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Reading

Citation for published version:

Vaninskaya, A 2014, Reading. in D Cavanagh et. al. (ed.), *The Edinburgh Introduction to Studying English Literature*. 2nd edn, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, pp. 223-27.

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/0748691324/ref=pd_lpo_sbs_dp_ss_1?pf_rd_p=569136327&pf_rd_s=lpo-top-stripe&pf_rd_t=201&pf_rd_i=0748640258&pf_rd_m=A3P5ROKL5A1OLE&pf_rd_r=1A657MESC6N1J2F70K78>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

The Edinburgh Introduction to Studying English Literature

Publisher Rights Statement:

©Vaninskaya, A. (2014). Reading. In D. Cavanagh et. al. (Ed.), *The Edinburgh Introduction to Studying English Literature*. (2nd ed., pp. 223-27). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

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Reading

Anna Vaninskaya

When the University of Cambridge finally established a Professorship of English Literature in 1910 – it was one of the last in the country to do so - those fighting the rearguard action against the introduction of English as a university subject fell back on their ultimate argument: what was there to teach if students of English literature required no special training except the ability to read?

In a sense, they were right. The ability to read is the only pre-requisite for studying and appreciating literature, and surely we all mastered that skill when we were children? Well, it turns out, not quite. We all learned to walk when we were children as well, but we are not all Olympic runners, though we use the same set of legs and the same set of lungs to walk to the corner shop as they do to set their world records. The difference is in training and technique, and to read literature as well as an Olympic medallist performs in the sporting arena requires as much training and as much mastery of technique as it does to win a marathon.

Reading in this latter sense is the main subject of this book; in fact, the entirety of *The Edinburgh Introduction to Studying English Literature* is an object lesson in reading technique. It teaches you to read poetry, narrative and drama. Study it from end to end and you will be equipped with the tools you need to get to work on almost any kind of literary text. But we also read non-literary texts: newspaper articles, reports, and – if undertaking a formal course of study – academic essays and monographs. What can be said about reading in general that will be as applicable to a lyric poem by Keats as to a journal article about that lyric poem? Or, put differently, what considerations are so fundamental that they must be brought to the reading of both primary and secondary texts, literature and ‘literature’ about literature, which are the two main kinds that we encounter when studying English?

One such consideration – rereading - may be called a process; the other - an awareness of one’s horizons of expectation - is a state..

Rereading

‘An unlitary man [sic] may be defined as one who reads books once only’ (16), wrote C. S. Lewis. If you have read a book (play, poem, article...) once, you have not read it at all. The first reading gives you the ‘gist’, the general lie of the land, the main landmarks. You read the first time to get the basic content, to find out ‘what happened’ (even if the text in question is a haiku and nothing happens as such). A first reading is a first look: you receive an impression of the building, but only a hazy one – you cannot really grasp the interrelations of the major and minor architectural features, let alone the exact colour or texture or minute ornamentation of different sections of the exterior.

A text is not exactly like a building – though critics, such as Matthew Arnold, have always been fond of talking about the architectonics of literature – because no matter how short, it unfolds before us in time. Even the shaped emblematic poems of George Herbert are temporal sequences of words. But spatial metaphors of buildings or paintings or the human body (the skeleton supported and overlaid by the muscles, connected by ligaments and tendons) do work very well because spatial or temporal, building or poem, each object has a structure – it is a relation of parts to each other and to the whole. An even better metaphor is a piece of music, perceived in duration like a text, so that it becomes possible to trace the major themes, supported by recurrent motifs, through time.

On a first look, a first reading or hearing, we apprehend the overall shape of the structure. But to get a clear sense of the discrete parts, the links and transitions between them, to reconstruct the logical chain of the argument if we are reading a discursive text, or the way the imagery contributes to the progressive elaboration of a theme if we are reading a poem or a Shakespearean play, requires a second and a third look. But that is not the end. We need to look a fourth and a fifth time if we wish to register all the nuances of language, to understand the particular choice of words and their placement together.

Let’s say you have read an article once and can summarise in your own words the overall case the critic is trying to make (that is an ideal scenario, of course; in practice, even to produce a bare but accurate summary usually requires two readings). But how does the critic’s argument get from point A to point B, and then to point C? Are there leaps in logic or digressions? What evidence does the critic marshal and how is it arranged? What purpose do the chosen examples serve and how have they been selected? What may the choice of terminology conceal or reveal about the critic’s conceptualisation of the problem? Each of

these stages of interpretation, each look back at a particular aspect of the text, is a new rereading, and on every such rereading you will pick up things you had not noticed before. It is a movement from the general to the particular, from overview to analysis of specific detail, and it is the same whether you are reading an academic article, a *bildungsroman* or a ballad.

