



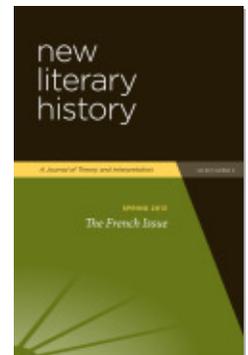
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How the French Read

Toril Moi

FOR A LONG TIME, FRENCH INTELLECTUALS set the agenda for Anglophone critics' understanding of reading. In the 1960s, the journal *Tel Quel*, led by Philippe Sollers, could count on the collaboration of intellectuals and writers such as Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Derrida. Finely attuned to the most innovative intellectual movements of its time, *Tel Quel* set an ambitious intellectual agenda: to develop a radically modern theory of texts and textuality. In its pages, linguists and literary critics allied themselves with Marxists and other philosophers and with psychoanalysts to show us that the world had become word. The task of the critic was no longer to be the simple decoding of literary meaning, but to follow the slipstream of the forever elusive signifier, and thus to grasp the production of meaning in every medium.

What came to be known as "French theory," or simply as "theory," exploded the traditional boundaries of literary criticism and prepared the ground for new kinds of critical interventions in new kinds of meaning making not just in literature but across media and technologies. Paradoxically, then, a revolutionary movement that began with writers and literary critics, and which took for granted that certain writers (Lautréamont, Mallarmé) had anticipated the new theoretical insights into the nature of language and signification, contributed to the undoing of the hegemony of literature and literary criticism in the humanities.

All over the world, literary intellectuals followed the siren call from France. The old editors, philologists, and biographers in their elbow-patched tweed jackets and sagging corduroys were no match for the latest French *haute culture*. If 1966, which saw the publication of Foucault's *The Order of Things* and Lacan's *Écrits*, remains the *annum mirabilis* of the new movement, 1967 runs a close second, for in that year Derrida published *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Speech and Phenomena*.

When did it all come to an end? Was it with the news that Althusser had strangled his wife (1980)? With the death of Barthes (1980), Lacan (1981), and Foucault (1984)? With the publication of Kristeva's *Black Sun*

(1987)? Even Deleuze, who died in 1995, had published his major works by 1980. While each intellectual has his or her own specific trajectory, it is safe to say that by 1990, “French theory” had reached middle-age: still handsome, perhaps, but no longer an incandescent youth.

In the English-speaking world, the legacy of “theory” lingers on, not just in the dominance of “critique” and the hermeneutics of suspicion, but in the widespread rejection of any mention of the acting and intending subject. Many critics remain persuaded that the subject is to be banished (the author is dead!), or if not entirely banished, then understood as a more or less performative effect of discourses or of the signifier or simply as an ideological illusion. For such critics, texts are not intentional acts or utterances, but simply effects of a specific logic of signification, or of the “materiality of the signifier.” That there is a considerable tension between such views and the widespread Anglo-American investment in identity politics is obvious. For if the subject is dead, what does it matter whether the writer (or the reader) is a woman or a black American or a white bourgeois male?

Of late, such beliefs have come under pressure. Gone are the days when Anglophone literary critics could take for granted that their task was to perform some form of ideological unmasking through close reading. We are now in the middle of a veritable revolution of ideas about reading. Dissatisfaction both with the paradigm of critique, in which the critic always appears as more knowing than the author, and with the paradigm of close reading, emerged already in 1997 when Eve Sedgwick contrasted the old “paranoid” with a new “reparative” reading.¹ In 2000, Franco Moretti rejected the essentially canonizing “theological exercise” of close reading, defined as a “very solemn treatment of very few texts taken very seriously.” Literary historians and critics faced with large quantities of data, he argued, should take up “distant reading”: instead of reading the literary works themselves, they should simply read what literary critics and historians have said about them.² In 2009, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus edited a memorable special issue of *Representations* called “The Way We Read Now,” in which they suggested that close reading should be replaced by “surface reading.”³ Rita Felski has long submitted the hermeneutics of suspicion, or “critique,” to incisive scrutiny. She has also, rightly, connected the resurgence of interest in reading to the current concern with the value not just of literary studies, but of the humanities in general.⁴ Personally, I have been interested in working out a way of reading philosophically which does not impose a preexisting theoretical framework on the literary text, but which rather seeks to discover the work’s own concepts in order to place them in conversation with philosophy and theory.⁵

