

# Introduction to the ethics and ecology of reading

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These notes are meant to highlight the most relevant points of a theme that I believe has not yet received a satisfying theoretical settlement, in spite of an increasing complexity of practical implications and consequences. Due to space (and other) limits, my attempt will not represent a complete settlement of the subject, but rather a description of the most interesting features and a suggestion of some possible paths for deepening in the subject. For the same reason, bibliography references will be limited to the ones that I believe being essential for the development of the subject.

## THE ETHICS OF READING: WHAT AND WHY

*Ethics* is a term liable to a strong inflation and trivialization. In the latest years and decades there has been no subject, discipline or sub-discipline that was not watched through the lens of an "ethical" look, which is an exam and a judgement often directed to prove their correspondence to specific values. Even if caused by manners and cultural gregariousness, this process is not completely negative. In fact, it brings to the foreground the necessity of an action based on moral values and - by paraphrasing Brecht and his *Praise of learning* - of pointing at every voice and asking: why? (Brecht, 1975, p.60). However, this is *not* at all the way I am going to intend ethics, as it risks to be not only a reductive and sketchy definition, but also moralistic and moralizing. Ethics and morals need to be well separated, even though the story of their "liasons dangereuses" has known many transformations. The most sensational one is probably the separation between the Hegelian vision - stating that *ethicality* is objective, institutional and collective, while *morals* are subjective, personal and private - and the one that is widespread today, where the terms are almost reversed. (Ricoeur, 2007; Nozick, 1987; Sichirollo 1985).

This is particularly valid for reading. The concept of *ethics of reading* does not refer to a normative and prescriptive sight, or to some kind of moralizing recipe that has already caused enough damages to the passion for reading. What is not really ethical is the kind of attitude that has led to the tendency to tag texts and readings, to

establish literary dignity charts, to prescribe the right age to read certain books, to forbid or impose this or that. Morals impose the rules, but ethics examines them. For this reason it often happens that immoralist attitudes are deeply ethical (the character of Antigone, for instance, embodies such a little Hegelian contingency), while moralism can be dictated by interests as well as conventional or legal principles having nothing to do with ethics. This is why the edifying and slightly censorious attitude that protects reading cannot be defined as ethical. In my opinion the phenomenology of passions *in* reading and *for* reading is considerably more ethical.

This will be, according to Spinoza (Spinoza, 1963), the first exponent which the ethics of reading should be raised to. The ethics of reading thus represents the description and the analysis of effects and problems that take place when different passions express themselves through reading. In this case ethics is first of all *ethos* analysis, which is an analysis of customs, inclinations and behaviour which influencing reading, to the point that it can originate a real *ethology* of reading (Illich, 1996). Although in a different direction from the one indicated by Illich, the idea of an ethology of reading opens to a new perspective that is still neglected in most cases: the search for the development of activities similar or comparable to reading in other animal species. For those who think that "we cannot say we are not animals" (Caruso, 2009), this perspective rids ethology of reading of any anthropocentric and anthropomorphic foundation while driving reading further from the concept of a simple activity of decryption and interpretation of a written text.

Reading possibilities are rich enough to give voice to an endless number of human passions, even negative ones. Still, every passion deeply influences reading characteristics. Love is the most evident and stressed declension: reading for love, of love, in love or despite love has become a *topos* in sentimental education and in the history of literature. Some eminent examples are the procurer book ("libro galeotto") of Paolo and Francesca in the *Inferno* by Dante and the reading of *The Works of Ossian* by Werther and Lotte in a flood of tears in Goethe's novel. However, passions connected to melancholy and anger, suspicion and envy have an even stronger relationship with reading (*reading in anger* often leads to a deliberately ethical reading). In spite of what Faguet believed (Faguet, 1920), passions are not "enemies", but friends or, at least, reading mates. Reading deprived of its passionate component would reduce itself to an aseptic practice, lacking of the basic elements

that are needed to talk about ethics. Of course, I cannot provide you with more than a research hint in this case as well.

The ethics of reading is at the crossroads of different disciplines and research fields, because of its nature of applied ethics (Ricoeur, 2007, p.58). The ethics of reading can be seen as a specific kind of *the ethics of information*, which was the subject of an interesting research and theoretical systematization done by Rafael Capurro (Capurro, 2005). Capurro describes the ethics of information as having four main features: cooperation, "open relativism", plural perspective, ecological thinking (Takenouchi, 2004). Many of these dimensions are also typical of the ethics of reading. Moreover, Capurro has recently given particular attention to the intercultural contents of the ethics of information (Capurro, 2010) and to the challenges of digital world (Capurro, 2009). As for Luciano Floridi (Floridi, 2008) ethics considers information as: a) an ethical *resource* b) a *product* of ethics c) one of the *purposes* of ethics. In fact, in every ethical declension we are going to analyse, the genitive form (of information, of reading, etc) must always be intended as subjective and objective at the same time: reading is both the drive behind an ethical look and the object which such look applies to.

