CROATIAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

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Notes On Reading

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Reading starts with the act of perception and rapidly moves into an area concerning the recognition of written words. Word recognition consists of two aspects (functioning simultaneously and working in parallel): the phonological—converting groups of letters into sounds—and the lexical—giving access to a mental dictionary of the meaning of words. But what does the act of reading consist of? According to Peter Kivy, there is a parallel between reading texts and reading scores. And what about the reasons for reading? When we read, we are not just interested in understanding what the signs stand for, but we also activate memory, perception, problem-solving, and reasoning, and our attention is also devoted to identifying those characteristics of texts which help categorize them as works of a specific genre. Readers play a central role: without them and their activity, there would be nothing but a page of black spots. As they read and understand, readers propositionally imagine what is written and, at a further level, they may also imagine objectually and simulatively. These objects come into being thanks to the words that we imagine are similar to what Roman Ingarden sees as a skeleton, needing the experience of reading to be appropriately concretized.

Keywords: Reading; understanding; imagination.

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> "I wish you to gasp not only at what you read
> but at the miracle of its being readable."
> Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale fire*

The aim of this paper is to investigate the act of reading by combining empirical and philosophical approaches to literature. Specific issues concerning reading will be taken into account, from the typically neuropsychological aspects (I), to the experience of reading (II), the connection between reading, understanding, and imagining (III), the phenomenon of re-reading and its relevance for aesthetic appreciation (IV), with a final consideration on the specific activity the reader is asked to achieve in order to grasp the complexity of the literary work (V). These notes, however disconnected they may appear from one another, are intended to suggest how complex and multifaceted the phenomenon of reading is and how many different points of view may be adopted to display all the richness and irreducibility of the object in question. The idea is to shed some light on different aspects of reading (whether we consider it as an act of perception, of decoding, of understanding, of imagining, of interpreting, or of appreciating) and show why asking some questions about it may be justified.

I.

What means *reading* a literary work, and reading it well? That's the question asked by Virginia Woolf in *How Should One Read a Book?* where she defends the reader's freedom and alerts against bringing baggage and pre-conceived notions during the reading activity:

> Few people ask from books what books can give us. Most commonly we come to books with blurred and divided minds, asking of fiction that it shall be true, of poetry that it shall be false, of biography that it shall be flattering, of history that it shall enforce our own prejudices. If we could banish all such preconceptions when we read, that would be an admirable beginning. Do not dictate to your author; try to become him. Be his fellow-worker and accomplice. If you hang back, and reserve and criticize at first, you are preventing yourself from getting the fullest possible value from what you read. But if you open your mind as widely as possible, then signs and hints of almost imperceptible fineness, from the twist and turn of the first sentences, will bring you into the presence of a human being unlike any other. Steep yourself in this, acquaint yourself with this and soon you will find that your author is giving you, or attempting to give you, something far more definite (Woolf [1932] 1965: 257).

So the reader is free to understand and imagine from what is written in the text whatever she likes (even if always starting from the text, and respecting it). But—before literal understanding and interpretation take place—what does it mean *to read* a text? And *how should one read*?

The spontaneous and naïve answer is that the best way of reading is from left to right (even if most of the modern languages, but not all of them are left-to-right languages: in actual fact Arabic, Hebrew, Persian, and Urdu, are right-to-left) and from the top to the bottom—but clearly this reply does not seem to be particularly enlightening or useful.

In any case, what is important to keep in mind is that reading starts with an act of perception, with the processing of letter strings, i.e., in order to be able to read we first need to be able to decode what we perceive (see or touch[1]—but here I will just take into consideration the act of reading with eyes) and then to individuate the connections subsisting between the sentence components.

