such as *Tender Buttons* as coded surfaces behind which a symbolic or symptomatic meaning is lurking. In *Tender Buttons* itself, Stein also writes: “any time there is a surface there is a surface” (TB 35).

Stein gives another practical guideline for reading in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933):

I always say that you can not tell what a picture really is or what an object really is until you dust it every day and you cannot tell what a book is until you type it or proof-read it. It then does something to you that only reading never can do. (Stein 1935, 152)

Dusting and proof-reading are defined by the fictionalized Alice as comparable practices, which enable one to “tell” what something “really is” and allow the text to “do something to you.” This remark, too, is easily tied to the biographical knowledge we have of the couple’s life and their roles in it: Alice appears as the pragmatic one, the typist and the caretaker and hostess who took care of *objects, food, and rooms* in the house while Stein talked about art with other geniuses. Yet it also resonates with accounts of Stein’s own method of writing, and the styles of reading invited by the resulting texts. It can be read as a pragmatic guide to ways of being with objects of art, where static contemplation in the form of looking or reading is replaced by a repeating, practical interaction that has to do with the material of the work—be it its concrete surface or the stuff of language it is made of. This surface becomes present-at-hand, to use Heideggerian terminology, instead of quietly remaining the equipment or basis that produces the effect of the work. The literary that are thus made visible are of course part of the work itself, whose purpose *is* to be present-at-hand, in comparison to a tool which would disappear in the event of its use. Even further, if we follow Alva Noë (2016), a work of art *is* a kind of “strange tool” that exhibits its own tool-being and thereby makes visible and creates something new out of a practice that might be lost in our everyday experience, be it dancing, writing, or looking.

Dusting, to expand Stein’s metaphor a bit, is interesting to think about in relation to the experiences and practices of childhood reading I recall: repeated, rhythmic, and bodily interactions with text-bodies, the absence of immediate comprehension, accumulation of knowledge, or identification with a plot or a character. A child may pick up a book several times, play with it, taste the words, paying attention to different material and formal features each time;

abandon the book to pick up another one and so on. Some texts, like Stein's, may benefit from a dusterly attitude even from a grown reader who aims to write and think with them. The tone of *Tender Buttons* is warm and humoristic, even though the work keeps its distance. It offers philosophical insights for a reader so inclined, but these are not hammered in; the interaction with the text is nonlinear; you can perhaps never become "familiar" with it, "know" it, or indeed "master" it, but it may still befriend you. "Knowledge" is perhaps possible in the sense of "can tell what something is" in the quote: the knowledge is of a surface, but it is of a *sedimented* kind, like accumulated dust, which expands the metaphor to acquire a kind of depth.

I did not discover Stein as a child, but these days engaging with her work always rekindles the pleasure and excitement I felt then, when approaching tempting spines on a shelf. This seems to be another experience shared by Hustvedt, as she states in the recent interview: "I didn't 'get' Gertrude Stein as a teenager. I had to grow into an adult to feel the music, humour and rigour of her work." (Hustvedt 2021). Stein might be hard to "get", and I also venture that in a way there might not be anything to get beyond the characteristics listed by Hustvedt. Even if finding them in Stein might require some repetitions, music and humour are characteristics likely to be appreciated by children in any literature (including nursery rhymes and wordplay), or anyone not reading for propositional meaning. As a literary scholar, one might occasionally ask oneself, what of the "childish" way of reading could be retained in research practices—and what might already be there but escape our adult attention.

Even though we might be used to thinking of modernism as the art of subjectivity, interiority, and encrypted meaning, other modernist texts invite and even educate their readers in this kind of readerly attitude. Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927) is a fascinating case. In this novel, a work of art (Lily Briscoe's abstract painting) features as a surface and an organizing element, people seem often opaque but also meaningful to one another, material things experience and manifest time passing indifferent to the grand events and emotions that structure human lives—and words float around, available to the senses like material things but refusing penetrating inquiries or attributions of meaning. An example I am thinking of are the excerpts of "A Garden Song" by Charles Isaac Elton (1899), recited by Mr Ramsay. The recurring line "Luriana Lurilee" sound like Latin to Mrs Ramsay, who muses:

The words (she was looking at the window) sounded as if they were floating like flowers on water out there, cut off from them all, as if no one had said them, but they had come into existence of themselves. (...) She did not know what they meant, but, like music, the words seemed to be spoken by her own voice, outside her self, saying quite easily and naturally what had been in her mind the whole evening while she said different things. (Woolf 1938, 129.)

Mrs Ramsay does not set the words into their original context. Like an occasionally absent-minded or “unskilled” reader of literary texts she does not “know what they meant,” and attaches their meaning to her own life. However, this process of signification does not rely on the propositional meaning of the words but on a sense of a connection beyond the individual and the boundaries of the senses, expanding into images of the natural world and associations to music.