While “French theory” transformed literary studies in the English-speaking world, it had relatively little impact on literary studies in France. Instead of taking up “theory,” many French literary critics turned to “genetic criticism,” which scrutinizes the slightest note from a writer’s hand in the hope of establishing not just the text, but the work’s *avant-texte*, defined as “the totality of the material written for any project.”⁶ Genetic criticism has produced voluminous new editions of canonical French texts (Flaubert and Proust have been particularly favored), which include every draft, note, and variant of the published text, as well as learned essays on a writer’s sources, drafts, and early manuscripts. Among the movement’s key names are Jean Bellemin-Noël, Raymonde Debray Genette, Henri Mitterand, and Jacques Neefs. In their useful overview, Jed Deppman, Daniel Ferrer, and Michael Groden describe genetic criticism as the very embodiment of a “spirit of paradox”: it is at once accepting of the idea of an “infinite play of signs” and of a “teleological model of textuality” which upholds a strong notion of authorship.⁷ Seen from the outside, genetic criticism appears to combine a poststructuralist notion of textuality with a positivistic obsession with writers and origins.

In this context, the present collection of five French essays on reading represent an alternative both to theory’s relentless focus on texts and textuality and to genetic criticism’s relentless focus on the writer and his (rarely her) sources. Indeed, for François Cusset, both trends share a fundamental investment in writing and a complete disregard for reading. These essays appear to be written against a background in which literary criticism has lost its status as a self-evidently meaningful and relatively prestigious pursuit in France. No longer the self-confident providers of new theoretical premises for the world’s literary critics to follow, French critics now appear to be haunted by the specter of Anglo-American literary studies. In this respect, I recommend Cusset’s incisive overview of the “reading scene” in France today, which he finds lacking in comparison to the American reader-response theory, including the neopragmatism of Stanley Fish, and the various ways of reading developed by U.S. critics informed by identity politics. Cusset also usefully points out that French interest in reading has for too long remained divided between a nonliterary wing of concrete studies of history, society, and of actual readers (Chartier, Bourdieu, de Certeau), and a phenomenological tradition focused on the individual subject, perceived as pure consciousness. But this divide, he predicts, will soon be a thing of the past: the new generation of critics, many of whom are included in this issue, will create a less insular, more innovative critical practice in France.

If this group agrees on anything, it is that reading is to be understood as an everyday individual experience, in which “immersion” and “attention”

become key concepts. Focusing on the reader-text relationship, these essays turn away not just from textuality but also from history. While Cusset sees this simply as a return to traditional phenomenology, as practised in the 1950s and 1960s by Georges Poulet and Jean-Pierre Ricard, I think there is a difference. Unlike their distinguished predecessors, the writers collected here consider the reader not just as a consciousness, but as an embodied human being living in the everyday world. Most of them seem ready, at least in principle, to drop the traditional French emphasis on the canon of high culture in favor of a more inclusive, or maybe just a more idiosyncratic view of what works are worth reading. (I write “seem ready” since most of their actual examples remain perfectly canonical.)

With the exception of Cusset’s relative enthusiasm for readings informed by American-style identity politics, I can find no specific interest in writing by women, in Francophone writers, gay writers, or in any other so-called “identity” group. The reader may well be embodied, but there is no question here about what kind of marks and features this body bears, and no discussion of whether such features (gender, race, ethnicity) or other, less visible modes of embodiment, such as class, nationality, and sexuality have any effect on reading. Surely there is a tension between the claim that we must be interested in the concrete reading experience of actual readers and the rather radical disinterest in the concrete embodiment of those readers? After all, as the existentialists insisted, we are always situated, and our body, our sex, our race, our class, our place, our historical time are among the inevitable situations any human being has to “assume,” even from a phenomenological perspective.