Reading starts in our brain like any other visual stimulation, i.e., in the general visual areas of the occipital pole of the brain, but rapidly moves into an area concerning the recognition of written words. The cognitive neuroscientist S. Dehaene ([2007] 2009) extensively explains how the functioning of reading—particularly interesting because the human brain does not have specific structures dedicated to a written language that evolved biologically, since writing and reading are cultural inventions, not biological facts—is based on some specificities of the eye, the organ receiving the visual input. The retina—thanks to its central part named *fovea* containing high-resolution cells—elaborates visual information, i.e., those small prints on the page, first by recognizing letters and the way they combine into the written word, and second by connecting them to the brain systems for coding of speech sounds and for meaning. And all this happens in a very short time: we recognize sixteen letters in less than a quarter of a second and identify and understand something like two/three hundred words in a minute. The secret behind this incredible performance, Dehaene maintains, is a form of "neural recycling": when we learn to read, our brain recycles structures that biological evolution has given us to process visual stimuli such as objects and faces, by transforming them in highly efficient programs for identifying letters and words.[2]

When our eyes perceive those black marks on the page, we identify letters and their combinations as known elements—and here the information processed is purely visual: we do not *understand* the meaning of the word, we just recognize it as an object—then we either get an access to the meaning followed by the conversion of a written word into phonemes or we transform string letters directly into linguistic sounds. These different stages are closely connected and functionally independent. Their being functionally independent gives further reasons to the neuroscientific assumption (Kemmerer 2015: 229) according to which there are at least *two routes* to reading: the so called *semantical/lexical one* (from visual feature analysis and letter identification to orthographic lexicon and semantic system followed by phonological lexicon) and the *phonological one* (from visual feature analysis and letter identification to grapheme-phoneme conversion and phoneme system). Dehaene as well works on these two aspects, functioning simultaneously and working in parallel: the one, *phonological*—converting groups of letters into sounds—and the other, *lexical*—giving access to a mental dictionary of the meaning of words.

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[1] In order to read by touch the universally adopted system is *Braille* (from Louis Braille's invention in 1824), consisting of a code of sixty-three characters embossed on paper that can be read by passing fingers over the page. Although the finger can read only one braille character at a time, the brain processes words at a higher level.

[2] Reading is therefore related to the simultaneous processes of *decoding* and *encoding*. When processing written input, apparently we are not disturbed by varying letter shapes or sizes, we recognize what does not change by grasping the letter common traits (invariants). To explain how our brain deals with invariants, Dehaene presents the following hypothesis: "every written word is probably encoded by a hierarchical tree in which letters are grouped into larger size units, which are themselves grouped into syllables and words" ([2007] 2009: 22). According to his view people naturally focus on morphemes during the word recognition process and move through different levels of representation to get to meaning. The input of the visual form is then encoded and gradually recoded in connection to a mental lexicon.

How does one learn *how* to read? According to Uta Frith (1985) reading is something we learn to do, it is an ongoing process that cannot be rushed and which develops through three different stages: the *pictorial* stage, the *phonological* stage, and the *orthographic* stage. The pictorial stage has to do with the recognition of words as objects and it is typically based on visual features (shape, color, letters' form). The second stage consists in becoming aware of phonemes: words are decoded into letters and letters are connected to sounds, i.e., graphemes develop in phonemes. Finally, the last stage is the orthographic one where there is a huge lexicon of visual units and reading is faster or slower depending on the occurrence of rare or more frequent words. Nonetheless, Dehaene insists on the fact that we "do not fully understand the causal chain that links visual and linguistic acquisition. Must a child first analyze speech inputs into phonemes in order to figure out the meaning of letters? Alternatively, does the child understand the nature of the letter code before he discovers that speech is made up of phonemes? This is probably just another 'chicken and egg' problem. The two types of learning are so tightly linked that it is impossible to tell which comes first, the grapheme or the phoneme—both arise together and enhance each other" ([2007] 2009: 202). Learning graphemes and phonemes—typical of decoding processes in reading—therefore seem to happen simultaneously in a sort of spiral causality, and attention has to be driven to both speech sounds and understanding of letters in a continuum process.

II.

So experimental research tries to explain the basis of reading and its development, precisely starting from the eyes—and remember that the "keenest of our senses is the sense of sight" as Cicero underlined (1967: II, 87: 357). One could argue whether such perceptual and neuropsychological approach to our reading experience is somehow relevant for literary appreciation (Lamarque 2019). We think it is, for the naïve—but no less important—reason that without scanning what is written with our eyes (or either listening to what is being read or following with fingers a braille text) we would have no access to any literary work.[3] Therefore this first perceptual approach, far from being irrelevant, proves its being fundamental (even if it does not turn novels, stories, and poetry into perceptual objects).