Some other important contact points are within the *ethics of interpretation* (Vattimo, 1989), that is a hermeneutical analysis that Heidegger first and Gadamer later have developed starting from some categories of Aristotelian ethics, such as the *phrònesis*, that is practical wisdom (Gallagher, 1993). This kind of ethics of interpretation gives a leading role to reading, which is perceived as a form of "translation" and vice versa (translating as a way to read). The ethics of reading and translation thus come to have very much in common. On the other hand, the *ethics of communication* explored by Habermas and Apel (Habermas, 1989, Apel, 1992) develops from the central ideas of transparency and "public opinion". Furthermore the ethics of reading borders on the *ethics of writing* (Sini, 1992, Ronchi, 1996), while it almost converges to the same horizon as *Reader's ethics*, as defined by Ezio Raimondi (Raimondi 2007). The ethics of reading partially overlaps with the *ethics of libraries* (Buchanan and Henderson, 2009; Preer, 2008) but at the same time they can completely diverge on some elements. What appears to separate them the most is the fact that the ethics of library builds its principles on problems of great importance for culture and society, which are taken for granted or even considered as prerequisites for reading, such as intellectual freedom, censorship, privacy, "clashes of interests", etc. As an example,

you need only to think of how freedom represents reading's internal and irreducible form of legality, while clashes of interests, which are so important in the management of library services, assume a different dimension in reading, rarely colliding with ethics values.

Last but not least, I would like to highlight how the vision of the ethics of reading as an applied ethics does not even slightly bereave it of its theoretical foundation and makes it relatively independent from individual and often opposite ethical theories. We can as much come to a kind of ethics of reading (and also to a kind of non-violent ethics) by starting from utilitarian, contractarian or consequential positions and many more. Although the theoretical background is not irrelevant, the unifying approach of reading allows us to come to the same ethical conclusions.

### ***THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE ETHICS OF READING***

The possibility to give an ethical base to the practice of reading leans on a vision of reading as a *relation*. This is a dimension that includes and transcends all partial aspects of reading: deciphering, comprehension, interpretation, moulding, diction, communication, promotion, etc. The relation established during reading is particularly defined by two characteristics at the core of Eduard Glissant's thought (Glissant 2007): *opacity* and *archipelagic* character. Opacity is not the opposite of transparency in this case. On the other hand, it shows a particular relation with others that consents to the "multiple root" of things and people, and that does not try to *comprehend*, but is content with *comprising*, that is *taking with oneself*<sup>1</sup>. Opacity *protects* who is different. It is a holistic and plural principle in reading. Opacity is anti-reductionist and it admits the necessity and vitality of a conflict within different kinds of reading: it opposes any authoritarian and hierarchic postulate in which there is only one "good" reading and all the others are bad. Such a definition of the ethics of reading also opposes the idea that it is possible to achieve an exhaustive interpretation of a text, as if it had just one definitive explanation. On the contrary, understanding everything is not only unnecessary, but also mostly deceitful in reading. There is no need to understand in order to love, says Glissant – and we shall not forget that Pennac (Pennac 1993) and many others have stated a similar idea

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<sup>1</sup> The author here plays on the common etymological origin of the words *comprehend* and *comprise*, which are homonyms in Italian and are both composed by the prefix "com-" (meaning "with") and the verb "-prendere" (meaning "taking").

about reading. The ethics of reading presents itself as phenomenology of reading passions.

With the term *archipelagic*, Glissant refers to a model of plural relation, which is nonetheless connected by a unitary element that is the sea (that stands for reading). While the idea of an island exposes to a sort of self-referential attitude, the archipelago represents the rhizomatous element (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980), which is able to enlarge and branch in a non-hierarchic and non-pre-established way. This relation develops within a patent intercultural or cross-cultural perspective, the first being directed to crossbreeding and miscegenation of different cultures, while the second one aims to cross borders. Therefore, according to Capurro, it is necessary to stress once again the fact that either the ethics of reading is completely intercultural or it is not at all.

In order to better define and understand what kind of relation is represented by reading, we have to refer to the work of two important French thinkers: Emmanuel Lévinas and Paul Ricoeur, who contributed the most to the development of this theoretical field, together with Derrida and deconstructionists like J. Hillis Miller (Miller 1989). In its deepest and broadest sense, reading is meeting the Other, or, we could say with Lévinas, meeting "the face of Others" (Lévinas, 1995). What comes toward us when we read is actually a face: the most exposed, vulnerable, but also mysterious part of the Other, the part through which he looks at *us*, he calls *us*. The Others' face is always the opposite of the idea that we have of them, as much as every reading surprises us and changes the beliefs we had and the mood we were in when it started. The Other's face comes across and says "you will not kill", or else "you will read me", which are the same thing when using the terms of Lévinas' thought.

