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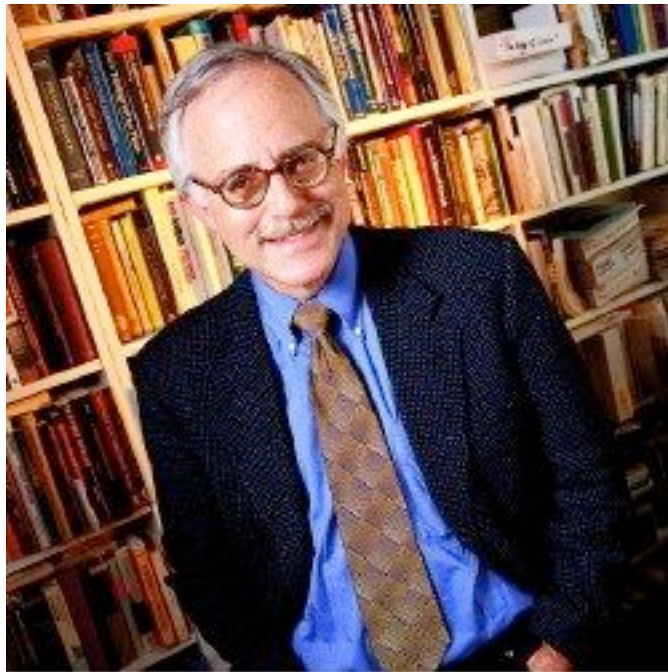


TIME FOR READING

Lindsay Waters

I want to start a new movement, now.

From the 19th century on, more and more segments of our society—farmers, factory workers, doctors, professors—have been urged to speed things up in order to produce more eggs or automobiles, or to heal or educate more people. Charles Dickens gave expression to the pathos of life under such a regime in his novel *Hard Times;* so did Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times,* a work of cine-

matic art that gets to the heart of what ails society. The Monty Python crew made fun of this imperative in its "All-England Summarize Proust Competition" for the best synopsis of Proust's seven-volume *Remembrance of Things Past* in 15 seconds. The fun poked at attempts to speed-read the classics was as painful as Chaplin's effort to survive industrialization. And it's no joke: Imagine radiologists forced to read 13 mammograms per hour, without interrupting their reading to speak to the women whose scans they are analyzing. I know of at least one such case.

Is it any surprise that there is now a reading crisis worldwide that affects people at all levels, from preschool to graduate school, the affluent and the poor alike? Don't assume you are immune, people of higher education. Is it reassuring or frightening to learn that problems that afflict one group actually afflict other groups considered to be as different as night and day? Maybe such a realization is both consoling and discommoding in equal measure. In any case, the reading crisis that is upon us is widespread.

What if we tried to connect the dots? What if we were to ask whether the work that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak does teaching advanced literary theory to graduate students at Columbia University has something essential to do with the work she does in the Birbhum District of West Bengal to prepare 5-year-olds to read? Is there something that connects instructing young children in the basics of grammar and teaching Torquato Tasso's 16th-century heroic poem *Jerusalem Delivered,* Herman Melville's late-19th-century *Clarel, a Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land,* and Jacques Derrida's late-20th-century *Of Grammatology*?

You can kiss your graduate programs in English lit goodbye if we all don't help get the grade schools in order. I know thinking about preschoolers is not in the job description of most academics, but get over it. We need to think about what's going on in our feeder schools. We need to think about what our fellow humanists, the grade-school and preschool teachers, are doing. We should not be afraid to take the lead from Oprah, who in July asserted her intention to deal with this issue in the "first ever summer reading issue" of her magazine. "I can't imagine where I'd be or who I'd be had reading not been such a fundamental tool in my life," she wrote in asking readers to ponder, and comment on, what they know about reading. Report after report testifies to declining literacy in America. Some of the decline is due to the neglect of our least-advantaged children, but some of it is due to the willful embrace of methods for teaching reading that are inimical to reading in depth.