And what does the act of reading consist in? How to explain it? According to Peter Kivy (2006, 2010)—who sees literary works as performances—there is a parallel between reading texts and reading scores. He bases his theory of reading on the metaphysical type-token distinction (even if intended differently from the way most philosophers have considered it, i.e., tokens—book's copies—as the instantiations of the type): "You have your copy of *Pride and Prejudice* and I have mine. But, I would urge, our copies of the novel are not tokens of the type *Pride and Prejudice*, any more than our scores of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* are tokens of the type Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*. All of the many copies of *Pride and Prejudice* are tokens of a type, but that type is not the work: it is the notation of the work" (Kivy 2006: 4). According to Kivy literary work types are instantiated by their readings and those readings are performances even when they are silent, as when one reads just for oneself (the way the experience of reading is nowadays mostly accomplished is alone and in silence). The main thesis of reading as performance is defended on the one hand by appealing to the history of literature (originally poems were merely orally transmitted, and therefore considered as forms of performance art) and on the other by working on the parallel between the silent reading of literary works and the silent reading of musical scores. I will not take into specific consideration the claim Kivy makes regarding the type-token distinction founded on the historical development of oral literary cultures nor will I advance general objections to his metaphysical assumptions. What I would like to focus on is the parallel Kivy establishes between silent contemporary readers and rhapsodes such as Ion in Plato's famous dialogue who, Kivy explains, "not only recited or sung the narration, and the characters' speeches, perhaps impersonating the dramatis personae with gesture and voice; he also, in his performance, made interpretive remarks about the meaning of the poems he was performing" (Kivy 2006: 9). From this Kivy goes on pointing out that silent readers too both perform what they read and interpret it as they go along. "It is my thesis"— Kivy says— "that in silent reading of fictional works, I am a performer, my reading a performance of the work. It is a silent performance, in the head. I am enacting, silently, the part of the storyteller" (Kivy 2006: 63).

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[3] As F. Sibley explains, far from being irrelevant, our first, perceptual, approach is indispensable for any aesthetic appreciation: "People have to *see* the grace or unity of work, *hear* the plaintiveness or frenar in the music, *notice* the gaudiness of a color scheme, *feel* the power of a novel, its mood, or its uncertainty of tone. They may be struck by these qualities at once, or they may come to perceive them only after repeated viewings, hearings, or readings, and with the help of critics. But unless they do perceive them for themselves, aesthetic enjoyment, appreciation, and judgment are beyond them [...] the crucial thing is to see, hear or feel" (Sibley 1965: 137).

But does this correspond to what always happens? When a reader's silent activity is just interested in grasping meanings or in what the text is about, would that reading count as a performance as well? According to Kivy these expressionless readings would somehow fail to be performance readings because they wouldn't imply a deep understanding and interpretation of the work. But what about the silent reading of *Anna Karenina* made by a nine years old child? However inspired it might be, it would of course lack both profound understanding (what can a child know about marriage and family life, love and jealousy, adultery and social conventions?) and literary interpretation (he has never read anything of that sort). So, should we consider his silent reading as not a performance at all?

In order to better understand let's try to focus on the analogy between literature and music as far as silent reading of texts and scores is concerned. "One can silently read a musical score and, through the silent reading, 'hear' in one's mind the musical work: a realization of the sound of the work. One can 'hear' a production in the mind' (Kivy 2006: 36); likewise "when we read poetry silently to ourselves, we 'voice' in our heads […] It is simply the verbal analogue of the phenomenon of score-reading" (Kivy 2006: 55). Hence, exactly as it happens with the silent reading of music, "all readers of literary texts—of novels, poems, stories—must have some interpretation or other of what they read" (Kivy 2006: 40). But here the counterexample with the nine years old child reading *Anna Karenina* is back again. And think also about all those readers non particularly literary well-trained—their silent readings wouldn't count properly as performances since they couldn't be considered as "silent Ions" interpreting the work both in the sense of performing and in the sense of understanding and interpreting its meaning. Here the difference between reading a literary text and reading a score becomes evident: whereas one can read a score without being able to perform it silently (because one has no skill in music) but exactly knowing the notes they are (if one reads the score of the final—the fourth—movement of Ludwig van Beethoven's *Symphony n. 9* one reads: e e f g g f e d c c, and so on), one cannot read silently "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" without in the meantime knowing how it does sound, because as psychological research has shown, in reading grapheme and phoneme arise together and develop in parallel, even when the meaning of those marks on the page is not definite—one can read sentences even if not grasping their meaning.[4]