Woolf’s novel offers a model of reading related to Stein’s dusting. The model reader that we can observe in Mrs Ramsay engages with the matter of sounds and letters without necessarily “knowing what they mean” but still arriving, as if through collaboration with the matter of language, to a meaning, a sense. Indisputably, she is touched and moved by the words. Perhaps some of the connections made by words might remain obscure to a critical mind educated in the humanist tradition, but “make sense” on a pre-reflective level that involves our body and its embeddedness in the world of flowers, water, and music. I find this an intriguing way to approach literary texts, even if it goes against the grain of what we are accustomed to think of as an intelligent or learned reading. It is sometimes difficult to express the sense thus made with the language of an academic study, but it is definitely a demonstration of the power and peculiarity of literary language and art.

As a final example, in Katherine Mansfield’s “Miss Brill” (1920), the eponymous character experiences a moment of epiphany that also revolves around not knowing, and still somehow understanding. She is listening to a band playing in the park and has a vision of universal connection to the environment, the tone of the music, and the other people listening to the band. The moment is soon negated by an instance of human meanness experienced by Miss Brill and by her return to her small home, but the sense of something wonderful lingers in the reader. In the ecstatic moment Miss Brill is thinking, tears in her eyes: “Yes, we understand, we understand, she thought—though what they understood she didn’t know” (113).

This expression of a sentiment or a mode of being, not unlike Mrs Ramsay's, easily reads like an ironically hyperbolic statement, highlighting the impossibility of knowing or empathizing with others. However, to me it also seems like a guideline to possible ways of reading the story and a sneaky demonstration of its power. Miss Brill cannot express what she and the others in her imaginary community understand or know, but she is clearly having an experience of being moved and changed, and this moment is rendered successfully into words by Mansfield, to be felt if not known by the reader. Similarly, the reader of the story will never attain knowledge of the "actual" thoughts of the character—she does not have any, being a fictional construction—nor of the "true meaning" of the story. Nevertheless, a reader has gone through the epiphanic moment with the focal character. Their experience has shifted at least a little bit, and they have been offered the opportunity to grasp the ecstatic bliss of a fictional being. We may even say they have been offered a place in the fictional community from which the moment and feeling arise. So, while on one level declaring affective communication and community among strangers impossible, the story manages to communicate, create a community and involve the reader in it.³ To "understand" this, the reader does not need to "know" if this is what Mansfield intended, or make a heroic entrance with a sophisticated apparatus of analytical concepts.

Mansfield's epiphany, like Stein's word-things and Woolf's floating phrases, can help address some myths about scholarly reading. Even as people trained to analyze, explain, and discuss texts, we don't always know, "get" or remember what a text is about, or have much privilege of understanding over any other reader of that same text, until we strive to express what has happened in the reading. Still, we are doing something special. Jonathan Kramnick argues persuasively for a redefinition of close reading, as it is practiced by literary scholars, as a form of *writing*, a skilled craft, instead of a particularly focused version of everyday reading:

Once we dispense with the idea that close reading is a type of reading, we can move away from the view that it involves an especially hard concentration on written words. Close reading wouldn't have to be guided by the phantom antecedent of ideas had when reflecting intensely on words. Rather, its truths would dwell in the writing itself, in the loop that includes vision and touch in the thoughtful activity of the fingers. (Kramnick 2021, 228)

³ I present this argument at length in a chapter on empathy in Mansfield's and Woolf's short stories (Oulanne 2021b).

We spend time with words, worlds, and spaces, fictional and material, and interact with them as the material beings that we are, eyes and fingers and all. Through my interactions with modernist texts, I have begun to experience that it might not be helpful to see myself or any reader as a *container* for internalized ideas, knowledge and emotions. As a container, I would be a failing, leaking mind. I could never feel like I possessed or had internalized all of a text, be it fictional or theoretical, so that I could access the knowledge of it like some kind of inner library. I need the actual library, the actual books, and my own writing as it slowly takes material form and interacts with the writing I am quoting, to think and create meanings. To me it seems like the work, meaning both the reading and the thinking, happens somewhere between “myself” and the texts that are read and written—much like dusting happens between the dusty surface and the duster, even if initiated by the mind and body of Alice B. Toklas.

Indeed, much of recent embodied cognitive science and philosophy of mind contests the accuracy of the container metaphor for the mind. It seems beneficial to see our minds as extending beyond the lump of brain within our skulls, or even our bodies. This does not only mean the cases argued by the original “extended mind” thesis, which shows how we use tools such as notebooks and maps to perform “cognitive” functions traditionally assigned solely to the brain (Clark & Chalmers 1998); it also pertains to feelings and moods (Colombetti 2013), and even the constitution and development of consciousness and a sense of self (Varela et al. 1991; Telakivi 2023). We are not only dependent on cognitive “aids” and “tools”, but the murkier stuff of environments and others. All these features of the mind are needed when we read a literary text, be it for pleasure or for research; and all of them suggest that our readership is very largely located outside of ourselves, in material equipment and environments, and in the networks we form with a host of things and beings. This, to me, seems like a refreshingly humbling position that takes out some of the pomp and circumstance from being a reader.