Ethics is essentially separation, as Lévinas and Kant have shown, the latter being the philosopher that opened the way to modern ethics. In Savater's opinion this would also be the reason for the *tragic* nature of ethics (Savater, 1998). A relation can only start from an original separation, as the one between ego and Other, or between reading and text. An ethical approach to reading criticizes every empathizing and fusional vision of reading. Proust used to say that those who read always end up reading themselves. However, this only happens at the end of a process, of a relation or mediation, where the reader comes out of him and meets with the Other. Lévinas asserts that "there is no synthesis between the Other and the Same and it is in this

difference that we recognize the ethical relation". Reading is exactly the act that breaks the ipseity of the Same. Some people believe that reading is like looking themselves in a mirror, or finding something that already exists, or having a confirmation of what they think and think to know. But eventually these people are forced to face the fact that every reading act exists in order to derail the certainties of the Same. *Re-reading* – maybe the highest form of reading, ethically and conceptually speaking – is a counterproof (Calinescu, 1993, Galef, 1998, Lesser, 2002), because it shows that it is not possible to read the same book twice. Even through the lines of a phrase that we know by heart, the otherness of some beauty or of a completely unexpected sense always peeps out.

We also come across a tension between the hermeneutical and the ethical vision of reading here. Hermeneutics states the supremacy of comprehension and interpretation, thus tending to limit the aesthetic and ethical capacity of reading. In the aesthetic field the *pleasure of the text* (Barthes, 1976), or even its *sensible apperception* (Jauss, 1987), are reduced by hermeneutics to a sort of epiphenomenon. In the ethic one, the hermeneutic conclusion is that "text comes before reading" (Frey, 2008, p.3). Ethically it is the opposite, because it is in reading that we make the choices that give sense and life to the text. This is also the reason for the separation of Lévinas and Ricoeur (but also for the "ethical turning point" of the last Ricoeur, in an implicit and explicit adjustment), as well as of the differences that enriched the comparison between Derrida and Gadamer. From an ethical point of view, the problem is actually the so called hermeneutic circle that is the Platonic conviction that everything that can be discovered and known in the world pre-exists its discovery. Thus reading only reveals a truth that already exists and that is already written. Reading, as well as knowledge, would just be reminiscence then.

### **OTHERNESS AND DIALOGICITY**

Many are the protagonists of a reading relation (author, text, reader, public, publisher, library, etc.), but the reading relation can be actually reduced to a *dual* relationship or to many subsequent and separate dual relationships. As almost every ethical conviction that concerns reading, this one comes from experience. Paul Ricoeur (Ricoeur, 1988, pp.263-264) showed very well that the initial scene in the reading arena is a *fight*: the author makes the reader feel the weight of his *auctoritas*. He is the father, reader is the son; he is the one who exists, knows, writes and who asks

the reader to listen, if not to obey. The reader resists: he trembles in front of the author, he feels unworthy (Borges, 1986, p.24), he does not dare openly contrast him, but he silently sharpens his knife and begins his reconstruction of the text through reading. Reading can be seen as a patricide, which was made necessary by the *violence* of the author, who does not hesitate to read instead of reader. This is how Lautreamont opens the challenge in the first canto of *Les Chants de Moldoror*: reader, "shy soul", you will have to become "as fierce as what you read" if you want to survive to the "mortal fumes" of the text: so "turn your heels back and not forward" (Ducasse, 1988, p.21). Do you understand? The author is literally pushing the reader away from the text. And the reader keeps on reading step by step, implacable. In the Prologue of *Autos sacramentales*, Calderón de la Barca turns to the reader as an "amigo y enemigo". Julian Green is even more direct: "The writer proceeds vigorous and [...] kills his reader. He kills him with a pleasure that is only comparable to the one of his own victim" (Green, 1990, p.17). For this reason Roland Barthes says that "the reader's birth is at the cost of the author's death" (Barthes, 1977, p.148; Foucault, 1969). Actually the reader's metaphorical contra-violence will rather take the nonviolent way of consciousness raising and of the claim of his own rights. This happens because of the constitutive nonviolence of reading's nature.

The duel between author and reader continues until the final upheaval, until mutual recognition. It can be seen in the terms of the Hegelian Master-Slave Dialectic. What we are interested in doing here though is recognising that they establish an I-you relationship, and that a condition of extraordinary intimacy and nearness is determined through conflict. This is also valid for many other dual relations associated with reading, as those that readers set up with one another through books, the goodnight reading or lap reading, as it has been called (Díaz, 1999), or "vicarial" reading, which is when someone reads instead of someone else. Vicarial reading is a typical dual reading, setting up a relationship between two people, one who reads and the other one who listens. Of course, love reading is always and completely dual.

Thus reading gives shape to a relation that Buber defined as an I-you relation, a *dialogic* and personal relation contrasting with the instrumental I-it one (Buber, 2004; Gadamer, 2000; Todorov, 1990). A dialogic relation is different from a dialectic one, because it is founded on an I-you relationship (Rueda Vásquez, 2010). However, Lévinas rightly contests the symmetrical and mutual nature of such relation, which does not correspond at all to the asymmetrical situation existing in reading (Lévinas,

1976; Lévinas, 1985; Zavala, 2002). Because of its position in the spheres of fight and gift, which are not in contrast with one another, reading correlates people and entities that are not on the same level. Parity (different from equity) is not really important in reading, because of its paradoxical risk of casting doubt on the very recognition of otherness.