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[4] As would happen for instance to someone reading the first lines of Goethe's poem *Mignon* and not knowing German enough: "Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühn, | Im dunkeln Laub die Goldorangen glühn, | Ein sanfter Wind vom blauen Himmel weht, | Die Myrte still und hoch der Lorbeer steht? | Kennst du es wohl? Dahin! Dahin | Möcht' ich mit dir, o mein Geliebter, ziehn!".

Another important disanalogy between reading literature and reading texts has to do with what will be taken into account in the next paragraph and that we can provisionally call the "filling" or "enrichment" the reader is always supposed to engage in when approaching a literary text. Reading is always an activity where the reader brings interpretive skills to the very act of reading: we fill out the text to complete (always and never fully) somehow its meaning. But reading scores does not seem to work this way, there is no enrichment needed, the notes to be played are all there on the score. That is an important sense in which reading text is a performance, but reading scores is not.

These are some of the difficulties Kivy's thesis, taken in its strong version, should try to give an answer. Nonetheless, neuroscientists have shown the plausibility of such a hypothesis by tracking and comparing eye movements in ten musicians as they silently read six texts and six pieces of music for piano: the music was contemporary and the texts were literary (Cara and Vera 2016). Despite the fact that musicians used different strategies for processing verbal and musical information, no cross-patterns of individual reading strategies were observed between conditions. Although the underlying processes are different, resource-sharing between the two domains, this research says, cannot be ruled out.

Another interesting neuro-approach to investigate the acceptability of Kivy's thesis is the one by Couvignou et al. (2019) who worked on eventual co-occurrence between developmental dyslexia and congenital amusia in adults (a database of online musical tests on 18.000 participants was analyzed). Self-reported dyslexic participants performed significantly lower on melodic skills than matched controls, suggesting a possible link between reading and musical disorders. The results of this study pointed to a moderate co-morbidity between amusia and dyslexia (but, as Couvignou et al. underline, further research is needed to determine what factors at the neural and/or cognitive levels are responsible for this co-occurrence).

III.

After having seen how we read and learn reading, and what that activity could be seen as consisting in, now try to see *why do we read*, i.e., what we gain thanks to this quite strenuous occupation. When we read we are primarily interested in understanding what those signs stand for (because if we do not reach the first, semantic level, we cannot go further), what is the meaning of the sequence of sentences together with their specific discourse context (fundamental for comprehension—out of context sentences are often ambiguous). These sentences can be about the real world or about an imaginary one—the distinction between the two is not relevant as far as basic understanding is concerned—they refer to a state, event or action and often have a truth value with respect to the real or the invented world.[5] When reading we also activate memory, perception, problem solving, and reasoning (Graesser, Millis and Zwaan 1997) and our attention is devoted in identifying those characteristics of texts which are standard, contra-standard and variable and that may help categorizing them as works of a specific genre (Cfr. Walton 1970 and Friend 2012).

Once grasping the meaning of the sentences and somehow identifying the literary genre each specific text belongs to (or is supposed to), readers often ask a question such as "What does the author want to say?" and the like. Readers try to conceptually connect the statements of the text in order to obtain coherence and assume information given in the text as somehow justified. They also take for granted that the role of the author—between what is said and what is not—is a fundamental one.

