Introduction

Reading Bodies

Reading appears to be a disembodied, purely mental act. The avid reader seems lost in a textual world, cut off from the life of the body and the real world that surrounds it. This image of the reader is derided in adolescent popular culture in the figure of the nerd with his nose in the book, wearing thick glasses and unfashionable clothes, oblivious to the social and physical surround, physically inept, and asexual. However, the assumption that reading is disembodied also pervades literary and cultural theory. We routinely define reading as an act of consciousness—a matter of cognition, emotion, or spirituality—all traditionally and implicitly cast as the sheer opposite of the gross physical body. But reading is undeniably a bodily act. Eyes scan the page, hands hold the book, body postures align the entire musculoskeletal frame around the visual and manual requirements of reading, adapting to the materiality of the book and to the physical space the reading body inhabits. Somatic habits develop, integrating reading into the daily life of the body. We read as we eat, as we fall asleep, as we ride the subway, and as we lie on the beach. These bodily procedures and habits have not been factored into our understanding of the work of the reader. Until recently, literary theory has tacitly framed the act of reading within a simple body/mind dualism, ignoring the eyes and hands, the postures and habits of reading, and denying any connection between the transcendent life of the reading mind and the immanent life of the body. The entry of cognitive and neural sciences into the conversation of literary theory has complicated this dualism, forcing theorists to recognize the physicality of the brain and nervous system, where mind and consciousness seem embodied, but the gross physical body still resides on the other side of the dualism, outside our analysis of the practice of reading.

T. Mc Laughlin, Reading and the Body
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This book, on the contrary, is based on the premise that reading is a physical act, an astonishing achievement of the human body. Virtually all human bodies are capable of reading, endowed by species evolution with a brain and nervous system, with eyes and hands that can learn the complex skills that reading requires. Reading does demand the work of consciousness and cognition, emotion and spirit, as literary theory has assumed, but all these attributes of mind are achievements of the body, produced by interaction between the body and the world, including the textual world. Bodies read. Nerves, muscles, hands, brains—flesh and blood adapted precisely to the task of reading; in and through that task connecting to language, society, culture, history; in and through that connection producing mind, consciousness, textual experience. Reading is a physical practice that requires a vast social pedagogy. Hands and eyes and brains need to learn the procedures and respect the logic of the practice. Reading socializes the body, subjects it to a powerful discipline. Yet, all reading bodies are unique, differently capable, and differently socialized. Reading practices are enacted by specific, idiosyncratic bodies in concrete, complex physical and social environments. So I begin with two narratives that provide rich accounts of specific reading bodies at work and that suggest the theoretical issues raised by asserting the physicality of reading.

James Joyce’s masterful short story “A Little Cloud” culminates in a densely narrated and emotionally powerful scene of reading. Little Chandler, so called because of his “fragile,” “refined” body, has just spent the evening with his old friend Ignatius Gallagher, who has left Dublin to become a successful journalist in London. Little Chandler is a clerk, in essence a copyist, a person who reads and “writes” all day long within the extremely narrow and mechanical constraints of his job. But he also cultivates a vague ambition for poetic glory and personal liberation, dreaming that one day he might be able to express his melancholy Celtic soul in verse. Chandler, in other words, is a failed writer, a would-be poet, and this evening he is confronted with a figure that embodies everything he will never be—a successful writer, a cosmopolitan, a man who has lived a “vagrant and triumphant life” that sharply contrasts with Chandler’s life of quiet, ordinary desperation. Over the course of the evening, Chandler subjects his body to substances from which he usually refrains—whiskey, cigars, the loud