Who, then, do these critics take the reader to be? Not Poulet’s universal and disembodied consciousness, but not, either, a fully concrete, living human being from a specific race and class (and so on). In these essays the reader is radically idiosyncratic, yet often quite abstract and impersonal. This, at least, appears to be the case for Marielle Macé, whose absorbing essay is at once immensely attractive and quite problematic. Macé begins, promisingly, with the claim that reading is “one of the daily means by which we give our existence form, flavor, and even style” (213). Her project is to understand how we “come to take texts as samples of existence, using them as real lines of movement in life” (217). To do this, she unites a “phenomenology of reading experience” with the “pragmatics of the relationship to the self” (217). *Conduct* describes the connection between the two. For Macé, reading is an “aesthetic conduct” implicated in the “stylistics of existence” of a given individual.⁸ Or in other words: we use our reading to individuate ourselves, to give shape and style to our own selves. When Emma Bovary dreams of romantic adventure, Macé writes, she is showing us exactly what it means to say

that a specific literary style or image can be translated into a way of being in the world.

In every sentence she writes, Macé comes across as a thoughtful and nuanced reader. The best thing about her essay is her fine meditation on what it means to be a reader, to make one's reading part of one's inner life, to have, as it were, an arsenal of images, voices, words to draw on in one's understanding of oneself.

Yet I remain at a certain distance from Macé's conceptual universe. There is a certain abstraction, as well as a certain formalism, in her notion of what reading does to us. When she discusses how we think of life—as a “tidy narrative,” a “musical tune” or as the “heroic exercise of a will”—she seems to me to say, quite uncontroversially, that if we want to imagine the shape of our life, we draw on a whole archive of images invented and explored by others. But it is difficult to see that this is a specific account of the existential experience of *reading*, if by reading one means the whole process: the attention, the immersion, the experience of the tension of excitement, the shock of disappointment, the joy of a happy end. Moreover, someone who has never read a book also has access to our cultural archive of stories and images of a life.

Macé's constant references to “style,” to “master-forms,” to “cognitive stylization,” “manners,” and to “forms of life” make it abundantly clear that her concern is with a kind of existential style. She is right to insist that our reading experiences form “layers of art,” resources with which to understand our experience. But at least in this essay, this concern remains abstract. I missed the careful scrutiny of any specific reader's experience, the experience of contradiction and conflict produced by divergent readings, and radically different uses of the same reading. (Maybe that is why I warmed to the moment in which she briefly connects her own experience as a baker's daughter to her reflections on the idea of “signature” in a poem by Francis Ponge.)

As a reader of Wittgenstein, I also found Macé's constant references to “forms of life” and to “grammar,” as in “the grammar of relationship to the self” or “the grammar” of forms of life deeply confusing. It is well known that “grammar” and “forms of life” are key concepts in the *Philosophical Investigations*, yet Wittgenstein is not a source of inspiration for Macé. As far as I can gather, she means by “form of life” something like the “shape of an individual existence.” Nothing could be further from Wittgenstein's idea that forms of life (or life-forms—*Lebensformen*) are something we *share*, something that gives us the very framework within which human existence can become intelligible. I wish Macé had taken the time to clarify her use of these terms with respect to Wittgenstein.

Pierre Bayard is famous as the author of *How to Talk about Books You Haven't Read* (2007), a witty exploration of what it means actually to have read a book. In "Anticipatory Plagiarism," he devotes his satirical intellect to the question of influence. The idea is that if we read books as if they were influenced by works written *after* their original moment of publication, entirely new and unexpected literary historical connections will emerge. But how original is it to read Kafka as if he were influenced by Beckett and the *nouveau roman*? Of course, Bayard has a serious point: he is right to insist, as he does by implication, that when we read Kafka today we can't escape our own knowledge of later developments. For us, Kafka naturally belongs in the company of Beckett. Bayard's conceit of "anticipatory plagiarism" takes this insight to its satirical extreme, and in so doing forces us to ask why we still fetishize the idea of the originality of genius. While this is a fine critique of the implicit anachronism of much literary criticism, I found the central conceit of "plagiarism" quite irritating, for nowhere in Bayard's text is there anything to warrant such an explosive term. "Influence" appears quite sufficient.