What happens when we have children speed up learning to read, skipping phonics and diagramming sentences? I believe it's hard to read Milton if you have not learned to take pleasure in baroque sentence structures. When John F. Kennedy became president, much was made of the fact that he was able to read so quickly, and people became intrigued with how he'd learned to speed-read thanks to the Evelyn Wood Reading Dynamics. Thank God he had learned to think slowly by the time of the Cuban missile crisis.

Over the last 50 years, certain ideas have become dominant that make learning to read different than it once was, none more insidious, I think, than the ideas that children are neurologically "wired" to use language "competently" in certain ways. Noam Chomsky has promoted the idea that there are certain "syntactic structures" hard-wired in the human brain. That view, I believe, based on my conversations with education scholars, led to the "whole language" movement—or fad—that let children find their own "meaning" in words, rather than teaching them the skills to read. Whole language, in turn, became an article of faith among schoolteachers, held on to with fundamentalist conviction that, in turn again, became a political position enforced by a number of states, thus taking it out of the realm of study and into that of political power and rendering it no longer subject to criticism without fear of reprisal. The fiasco (as I believe we must call it) that befell us is the bad idea that we don't have to *teach* reading, that it is wired into children's brains, and that we only have to put them in the proximity of a book. Might be true in a rich school district like Wellesley, Mass., but it sure isn't true in the poorer parts of Roslindale and Roxbury, Mass., as a teacher at Boston's Another Course to College High School recently told me. In Wellesley many children enter first grade already knowing how to read. But, according to several recent national reports, in numerous school districts youngsters do not simply "pick up" reading. They need to be taught to read methodically. I remember the process of learning to read myself, and I had to be coaxed every inch of the way by every device the teachers had at their command. I didn't begin to read until second grade.

As if all that were not bad enough, we have distinguished professors of literature at elite universities promoting methodologies of study that positively discourage reading. Franco Moretti, of Stanford University, a scholar of the greatest cultivation, has published superb analyses of literary works. But Moretti is now promoting what he calls "distant reading," which seems to me to suggest that scholars of literature outsource reading of books to lower-level workers. Moretti has a cadre of workers charged with tracking nu-

merically documented aspects of the history of the book, especially details like how many novels were published in Britain in the 18th century. What we need to understand is the system. The professor need not read books at all! (The subtitle of one lecture he gave in Germany says it all: “How to Talk About Literature Without Ever Reading a Single Book.”) It is impossible to understand the rationale for such a relegation of reading to graphs and charts except as a way of institutionalizing large-scale bureaucratic analyses of literature. That is poison.

What Moretti is advocating sounds precisely like what the doctor should *not* be ordering. In general in America, there has long been a movement by the leaders of various institutions, like corporations, to distance themselves from contact with the actual materials they sell or process. In mining or car manufacturing, that might be legitimate—I think it is not—but for teachers of literature the shift is deadly because, pursued systematically, it would ensure that professors of literature did not personally have aesthetic experiences of engagement with works of literature. So far, Moretti’s movement has had limited influence, as far as I can see.

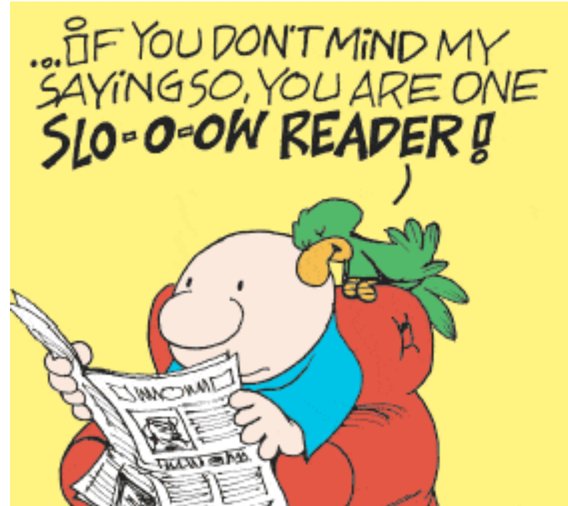
More to the point, his work is symptomatic. I know I risk sounding like the commentator Lou Dobbs going on about outsourcing jobs. Whether or not that kind of outsourcing is going to be the ruination of America, as Dobbs alleges, I do know that the outsourcing I have been talking about is much more dangerous in the long run. It’s like killing the plankton in the ocean.