It also seems like a position clearly communicated by the modernist texts I’m intrigued with. They are not precocious accounts of the theses of the enacted or extended mind; rather, they find ways of articulating experiences of being in the world and making sense of it as the embodied things that we are. Perhaps I have been drawn to some modernists, even as a reader too young to

“understand anything,” not only because they happened to be there on the shelf (even though I consider this pretty significant as well) but because something in them is actually the opposite of what we tend to understand as “difficult”: they present us with words and images and leave it to us to do something with them, be it “dusting” and lingering with repeated, nonsensical words and phrases, listening to the ring of an incomprehensible line of poetry and the feelings aroused by it, or grasping at an understanding that will never quite reach the threshold of communicable everyday words. Even as they revolve around the failure of internalizing or understanding, they communicate something crucial about the power of literature. Indeed, much of literature might be beyond our efforts at internalizing; we can only come into contact with part of it, tugging a corner, caressing a surface, looking at the play of a field of color. Still, we are moved and shifted, and some understanding is created, even if we cannot quite place it in the mythical brainy interiority of a humanist subject. And our bodies in front of bookshelves may be moved to pick up yet another volume.

Picking up and being moved

As I was drafting this, I was waiting for a very delayed shipment of my property, including my books, to make its way across the Atlantic into my new home in the North. I had almost forgotten what it’s like to have a bookshelf of one’s own to rest one’s eyes on, wandering and making associations while writing, always open for the possibility of being called and ready to move myself over to the shelf and grab the book-spine of a relevant title volume. As a result of this temporary lack I resorted to libraries and the internet, appreciating both but also noting how the latter is not the same kind of aid for a thinking process as a physical bookshelf. I experienced the relief of wandering the stacks and finding my own books again, after a period of only picking up orders from a tiny reservation shelf due to the global pandemic. When finishing the essay, I have regained my books and shelves, and every day I watch my one-year-old daughter being drawn by its gravity. First it was only her gaze, as looking at book spines was what most often calmed her as a small baby. Now she ferociously interacts with her own little shelf of baby books, but is at least as enthusiastic about Willa Cather (she likes the picture of the writer on the spine of her collected letters) and Lydia Davis and a growing number of other grown-up books that end up in piles on the floor multiple times a day.

Based on all this, I cannot really say anything about the future of reading, the book-object, or the library, but they have taught me to further understand the connection, or rather the inseparability, between my moving body and my thinking mind. As readers, sometimes, our minds are like dusters, and our bodies do much of the “thinking.” Even as a researcher, one needs bodily engagement with things and words. This exercise of looking at personally recalled experiences of reading-as-not-quite-reading or reading-while-not-understanding has led to finding metaphors for seemingly associated experiences and even strategies in scholarship of reading as well as in some instances of modernist writing. What it has perhaps brought to light is a multiplicity of possibilities for experiencing and engaging with texts and describing that experience, from surface reading to dusting to not knowing what one is understanding but still understanding. It has made me articulate some skepticism toward the idea of literature as necessarily or primarily providing us with propositional knowledge, or its power resting in immersive plots and storyworlds. All these aspects of literary art are worth considering in the casual as well as academic conversations around it.

However, it seems like an expansion of those conversations could also be called for, and embraced as the multiple ways researchers are already striving to consider the variety of emotional, bodily, and non-intellectual sides there are to any experience of reading. This should not come across as a devaluation of learned readership, which would then contribute to the plight of the discipline of literary studies in the society. I hope to have shown that what we do is indeed a skilled practice and directly relevant to life as embodied beings in the world. Acknowledging reading as a multifaceted phenomenon and practice that engages more than our intellect, even as researchers, should further enrich the ground of literary study in schools and universities, and reside in the hallways of Arts departments in peaceful cohabitation with critical aesthetics and deep-rooted knowledge of symbolism. In my view, if researchers like myself strive to be in touch with the child-like reader they might all be carrying with them, and dwells for a moment with the excitement in front of the “pure matter” of words and pages, it can serve as another way to make the call of literary art more audible and comprehensible. Most importantly, I hope my reading of reading adds a voice to the small but persistent choir suggesting that literature is not there *for* a purpose, making us better people or *teaching* us about the world, as this kind of thinking easily

leads to demanding calculable benefits for the world driven by unsustainable economies. Rather, the aesthetics of letting be that I have ended up calling for here, is also an ethics that acknowledges literature as a thing in the world, to be given care, time, and attention just because of its intrinsic value and its power to move other things in the world, including us.

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