Some readers may admire Bayard's mastery of tone, the seamless shifts from sophisticated literary theory to utterly absurd counterfactual statements, and experience "Anticipatory Plagiarism" as a playful satire finely balanced between seriousness and slapstick. Unfortunately, I am not among them. I found the essay labored and unfunny, an example of a certain kind of French whimsy that I have always had trouble warming to. On this topic, I much prefer Borges's remarkable short story "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quijote."

Jean-Marie Schaeffer places the question of reading within a pedagogical framework. For Schaeffer as for Macé, reading is a moment of life, a form of lived experience, as real as any other kind of experience. His goal is to persuade us to stop inculcating students with the values and norms of a certain canon, be that the traditional literary canon or the new countercanons produced by, say, feminism and postcolonialism, and instead focus on the experience of reading. Students must learn to immerse themselves into the experience of literature, to notice its emotional effects, and its repercussions in everyday life.

If this is Schaeffer's positive program, it sounds quite sensible to me. I also liked his brief comments on the difference between reading narrative and poetry (although he left me wanting more reflections on theater). Yet it is difficult to understand why he wants to name this program "descriptive" as opposed to "normative." Nor do I understand how he intends to escape any kind of canon formation. Students will naturally assume that the canon is what is being taught. As long as we continue to teach literature, new canons will arise from the ashes of

the old. (The more courses we get on comic books, the more canonical comic books become.)

To me, then, Schaeffer's careful analytical distinction between the normative and the descriptive and between analysis and experience doesn't really work. I don't even see why such a distinction is needed for his project. I was also quite bothered by the absence of examples to help me imagine the new pedagogical practice. I did get the sense that Schaeffer is in favor of teaching complete works, as opposed to brief excerpts from a text, but in the United States, that's already the usual practice. If I decide to follow Schaeffer's recommendations and emphasize reading as an experience, what exactly would I do? And how would I know if it worked?

Yes Citton also considers immersion and experience to be an essential part of reading. For him, to read is to "expose oneself to being affected" (285) and to be "trained in developing relational gestures" (287). A "relational gesture" is a mental attitude which at once tells us what a social situation is and drives us to intervene in it. When we read, we don't actually intervene, of course, but we learn, through identification and other affective experiences, modes of reaction that shape us as moral agents, and ultimately also as more or less willing subjects of "semiocapitalism." Citton is right to insist that such an understanding of reading turns reading (and literature and other media) into the central practice of the humanities today. The future of the humanities, he argues, is the study of the interaction between human "gestures" and "communicating machines."

Citton's understanding of "semiocapitalism" speaks to his interest in the social dimensions of reading. He embraces the term because he wants to chart the "role of signs in the circulation of wealth, power, and desires" (291), which strikes me as an admirable project. Yet after reading Citton's essay, I can't say I am clear about what it means. In what way is "semiocapitalism" different from plain old "capitalism"? Or from the idea of postmodernity, as elaborated by Fredric Jameson?

To me, the most troublesome aspect of Citton's otherwise refreshing and imaginative essay is his explicitly theatrical understanding of the key concept of "gesture." Connected with the idea of performance, a "gesture" is action, but action understood exclusively as something performed for others. But this is a shallow understanding of action, which reveals an overly sanguine faith in the positive effects of adopting the vocabulary of "gesture." For if my expressions (my interpretations, my comments on my reading, in conversation, teaching, or writing) are taken to be "gestures" or "performances," it follows that every time I express myself, I place myself on stage and turn you into my audience.

But then I will be the star of my own performance, and you will be in the dark for me; if you are in pain, I will not perceive it. If we accept this view, reading becomes a self-centered, even narcissistic, activity, in which the subject takes no interest in others except as an audience of his or her performances.