*Dialogue* is another concept that has been constantly eroded by an action of trivialization. From the original Socratic meaning of a maieutic research of some truth that is never dogmatically presupposed nor definite, dialogue became a sort of communicative and inventive technique, as for example in the interpretation given by Leonard Nelson and his followers (Dordoni, 2009; Dudiak, 2001). As we have already said, it is necessary to be warned against trivialization, although it is not always damaging, as it is connected with the *use* of a concept. For instance, the *technique* of withdrawal from question to question can enlighten some modalities used by reading in order find its way through the text, without forcing it to light, so as to respect its ambiguities and twilight zones. The questions that the text is asked by the reader and vice versa – which are not a symmetrical cut and thrust – are necessary to draw the cathartic way through which reading takes possession of the text, or makes its own text. This is a course led by doubts and experimentation, more than by the research of truth. Moreover the “learned ignorance”, and the Socratic “knowing not to know”, are often the result of deep and brotherly readings (Derrida, 1980, p.63; Illich, 1994, p.17). Franco Fortini argued that it is necessary to rediscover the value of reading as “silent dialogue”, as a countermelody of mass culture and its values (Fortini, 2003, p.193). In Ezio Raimondi’s work about the *ethics of the reader*, the dialogical structure of reading “does not ignore the threat or the continuous temptation of violence”, but rather offers itself as a form of non violent management of conflicts (Raimondi, 2007, p.46). Therefore the dialogue started by and within reading does not contrast with the “conflict scene” that Ricoeur pointed out. As Lévinas argues, a relation is ethical when there is an opposition that is not a source of violence (Lévinas, 1994).

Of course there is also a more traditionalist version of reading’s dialogue, meaning a dialogue with the dead and with ancestors. From Seneca to Pliny, from Descartes to Milton through Quevedo, reading has often been depicted as a conversation with the deceased. Also Paul De Man sees a will “to reveal the identity of the dead” (De Man, 1979, pp.68-69). According to another current and dark comparison, this aspect that risks to embalm reading and transform libraries in cemeteries, is just one of the

possible ways of a living dialogue with the living, which also transforms the dead in real living interlocutors. So reading is always a return to life, it is the realm of the *revenant*, of ghosts, of living dead, as in the beautiful poem of Wallace Stevens, *Large Red Man Reading* (Stevens, 1950):

There were ghosts that returned to earth to hear his phrases,  
As he sat there reading, aloud, the great blue tabulae.  
They were those from the wilderness of stars that had expected more.

There were those that returned to hear him read from the poem of life,  
Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips among them.  
They were those that would have wept to step barefoot into reality,

That would have wept and been happy, have shivered in the frost  
And cried out to feel it again, have run fingers over leaves  
And against the most coiled thorn, have seized on what was ugly...

#### **AND READING ANSWERED...**

The ethics of reading particularly highlights the *responsibility* connected to reading itself, weighing on the reader's shoulders, although it is a responsibility of all the actors of this process, including the author (as writers must be the first readers of their own works). The responsibility of reading stands out in different ways: either by following the so-called *ethics of responsibility* (Weber, 1968; Jonas, 1990), based on the evaluation of actions' consequences, or by following the ethics "of persuasion" referring to some absolute and binding principles (credit of this concept is usually given to Kant). Actually, an ethical analysis of responsibility points out the limits of the schematic presentation introduced by Weber.

Responsibility means responding above all: both responding *for* and responding *to*. Since reading itself does not always give answers, or at least as this is not its main purpose (Gadamer's hermeneutics shows how reading represents the priority of questions over answers), it teaches us how to respond in an ethical way. We shall focus on the difference between *giving answers* and *responding*, the first one being a factual activity, biunique, not ethical, and the second one being a personal, plural, ethical and political attitude. We can give answers without responding and responding without giving any answers. We can also give answers in disagreement, or better still, disagreeing can be a specific way of responding. Responding implies availability,

sometimes empathy, commitment in all cases. We respond to a call, to a voice, by putting ourselves in dialogue.

The first responsibility of reading (Attridge, 2010) does stand in responding to the author's call. Pay attention, as this does not mean that the reader has to conform to the model that the author has imagined (the one represented by the "implicit reader", as semiotic has defined it). It does not even mean parting with reading's supreme freedom. Responsibility does not exist without freedom. In his book "*Ethics of reading*" Miller states that freedom actually consists in being responsible of one's own reading (Miller, 1987, p.53; García Landa, 2001). By paraphrasing Marx, we could say that the reader is free to make his own text, but not arbitrarily. Hand to hand with the text, in the statement of reader's own pleasure and rights that cannot be renounced, the action of reading has to meet with the alterity or even with the non involvement hiding deep inside the text.