Needless to say, in that experience readers do play a central role: it is thanks to them that it is possible to focus on *what we see when we read* (as the title of the famous book by Peter Mendelsund says[6]). And what we see are not just written signs, because through the meanings we grasp and with the help of imagination, we get the literary content, i.e., the characters and the events those words are meant to describe. And how does this happen? As we read and understand, we propositionally imagine (Stock 2017: 20–21) what we read by representing to ourselves that something is the case: for example, I might imagine that Anna is arriving at the railway station. Imagining propositionally (which does not require mental imagery, as Kendall Walton explains, "imagining can occur without imagery" Walton 1990: 13) therefore means to stand in some mental relation to a particular proposition, i.e., literary works—fictional and non-fictional ones—call for propositional imagining.[7] Take for instance the opening words of Albert Camus' *The Stranger*: "Maman died today".[8] It consists of a simple sentence explicitly containing the proposition *that maman died today*, and that's what we imagine. Of course, not all sentences we find in literary texts express complete propositions, as happens when we have exclamations, rhetorical questions, and direct speech, where propositions are just implied, as at the beginning of Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*: "And—And—What comes next?".[9] When we read a text and understand it—at its basic level—we imagine the propositions it directly expresses or implies, whereas when we get the words without grasping their meaning we simply let them flow in our minds. Nonetheless, imagining propositionally (even if the first step) proves being not enough, because even if we imagine that p—that Anna is arriving at the railway station—we seem to lack what could be seen as a deep insight into the work. Actually, in a literal sense it is true to say that, when reading the sentence written by Tolstoy, we do imagine that Anna is arriving at the railway station. This is what is true in the fiction. But, as Lamarque explains, "this misses all that an opaque reading has to offer [...]. And it gives no useful insight into the kind of experience that is characteristic of literary engagement" (Lamarque 2017: 111). I think this point is important and needs to be kept in mind. However, I do not see it as incompatible with further developments resulting from our reading and understanding of the text—let me explain.

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[5] I will not examine in depth here the topic concerning the fiction/non-fiction distinction, nor will I focus on what is the distinction in reading something we believe being fictional or not. Let me just remember that most contemporary philosophers (Gregory Currie, David Davies, Kathleen Stock, Kendall Walton) consider the fiction/non-fiction distinction as fundamental when reading literature and see it as corresponding to the belief/imagination distinction. Different from this mainstream are Stacie Friend's and Derek Matravers' positions. According to Friend there is no sharp distinction between fiction and non-fiction and when reading "we focus on different features of the work, taking some aspects as more salient and foregrounding these whilst leaving others in the background" (Friend 2012:198); according to Matravers "we should give up the claim that there are essential differences between reading something as fiction and reading something as non-fiction. There are no essential differences; at best, there are differences in emphasis" (Matravers 2016: 181).

[6] Mendelsund 2014.

[7] Stock (2017: 20–29, 187–191).

[8] The complete beginning by Camus' masterpiece is the following: "Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know. I got a telegram from the home: 'Mother

Actually, when reading and being involved with literary texts at a further level, one can as well *imagine objectually*—representing to oneself a real or make-believe entity or situation (Yablo 1993)—and *imagine simulatively*—representing to oneself some sort of experience (Walton 1990). But whereas propositional imagining can take place without the former ones, neither objectual nor simulative imaginings can occur independently of propositional imagining: when one objectually imagines Anna Karenina also propositionally imagines that there is Anna Karenina—but not the reverse, in fact one can imagine that there is Anna Karenina without imagining her such and such. Moreover, this is also compatible with what Zeman, Dawar and Della Salla mean by "'aphantasia' to refer to a condition of reduced or absent voluntary imagery" (Zeman, Dawar and Della Salla 2015: 379). This inability to visualize any mental image, first described by Francis Galton (1880), concerns completely or partially lacking the ability to visualize or recall images (and often also words, sounds, tastes, and smells). And even if lacking mental imagery, these people still have propositional imagining, which specifically consist of standing in some mental relation to a proposition. This gives further support to the thesis according to which whereas propositional imagination has to do with understanding, objectual imagination has to be considered as a perception-like experience (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002). Nevertheless, even if objectual

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deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours'. That doesn't mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday" (Camus [1942] 1989).

[9] Mann [1901] 1994.

imagining implies imagining an object with some specific properties, that very same object will never be fully determinate, the author has inevitably left some parts or characteristics *empty*.[10]

Hence those objects that come into being thanks to words and that we imagine are not complete ones, but are more similar to what Roman Ingarden sees as a schema or a skeleton ("what is in question here are [...] certain *idealizations*, which are, so to speak, a *skeleton*, a *schema*, of concrete, flowing transitory aspects" Ingarden [1965] 1973: 262), needing the attention of reading to be appropriately concretized.[11] The schema need to be concretized because in actual fact, when writers describe characters, they do so with a few linguistic brush strokes, and readers have the task of filling in the gaps, not only by trying to complete what is ontologically incomplete, but also by enriching the experience of reading with their own expectations, culture, personal memories, and desires.[12] Stories are often made richer by what they do not tell: omissions invite imagination to be active and fertile.