Here, as in the other articles in this collection, I missed an understanding of reading as a shared experience, as something we do together, both in the sense that reading requires a shared language and a shared form of life (in Wittgenstein's understanding of the term), and in the sense that reading (and viewing, and seeing theater, and experiencing an opera) is something that makes us participate in a shareable world, that reading as an experience is not just private and personal, but part of the fabric of our life with others. Macé's claim that every reading adventure begins with isolation is open to challenge. For how alone is the reader curled up with her book? For how long would we keep reading if we never for one moment experienced the reading as a way of sharing a world with others? In the same way, to teach literature is not just to perform gestures, but to show students what it means to read with others.

In these essays, the focus on "reading as such" prevents the authors from asking whether what we actually read changes the experience of reading. Macé's isolated reader comes across as the classical image of a reader absorbed in a difficult text (maybe modernist poetry, or Proust). But what about readers of *Harry Potter* or watchers of *Star Trek*? They read (or watch) with passion, immersion, and total attention. Yet they experience themselves as a community. They produce fanzines, they interact online, they meet at conventions. In fact, today new online reading sites enable readers of every kind of literature to find community with others. To theorize the experience of the individual reader as if that reader were an isolated island, or an egocentric performer, is to miss half the adventure of reading.

In a collection of essays in which the idea of "attention" plays such a prominent role, I am surprised to find no reference to Simone Weil's epochal essays on attention, nor to Iris Murdoch's and Cora Diamond's development of Weil's concept with respect to literature.⁹ I would also have liked to see what the new generation of French critics make of Sartre's and Beauvoir's understanding of reading as "a pact of generosity" between writer and reader (Sartre), or as an invitation from the writer to the reader to follow the writer on a "genuine adventure of the mind" (Beauvoir).¹⁰

Taken as a whole, these five essays provide a vision of reading as the most ordinary experience in the world. They show us that reading shapes our understanding of ourselves, gives us resources with which to under-

stand the world and others, and that it is of fundamental importance now and in the digital future. At a time when the humanities are under serious threat, they are an invitation to us, who read them in English, to respond, to continue the conversation, to make our own case for the importance of literature and reading in the world today.

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NOTES

- 1 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading: Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You," in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Sedgwick (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1997), 1–37.
- 2 Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review*, no. 1 (2000): 57.
- 3 Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations*, no. 108 (2009): 1–21.
- 4 See for example Rita Felski, "Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *M/C Journal* 15, no. 1 (2012): <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/viewArticle/431>; Felski, "Suspicious Minds," *Poetics Today* 32, no. 2 (2011): 215–34. For a discussion of the value of reading literature, see Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).
- 5 Moi, "The Adventure of Reading: Literature and Philosophy, Cavell and Beauvoir," *Literature and Theology* 25, no. 2 (2011): 125–40; also published as Moi, "The Adventure of Reading: Literature and Philosophy, Cavell and Beauvoir," in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies: Consequences of Skepticism*, ed. Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie (London: Continuum, 2011), 17–29.
- 6 Jean Bellemin-Noël, "Psychoanalytic Reading and the Avant-texte," in *Genetic Criticism: Texts and Avant-textes*, ed. Jed Deppman, Daniel Ferrer, and Michael Groden (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 31.
- 7 Deppman, Ferrer, and Groden, eds., *Genetic Criticism*, 2.
- 8 Readers interested in more, should turn to her book: Marielle Macé, *Façons de lire, manières d'être* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011).
- 9 See for example Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," in *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1973), 105–16 (for French text, see Simone Weil, "Réflexions sur le bon usage des études scolaires en vue de l'amour de Dieu," in *Écrits de Marseille (1940–42): Philosophie, science, religion, questions politiques et sociales*, ed. Florence de Lussy, *Œuvres complètes* [Paris: Gallimard, 2008], 255–62); Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 2001); Cora Diamond, "Murdoch the Explorer," *Philosophical Topics* 38, no. 1 (2010): 51–85.
- 10 Jean-Paul Sartre, "What Is Literature?" in *What Is Literature? and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988), 21–238; Simone de Beauvoir, "Littérature et métaphysique," in *L'existentialisme et la sagesse des nations* (Paris: Nagel, 1948): 102–24; see also Toril Moi, "What Can Literature Do? Simone de Beauvoir as a Literary Theorist," *PMLA* 124, no. 1 (2009): 189–98.