In departments of education, professors talk about the “fluency” that those who are learning to read need to achieve to become good readers. Unless one can digest the letters on the page fast enough, one cannot comprehend what one is reading. But once one learns how to read, there is a speed beyond which one stops reading in a truly effective way. I am convinced that most speed-reading is impaired reading, just like the sort you do when you have a fever or are tired or engaged in other tasks at the same time you are supposed to be reading. Unless you are very smart, speed-reading forces you to ignore all but one dimension of a literary work, the simplest information. What we lose is the enjoyment that made people turn to literature in the first place.

Behind the fads of the last 20 years, the shift in methods of teaching reading—at all levels—has rejected paying attention to everything literary in a piece of writing, from phonics to poetics, from sentence structures to all larger formal structures. Consider the whole-language movement beside changes we’ve seen in reading literature at middle schools, high schools, colleges, and graduate schools. Thematic approaches to literature have triumphed, emphasizing the moral of the story over formal and aesthetic analyses. At the college level, earnestly moral or political readings have pushed aside the pleasure of waywardness in plot and rhyme. The new asceticism crept into class in the 1980s with all the talk of the “Body” (turning literature into a “construction” site subject to authoritarian regimes of “truth,” awaiting a single puff of transgressive intervention to knock it down). All that pseudoradicalism achieved full flower in the New Historicism, with its reduction of the text to historical backdrop, the default position for anyone who has wanted to leave the passion of the 1960s behind and replace it with revolution in the head.

There is something similar between a reading method that focuses primarily on the bottom-line meaning of a story in a novel and the economic emphasis on the bottom line that makes automobile manufacturers speed up assembly lines. If there is any truth to the analogy, it provides grounds for concern.

I want to ask what reading would look like if we were to reintroduce, forcefully, the matter of time. Let’s leave Evelyn Wood behind, and let’s leave Franco Moretti behind, too. The mighty imperative is to speed everything up, but there might be some advantage in slowing things down. People are trying slow eating. Why not slow reading?



Nietzsche defined philology as the art of teaching people "to go aside, to take time, to become still, to become slow." If we look at the dynamics of what I call "slow reading," we might be able to explore the values of a methodology that has links to what was once called "close reading"—but that goes beyond close reading in a number of ways that might prove particularly valuable today. The one thing necessary is that we put aside our normal adherence to punch-clock time, a universal measure that has us all in its grip.

The most skillful writers are always playing with our timing as readers, for example by retarding our progress through their works, causing us to linger and pay closer attention than we might have wanted. The late literary critic William Empson said that the poet uses the physical properties of words not to stop us, but to make us dally through the great amount of thought crushed into a few lines. Recite out loud the first three lines from the 19th-century poet Giacomo Leopardi's "L'Infinito," and even if you can't understand the Italian, listen to how the sounds of the o's and t's retard your movement forward, tripping you up if you don't slow down:

Sempre caro mi fu quest'ermo colle

e questa siepe, che da tanta parte

dell'ultimo orizzonte il guardo esclude.

As Leopardi goes on to suggest in his poem, slowing down can produce a deeply profound quiet that can overwhelm your soul, and in that quiet you can lose yourself in thought for an immeasurable moment of time.

The issue is more than just savoring literary experience. I am suggesting that there is more than meets the eye in reading, literally. If we attend to the time of reading, we might notice that our relationship to a literary work changes over time. One consequence is that we begin to be charitable to "bad" readers, whether they are our students, our acquaintances, or our former selves. Most important, though, we learn to drop the idea that we can neatly distinguish good from bad reading because we realize that, at some time in the past, we were not up to reading a particular work. Or perhaps we see that while we missed a great deal, we did respond strongly to parts of the work. It begins to make sense, then, to track our career with a certain work, in order to open it up as literature.

Keats gave us a key insight into reading in his poem "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer," about reading the English poet and dramatist George Chapman's translation of Homer's epics. As often as he had read Homer, Keats wrote, "Yet did I never breathe its pure serene/Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold."