Reading responds also when it respects the *intentions* and the *intentionality* of the text. This is one kind of *responsible reading*, that we are going to treat again with regard to the ecology of reading. It is very hard and useless to tell apart intentions and results, as well as principles and consequences when it comes to reading. This activity applies to a physical object, although this might be composed of electronic signs, or impalpable and ephemeral labial or corporal expressions. Reading is an art, a technique that only gets some results if it sticks to the structure of the text and changes it by its own action. The author's intention and the text's intentionality are very different concepts, as the first one mostly refers to a will of communication, while the second one attributes to a constituent inclination towards the object (in a phenomenological meaning). However, both concepts need to be part of a responsible reading. This does not mean that the reader has to get along with the author's intention and the text's intentionality, nor follow them slavishly. Reading *against* the author's will can be responsible if it is done in a sincere dialogical way, as in the case of "resistant reading", which feminist cultural studies called attention to (Fetterley, 1978; Kolodny, 1980). As the author is asked to state the sources, origin and debts of his thought, the reader should *outline* his own path too. This can be done through a variety of *reading outlines*, in order to make it consistent, communicable and repeatable. It is evident that this perspective implies a strong reconciliation between the author and the reader, between the figures of reading and writing. It is indeed the rehabilitation of the reader and his importance in the literary work's existence that

burdens him with a full-blown *work* of reading, which shall not be intended in a “productive” way, but as a creation and re-creation of a work of art to all intents and purposes. The *inventive* nature of reading has been shown with exemplary ability by Massimo Bonfantini in his essay *Dalla parte del lettore (On the reader’s side,* Bonfantini, 1982). It is also clear that this conception of reading can clash (but also live) with a practice of reading that is brief, digestive and disenchanting. Still an ethical perspective (the one that is not moralistic nor restricted to prescribe and banish good and bad readings) is exactly the one in the position to welcome and process the possible conflict among multiple readings.

The notion of responsible reading has had a major role within semiotics, for instance, in reacting to the theories of “open work” (Eco, 1962). Umberto Eco distances himself from the *unlimited semiosis* that he had contributed to reinforce through his first works and he troubles with distinguishing between *interpretation* and *use* of a text, between *intentio operis* and *intentio lectoris*. He also determines “what should be protected in order to allow to be opened”. We are within an ethics of reading responsibility. The motto could be: read however you like, but pay the price.

Having eventually come out of the catechism of good and bad readings, and being in a context of reading responsibility, the idea of reading well or not takes a totally different shape too. This has been highlighted by George Steiner, who can be considered as one of the masters of this particular ethics of reading:

To read well is to answer the text, to be answerable to the text, “answerability” comprising the crucial elements of “response” and of “responsibility”. To read well is to enter into answerable reciprocity with the book being read [...]. To read well is to be read by that which we read. Is it to be answerable to it.  
(Steiner, 1996, p. 6)

It is important to stress that we are not talking about “good readings” but rather about “well done readings” (Steiner, 1997, pp.7-27), reading being an activity that is done in obedience to an internal legality, just as a work of art does. This way could lead us to discover that the guiding principles of the ethics and aesthetics of reading will eventually meet again, but that is not the subject of this essay. “A good ear is needed in order to read well, just as for music, and listening is necessary” explains Raffaele La Capria (La Capria, 1998). On the other hand, those who do not read well stay on the surface and do not feel the text, they betray themselves by betraying the

text, and they are not faithful to reading or to the exchange that it embodies (Steiner). Riccardo Piglia (Piglia 2005, p.35) speaks of “wicked” reading when one does it literally, or “against another reader”, or “when one reads hostile readings” (being the opposite of reading the enemy, which is an ethical commandment of reading). In his tale *Bad literature* Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt tells the story of a professor who despises reading novels until he finally tries one of them and he identifies himself with it to the point of dying for it (Schmitt, 2008). In this case bad literature is the ethical one, which relieves the reader of his prejudice, although... he pays the price for it.

A crucial role in the field of responsibility is played by the “care for the text” and for the relation that it establishes (Martinsson, 1996, p.29). We could say that reading only takes care of the text if it allows its survival and the reproduction of the “context”. Reading defends the integrity of the text from merchant assaults and from interested nibbles, it affirms the text's right to find readers, and it protects the text's authenticity. The care for the text is part of what Foucault would call “self-care”: reading is a “paideia”, a sentimental education that is built through the acknowledgement of the Other's textual attitude. Under the title of “ethics of the text”, Michele Ranchetti has published a series of essays digging backwards in the reception of some famous authors such as Benjamin, Wittgenstein, Adorno, Freud, etc. These essays aim to compare the different layers of reading and make the performing power of written words come out thanks to a philological loving action (Ranchetti, 1999). Therefore the care for the text is not a result of the impossible restoration of an original buried under layers of reading, but rather the consequence of a comparative and critical reading of the text itself. We would like to remind that, according to Calvino, it is readings sedimentation that actually makes a classic *classical* (Calvino, 1991, p.7) and that by Borges (Borges, 1960, p.108 and foll.) every author creates their own predecessor – from reading layers then.