As Paul Auster vividly explains, "The text is no more than a springboard for the imagination. 'Once upon a time there was a girl who lived with her mother in a house at the edge of a large wood.' You don't know what the girl looks like, you don't know what color the house is, you don't know if the mother is tall or short, fat or thin, you know next to nothing. But the mind won't allow these things to remain blank; it fills in the details itself, it creates images based on its own memories and experiences — which is why these stories resonate so deeply inside us. The listener becomes an active participant in the story" (Auster 1993:

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[10] Objectual imagining is therefore always characterized by indeterminateness: "To imagine an object *as* determinate is to imagine it as possessing the higher-order property stated, that of possessing a determinate property for each of its determinables. There is a world of difference, then, between *imagining an object as determinate*—as possessing determinates for each of its determinables—and *determinately imagining it—specifying* in each case what the underlying determinate is. What I have been urging is that objectual imagining is determinate in the first sense but not in the second" (Yablo 1993: 28).

[11] Following what Bergson [1902] says about *dynamic schemas*. In order to explain what they are Bergson choses the example of the memory of a skillful chess player who can play several games of chess at once without looking at the chessboard— what the player has in mind is the function of each piece and his (past-present-future) role in moving them: then at every move the chess player makes, he reconstructs the history of that specific game from the beginning, thus obtaining a representation of the whole process. The dynamic schema is therefore a dynamic outline of temporal relations which is developable into multiple images.

[12] Ingarden explains that "every literary work is in principle incomplete and always in need of further supplementation; in terms of the text, however, this supplementation can never be completed" ([1965] 1973: 251); cf. also Smith (1979) who underlines how ontological incompleteness is at the basis of the most important and radical difference between real and literary individuals.

304). So the activity of reading results from the cooperation between reader and writer: while completing what is written down the first recreates (or better, tries to recreate) that world the second has just sketched on the page. Readers fill out what is ontologically incomplete by conceiving (imagining, understanding) it *as if* it were complete:

> [D]uring his reading and his aesthetic appreciation of the work, the reader usually goes beyond what is simply presented by the text (or projected by it) and in various respects *completes* the represented objectivities, so that at least some of the spots of indeterminacy are removed [...] the literary work itself is to be distinguished from its respective concretizations, and not everything that is valid for the concretization of the work is equally valid for the work itself. [...] one and the same literary work can allow any number of concretizations, which frequently differ significantly from the work itself and also, in their content, differ significantly among themselves. (Ingarden [1965] 1973: 252)

This explains why from a single schematized object we can derive different concretizations and why, even if we can have many concretizations of a literary work, none of them can be considered as *being/ consisting in* the work itself: because the ontology of the literary work is such that it can always be determinate further on.

Insisting on the distinction between literary work and its concretizations does not mean to deny the possibility of a genuine access to the work in itself, but rather to defend the peculiar ontological structure of literary objects which are essentially *schematic*: even if their constitutive spots of indeterminacy may be fulfilled time after time, their very identity is never threatened. This also explains why such objects fail to satisfy the law of the excluded middle, i.e., why it is true both that they have p and that they have non-p, when they are not determined for what concerns p.

> If, e.g., a story begins with the sentence: 'An old man was sitting at a table', etc., it is clear that the represented 'table' is indeed a 'table' and not, for example a 'chair'; but whether it is made of wood or iron, is four-legged or three-legged, etc., is left quite unsaid and therefore—this being a purely intentional object—*not determined*. The material of its composition is altogether unqualified, although it must be some material. Thus, in the given object, its qualification is *totally absent*: there is an 'empty' spot here, a 'spot of indeterminacy'. As we have said, such empty spots are impossible in the case of a real object. At most, the material may, for example, be unknown. (Ingarden [1965] 1973: 249)

Specifically insisting on this qualification/determination activity in which lies part of the interaction between text and reader, Wolfgang Iser (1972) presents his phenomenological theory of reader-response. Following Ingarden, he describes the act of reading as consisting in the reader's concretization of textual features, a gap-filling activity stimulated by the structural indeterminacies of the text. The *implied* *reader*[13] therefore is a text-based reader and the reading process entails the generation of meanings already inscribed in the text.[14]

As Iser himself remarks when reading novels the reader has to imaginatively work in order to visualize what he has read, whereas when watching films his experience starts with the physical perception of the concretization of someone's else (the film's director). That is why, in comparison with being engaged with books, being engaged with films is imaginatively less demanding: there are less elements of indeterminacy, i.e., less gaps our imagination is required to fill.[15]

IV.