I have increasingly come to believe that the key to reading is *re*-reading. Paradoxically, rereading a literary work is not a quick business, but usually slower than the first time round. We learn that the first time we read too fast, and in a complicated feedback mechanism what was deeply buried in the text can emerge.

What time does discovery take? When Columbus returned to Europe with the news that he had discovered something new, surely the shock of discovery was quick. Wrong. The historian Anthony Grafton shows in his 1992 book *New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery* (written with April Shelford and Nancy Siraisi, and one of the books I published at Harvard University Press) that during the 150 years of the era of exploration, mariners, scientists, publishers, and rulers struggled to make sense of their discoveries in a continuing war of ideas. I understand Grafton to be rendering deeply problematic the idea that we can freeze history in one moment, 1492, that flows from and to other moments in a clear chronology. Nor can we freeze our reading of a text.

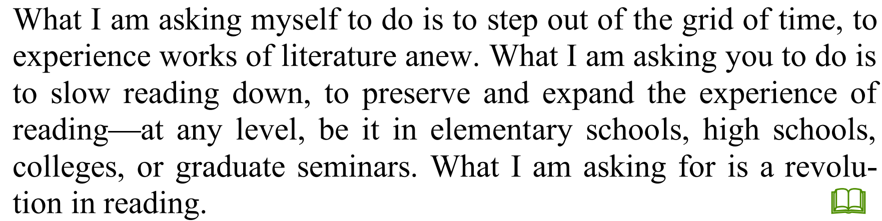
Even an action seemingly discrete like tapping our fingers on a table does not happen just the way we think it does. The timing of that trivial event is much more complex than we assume. We feel it in real time, right away, don't we? No, according to Benjamin Libet, a pioneer in the study of human consciousness, in *Mind Time: The Temporal Factor in Consciousness* (Harvard, 2004). He writes that research "strongly supports a surprising finding that is

directly counter to our intuition and feelings: The brain needs a relatively long period of appropriate activations, up to about half a second, to elicit awareness of the event!" There is, then, a disjunction in time between sensation felt and sensation subjectively perceived. Some filter blocks sensory input. Moreover, as Libet points out, reporting on decades of research by himself and others, a second stimulus can "retroactively enhance, or intensify" our initial sensation. Why should that not occur when we read, and reread?

In fact, it does. When I have returned to works of art that marked me deeply years before, I have felt that I have opened up time. A couple of years ago, I agreed to give a lecture in China on T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" because I suspected that students of English literature there would be familiar with it. I started to work on the lecture using the same book I'd read as a freshman in college, when the "young man carbuncular" who wandered through the poem spoke to me strongly, and I longed to subordinate myself to that old man of Western culture, Eliot's Tiresias. My old experience was all present on rereading; but the sorrow at the decline of culture was so much stronger to me this time around, cutting like a knife through my own experience of the age of materialism, and I wanted to rebel. I felt the holes in the poem not as holy but as a challenge to be engaged more actively. The clock slowed, I read more slowly. Words that I had once rushed through had a new rhythm. The very process of rereading made me understand as I had never done before the role I had as a reader.

That takes me back to literary studies. The problem with reducing books to themes and morals is that it slights the experience of reading. The problem with outsourcing reading by reducing it to graphs and numbers is that it involves no experience at all. In my theory of reading, we have an emotional experience before we come to understand what happened, before we can draw any abstractions out of it. And then our consciousness plays the role of observer, recreating the experience, seeking to understand it, in different ways in different times.

The role of literature is to mess with time, to establish its own time, its own rhythm. A new agenda for literary studies should open up the time of reading, just as it opens up how the writer establishes his or her rhythm. Instead of rushing by works so fast that we don't even muss up our hair, we should tarry, attend to the sensuousness of reading, allow ourselves to enter the experience of words.



What I am asking myself to do is to step out of the grid of time, to experience works of literature anew. What I am asking you to do is to slow reading down, to preserve and expand the experience of reading—at any level, be it in elementary schools, high schools, colleges, or graduate seminars. What I am asking for is a revolution in reading.

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Lindsay Waters is executive editor for the humanities at Harvard University Press. His most recent book is *Enemies of Promise: Publishing, Perishing, and the Eclipse of Scholarship* (Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004).

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