An important moment of this *care* is represented by the selection, referring to an exquisitely ethical act such as choosing. Reading represents a choice to the nth degree, although this dimension has not been deeply investigated yet. First of all, we choose to read, which implies per se an adherence to a conscious use of one's own time, abilities and intellectual availability. Choosing *to read* already makes a difference: “the book matters” (Sumara, 1996, p.87). Secondly it is necessary to choose *what* to read: in such a stoned and hypertrophic publishing offer we have to

identify the text that will be the object of our *care* for reading. Then again we have to choose how we are going to read that text, what will be the quality and the specificity of our operation of interpretation, what answer we are going to give if we are actually giving one. Finally, we have to choose the kind of possible relationships that we are going to establish with other readers. Each of these choices implies another one and it is not done once and for all: the reading pact can be cut off at any time. As in many other cases that we have already treated, it is not a matter of voluntaristic or deterministic ethics: the ethical attitude never denies but it *reveals* – if ever – the role that chance has in many reading choices.

#### **SHARING AND SINGULARITY**

The public/private relation that reading puts at stake is one of the most intriguing aspects of this subject, meaning the kind of *ethical intrigue* that Lévinas talks about. In fact, reading is undoubtedly a private action. Not only, as we have seen, because it calls to individual responsibilities (since no *responsible* reader would explain his own reading choice by saddling someone else with it), but also because reading is an action that obeys to instinct, aversions, timetables and modalities that dip into the most intimate and secret self. Every reader's reading space, for instance, is inviolable: when you read you enter a zone that Hall's proxemics would define as part of the "intimate" sphere (Hall, 1962). And what is private par excellence is the pleasure that comes from an act. But what is also distinctive of reading is the fact that it is a private act which is often consummated in public (out of necessity or virtue). This feature of reading is libraries' true *raison d'être*: these being public institutions devoted to give private pleasure, the irreverent comparison that was made with brothels (Magrelli, 1998, p. 33; Masini, 1983, p. 54; François, 2000, pp. 19, 24) is not completely senseless, although libraries totally lack of the mercenary aspect, at least so far.

When Cioran reads in a bar ("a silent conversation in the dictatorship of noise") and is seen by a colleague that questions him, he acts as if nothing had happened and keeps on reading, "because reading is a private act, even when done in public" (Lozano, 2007). The ethics of reading includes the defense of the privacy of the act, regardless of this reinforcing the several accusations of asociality that have been made against reading. Such a private act has plenty of other public, social and even political implications: when we talk about the ethics of reading, Manguel writes, we actually

think of the union between the public and private components that are “in the act of turning the pages and following the lines” (Manguel, 2010, p. x).

Starting from a hermeneutic approach strengthened by various ethic ideas, Dennis J. Sumara dedicated an interesting book to the interlacement public/private in the field of reading (Sumara, 1996). Sumara focuses on the character of “embodied action” represented by reading: the relation started should not be thought as a textual machine, on the model of a factory, but as a full-blown physical *incorporation* of the world. The body of reading marks the text and spreads it with its desiring traces. In order to stress on the physicalness of this relation, Sumara repeatedly uses an expression drawn from the novel *The English Patient* by Ondaatje: “unskinning”. This word calls to mind the metaphor of a moult, a painful and liberating experience at the same time, such as coming out of a cocoon and changing skin. While changing, we are certainly more undefended and reading exposes our nudity but also regenerates the self. This process has a lot to do with the moment of birth, which philosophers such as Hannah Arendt and María Zambrano reasoned about, and it makes us understand the intimacy, fragility and also the creative power of the act of reading.

It is not by chance that Sumara’s observation, as well as the one by Leslie Cole (Cole, 2009), is centred on the experience of *reading groups*. In fact, in their most mature form, they represent some kind of “ethical wash” of reading practices. The constant confrontation among different perspectives, the respect for the text and for its interpretation by other readers, the emphasis on the connection between life and reading: these are all elements that make a reading group a “commonplace location”, a place for experimenting participated reading. It is very important to seize the historical and conceptual difference between collective and participated reading (Ferrieri, 2006). Collective reading, in all of its different historical variations, is considerably characterized by oral components, as well as instrumentality, authoritarianism and gregariousness. Some well-known examples are the peasant reading done by the *pater familias* by the fireplace (Chartier, 1988), the ecclesiastic or sectarian reading of holy books, the flutter of red booklets during the Chinese cultural revolution, school reading, the reading aloud in cigars factories in Cuba, etc. It is somehow a sort of pre-ethical or post-ethical reading, happening before or after the revolution of individual reading, represented by the “room of one’s own” claimed by Virginia Woolf (Woolf, 1967). On the other hand, participated reading as it is done by today’s reading groups represents *the creation of a network where the benefits of*

*reading are shared.* This network neither ignores nor denies the founding feature of solitary and individual reading. On the other hand, it adds on the values of plurality, dialogue, different readings and experiences, together with a holistic approach that deals with all the emotional drifts and relation games originated from reading. While collective reading maintains its strong oral component, participated reading is marked by continual written traces (notes, emails, comments) and most of all, it feeds and is fed by social networks' activity.