Horizons of Expectation

But how do you know which type of text you are reading? Every act of reading takes place within what reception theorist Hans Robert Jauss calls a horizon of expectations, a horizon composed of all the previous reading acts we have performed, our general knowledge of the literary field, and the particular markers of the work before us. When faced with a text we must first and foremost decide what genus or species it belongs to, before we can arm ourselves with the requisite set of tools for its interpretation. If we are not aware of the conventions within which the text is working the scope for *mis*interpretation is vast. To put it colloquially, we may be barking up the wrong tree. If we know we are reading free verse, we will not fault it for failing to conform to the exigencies of iambic pentameter, but if we have come to the poem in the expectation that it will be blank verse, our reaction may be rather different.

But how do we know which one it is meant to be? Sometimes we are told: you are reading a contribution to *The Journal of So-and-So*; you are reading *X: A Romance* or *Y: A Novel*; you are reading *The Epic of Thingummy* or *The Tragedy of Whatshisname*. Titles are a type of paratext: a framing, liminal, or what theorist Gérard Genette calls ‘threshold’ part of a published work that influences interpretation, yet does not belong to the actual text, such as a preface, illustration, footnote, appendix, or cover blurb. But titles can be ambiguous or ironic – Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale* is anything but simple – and paratexts can mislead in all sorts of ways. What if you are reading the famous ‘Sokal Hoax’, a spurious article published in a cultural studies journal in 1996, whose author intentionally passed off nonsense as the real thing in order to prove a point about postmodern theory? Where a text is published, what it is called or how it is presented is obviously not enough to tell us how to read it.

But the second-hand received wisdom known as cultural literacy, the assumptions we bring to a text because we have heard of it or its like before, are not enough either, and can be equally

deceptive. You are reading *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley: you are culturally literate and know that it is a famous dystopia of a nightmare future like George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. And you read it accordingly – solemnly and seriously. But what if somebody had told you that Huxley himself called it a 'comic' novel? If you read it again in a comic key, as a burlesque satire rather than a terrifying dystopia, then all kinds of things will begin to come to the surface that you never suspected were there – like patterns in a wallpaper that you never noticed until now – the jokes, the ubiquitous wordplay, the mocking caricatures, the carefully studied incongruities.

So much for particular paratextual markers and general knowledge: what about the experience we have gained from previous reading acts? You come across the following passage:

Grant, then, the eternity of the World (not this world: I mean all the whole universality of things and beings and times). Grant God is omnipotent. Then must not that universal World be infinite, by reason of the omnipotence of God? [...] here, where this lower Time determines all our instants, and where is no turning back: here indeed is good and evil. But *sub specie aeternitatis*, all that IS is good. For how shall God, having supreme and uncontrollable authority to come and go in those infinite successions of eternity, be subject unto time, change, or death? His toys they are, not conditions of His being. (252, 256)

If you decide to perform a standard close reading, you might note the Latin phrase from the seventeenth-century philosopher Spinoza, and perhaps realise that the whole discussion of the nature of God and time, universality and eternity is cast in the mode of a philosophical treatise – one indebted to Spinoza in particular, but recognisable from the manner in which it considers its metaphysical and theodicean topics as a non-literary and possibly (if you remark the diction and syntax) early modern text. This much your previous reading experience may tell you. But it is not enough either.

The expectations aroused by this encounter with what appears to be a specimen of a familiar genre are dashed when we place the passage in its context: a fictional prose narrative, and more precisely, a fantasy novel – E. R. Eddison's *A Fish Dinner in Memison* of 1941. The

words ‘fantasy novel’ arouse certain expectations as well: and if we have come to the text via one of its paratexts – the blurb on the back cover, for instance – or approached it with certain assumptions arising out of our general knowledge of twentieth-century fantasy literature, we will be in for a big surprise. As big as the dislocation we would feel if we relied solely on the text’s ‘formal’ characteristics for our interpretation.

The moral is simple: to read any text is simultaneously to bring into play several, possibly conflicting, frameworks of interpretation, no one of which is sufficient in isolation. If we bear this in mind we can approach a text with an awareness of the factors that might mediate our reading. And the more we read and reread – the more we write and reflect too – the more aware we will become. It is a useful kind of awareness to cultivate, for it will help us to make sense not just of the primary works we encounter, but of the secondary criticism which purports to explain them, and not just of the conventions and expectations of our own time, but those of past times as well.

Next Steps

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