What stands out when analyzing the practices of participated reading is a central value of the ethics of reading: *singularity* (once again, an esthetic category that becomes ethical). Indeed, Derek Attridge, who elaborated on this category in his works, highlights its strong relation with another two: *otherness* and *inventiveness* (Attridge, 2004b; Attridge, 2004a). Singularity concerns both the *unexpected* character of the text – actually revealed by the astonishment of reading – and the unrepeatable and unique nature of the act of reading. Every reading unit contains the entire universe of what has been and will be read, but all monads are different from one another, every one of them being a unique representation of that universe. In defining the concept of singularity, Attridge clearly specifies that it is not just the opposite of universal, or a synonym for particular, contingent, specific and unique: singularity is essentially *a difference*, what makes an object different from all of its similar objects. And reading corresponds to this difference, or better still, reading is what makes the difference, as we have already said. Attridge argues that singularity is rather an event than an object's quality. Although the concept of singularity is very far from the one used in physics, something of the *singularity* of the big bang or of a black hole penetrates in Attridge's vision. In fact, singularity defines an irreducible and inviolable ethical space, whose physical correspondent is a *reading bubble* where the reader plunges because of the gravitational attraction to the text. This *time space* is defined as an *exceptional* state (Schmitt, 1972; Bataille, 1990) where *rules* are suspended and meanwhile an *exceeding* state because it "exceeds existing frameworks".

Attridge attaches great importance to the distinction between the singularity of reading and any vision considering singularity as a gradual adjustment to rules and habits. The sublime fiction of reading entails that, under its sovereignty, what is known as not being true can be true, meaning that the only existing things are the ones that you read. Compared to writing, reading presents an additional fictional

character, as it revises also the existence of the author in a fictional way, which is something that the author himself cannot do. Singularity is ethical for many different reasons, first of all because it causes a suspension of normality. It is ethical because it separates, it isolates, it nests; it is ethical because it revolts, because it chooses and it is chosen, because it is free and liberating, because it is *ethologic*, defined and ruled by its own passions and natural inclinations. Finally, singularity is ethical because it is utterly impure and half-cast: "Singularity is not pure: it is constitutively impure, always open to contamination, grafting, accidents, reinterpretation and recontextualization" (Attridge, 2004b, p. 63). Attridge even goes so far as to state that there cannot be any justice if the singularity of the act of reading is not recognized, as this is the only way to account for it: *no singularity, no justice!*

#### **TOWARDS AN ECOLOGY OF READING**

In conclusion I would like to shortly and schematically treat the guidelines for a possible transition from the ethics to the *ecology of reading*, which is nothing else but one of its applications.

The starting point is the very strong interconnection between text and environment. Dennis Sumara defined the concept of *living reading*, which clearly expresses interdependence and a common origin. We somehow read biologically (Sumara, 1996, p.108), meaning both that reading has changed our biology and that the relations between nature and culture (and thus reading) are really far from the schematic opposition that used to be assumed in the past. The transactional theory of reading by Louise Rosenblatt (Rosenblatt, 1938; Rosenblatt, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1988) anticipated this idea by putting under discussion the very possibility of a separate existence of text and reader. There are also some forms of ecology of reading that completely rid the concept of any naturalistic component (Newlyn, 2005): the "natural" environment of reading is the text, and an ecological reading is one that kindly and generously responds to the text.

The text-environment unit (including but not exhausting the text-reader unit) is one of the foundations of the vision of reading as an ecosystem. It can develop in two different directions that could be defined as *pars destruens* and *pars construens*, depending on whether we want to stress the ecological necessity of reducing useless redundancy or the capacity of reading to develop an "ecology of the mind". However, the awareness of the fragility of reading's ecological niche is present in both. Anyone

who has dealt with reading promotion knows the importance of environmental factors and of the role they can play in “reproducing” reading habits. A city on a reader scale, a society setting off reading, a family owning books, a school conveying the pleasure of reading, a peer group suggesting reading tips to one another, a happy initiation, hospitable libraries, the *in corpore vili* experimentation (Barlaam, 2010) of the existential and evolving advantages that can come from reading, etc. These are all crucial factors in the education of a reader. In the same way, by paraphrasing a popular ecologist statement on the Amazonian butterfly flitting, environmental interdependence can make a note on a diary in Cologno Monzese provoke a reading trauma in Helsinki. The fluidity of reading experiences and their circulation in subliminal and viral forms are of such a great intent as to exceed any distance. Therefore it is easy to test how a reading experience can not only change the readers’ life, *but also the life of the non-readers*, contributing to the development of the intellectual environment where they both live.

Let us start from the *pars destruens*. The ecology of reading is meant to protect both the present and future reader from the cultural pollution that surrounds them. The Italian writer Franco Fortini has often called attention to this acceptation of the word (Fortini, 1985, pp. 85-89, 180-183, 227-229, 279-292; Fortini, 1990, p. 85, Fortini, 1991, p. 288 e segg.): when books become “an alibi”, “one of the major signs of our misery”, it is then that the ecology of reading asserts itself as a “deliberate renunciation” of false pluralism, and as a “disinfestation and reduction of the imaginary and intimidating library that buzzes amongst words, these being spoken or printed by the media”. Facing the Promethean and consumer will to read everything, or read “anything and everything”, the ecology of reading describes the choice of some measure and self-discipline. Besides Fortini’s more political view, there are some nearly nihilistical acceptations that stimulate to read less, such as Henry Miller’s (Miller, 1976, p.16) or Ezra Pound’s (Pound, 1957, p.35), or even not to read at all (Schopenhauer, 1983, p. 748, Manganelli, 1973, p. 107). Naturally, choosing not to read is a possibility that fully belongs to the ethics and ecology of reading, as long as it is the result of a conscious, individual and deliberate decision.

The main problem of ecology is actually the *relation between quantity and quality*: as in other productive processes, we witness a hypertrophic growth of the offer through the daily publication of such a high number of books that no reader would ever be able to read in their own life. Besides, quantity is not at all proportional to quality.

Indeed, the struggle against wasting appears as a major problem, concerning not only the mere production of books but also the act of reading. This struggle can be intended as a fight against cultural rumors and the supremacy of para-text and epi-text on the text itself (Genette, 1989), that is anything that has to do with the book in the media. In its turn, this cultural rumor settles the supremacy of *extensive* over *intensive* reading (Chartier, 1992) and of comment over the text itself (Steiner, 1992). Against the oppression of fashion and consumer culture, the ecological practice of *reuse* increases the value of libraries, of circuits of book exchange and donation, like bookcrossing, contributing to weaken the supermarkets of information. Classical books thus gain over bestsellers, and the patient *re-reading* asserts itself against the bulimic swallowing of new releases.

Finally, this dimension of the ecology of reading questions itself on the *sustainability* of the text. When referring to the world of information (as in the “*Charter of Civil Rights for a Sustainable Knowledge Society*” elaborated by Heinrich Böll Foundation and Rafael Capurro) the concept of sustainability means above all making the increasing quantity of information and of informative transactions compatible with the preservation of the balance and reproductive capacity of the cognitive ecosystem. Therefore, reading is sustainable when it saves both trees and reader’s time, when it submits its documents to a textual impact balance (by determining if they quote and respect their sources, for instance, if they allow to go back to the original, how deep is their linguistic devastation, if they permit some reuse and so on).

However, the most interesting feature of the ecology of reading is the *pars construens*, the constructive part insofar as it contains a proposal. It is also the element where the ethical dimension tends to take root the most. We go from appeals for the reduction of “mediocre forage” (Miller, 1976, p.3) to the valorization of reading as a nourishment, as a vital relationship with the world of humans and nature (Furtado, 2000). Reading as such then becomes a specific form of ecological approach to the environment and the genitive of the expression “ecology of reading” goes back to being subjective above all. Reading is the process allowing and promoting the survival of ideas in the environment. The master of this field is Gregory Bateson (Bateson, 1976; Bateson, 2002), who has shown that reading is “a difference that makes the difference”, that it is a way for ideas to relate to one another, to connect and reproduce themselves. Reading has often been put on an operating table by neurologists and linguists, as if it was a linear mechanical phenomenon, subjected to

unambiguous rules and codes. On the contrary, it originates from a violation of the rules of a proper logical typification, just as any other living system, such as dreams and games that it has so much in common with. Reading is an *enantiomorphic* system, which includes the opposites and does not remove them. It lays on the environment, as a map on a territory, and it keeps records of all altimetrical, pressure and border differences.

Mind ecology teaches us how to explore the interconnections between crab and lobster, orchid and primrose, and ourselves with them, as Bateson would say. Reading explores mislaid spheres such as silence, fraternity, peace. The ecology of reading questions the possible separation of reading from any vision of knowledge as a domain of world and nature. This way Bateson's idea of "mind ecology" can meet the one of "collective mind" which Pierre Lévy describes as being at work on the web (Lévy, 1996). Here the "connecting structure" takes the shape of a constant circulation of knowledge, of a mobilization of intelligences based on the ecological principle that "no one knows everything, everyone knows something, and the entire knowledge lies in humanity". Even the reductionist element expressed in the *pars destruens* can turn positively into a cultural *degrowth* (Latouche, 2008; Latouche and Bonaiuti, 2005; Pallante, 2005) founded on energy saving, on molecular recombination of messages, on a bottom-up reappropriation of the sense, on "slow reading". "Only when we will have learnt how to look at a rose in a glass" – states Fortini recalling Bateson – "an opposition to the present status quo could be revived" (Fortini, 1988).

The ecologic approach adds another ethical responsibility to reading: the one towards future generations. It is not just a matter of enabling new readers to come to life, but also of allowing reading as an expression of future possibilities. This means preserving reading, but most of all using reading as a way to preserve the world. Reading is preserving. As long as we read, this blue planet will have enough nourishment to survive. With Bateson (Bateson, 2002, p.231) we set our hopes on the fact that while all the lemmings are running to the sea, there shall be at least one that stops and reads a footprint on the sand.

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