Another quite natural (but no less powerful) question concerns the practice of reading and the way it is carried out: does the speed at which we read affect our appreciation? In order to imagine vividly and richly what the text says as well as what it does not, do we need more time? If so, this would explain why, especially for literary masterpieces, slow reading or even re-reading often does help. As Vladimir Nabokov stated in his *Lectures on Literature*,

> Curiously enough, one cannot read a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader. And I shall tell you why. When we read a book for the first time the very process of laboriously moving our eyes from left to right, line after line, page after page, this complicated physical work upon the book, the very process of learning in terms of space and time what the book is about, this stands between us and artistic appreciation. When we look at a painting we do not have to move our eyes in a special way even if, as in a book, the picture contains elements of depth and development. The element of time does not really enter in a first contact with a painting. In reading a book, we must have time to acquaint ourselves with it. We have no physical organ (as we have the eye in regard to a painting) that takes in the whole picture and then can enjoy its details. But at a second, or third, or fourth reading we do, in a sense, behave towards a book as we do towards a painting. However, let us not confuse the physical eye, that monstrous masterpiece of evolution, with the mind, an even more monstrous achievement. A book, no matter what it is—a work of fiction or a work of science (the boundary line between the two is not as dear as is generally believed)—a book of fiction appeals first of all

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[13] The difference between an *implied* reader and an *actual* reader becomes apparent when having to do with literary works written in a period when conventional values were very different. The implied reader has to do with the way in which the text structures answers, points of view, interpretations, and indeterminacies requiring a regular completing activity.

[14] Iser's proposal sounds circular since the concept of the reader is deduced from the (text) theory and the reader's activity just confirms this hypothesis.

[15] Concerning "filling the gaps" and "concretizing schematic objects", actually Ingarden and Iser are merely stating the problem, but not offering any solution to it. This is the issue concerning what is "truth in fiction", which has exercised analytic philosophers for much time, it is enough to think to D. Lewis and his possible words (1978), K. Walton and authorized games of make-believe (1990), and more recent K. Stock's strong intentionalism (2017).

> to the mind. The mind, the brain, the top of the tingling spine, is, or should be, the only instrument used up in a book. (Nabokov [1980] 1983: 3–4)

This is a feature characterizing reading literature that might not be easy to understand: whereas few would question admiring Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* many times or watching Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* again and again, some would probably find strange the act of rereading Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* three or four times. Why "wasting time" rereading something of which we remember the plot, many parts in detail, and entire quotes? Actually in rereading what we usually experience is the paradox of the simultaneous *sameness* and *difference* of that very experience. How is it possible that the words are the same but our perceptions of them seem different? And why quite often rereadings are *better* readings? This last question sounds even more odd. Nabokov has an answer for it: once the physical and hard job on the text is over, artistic appreciation can start thanks to memory (we need remember the different parts of the novel in order to grasp it as a whole), imagination and aesthetic distance (or, as Kant (1790) would say, the disinterested approach which is necessary for aesthetic judgment and pleasure). These three ingredients are the ones characteristically fundamental in order to gain the attention of reading—which is not the mere deciphering symbols on the page or the act of identifying ourselves with characters:

> There are, however, at least two varieties of imagination in the reader's case. So let us see which one of the two is the right one to use in reading a book. First, there is the comparatively lowly kind which turns for support to the simple emotions and is of a definitely personal nature. […] A situation in a book is intensely felt because it reminds us of something that happened to us or to someone we know or knew. Or, again, a reader treasures a book mainly because it evokes a country, a landscape, a mode of living which he nostalgically recalls as part of his own past. Or, and this is the worst thing a reader can do, he identifies himself with a character in the book. This lowly variety is not the kind of imagination I would like readers to use.
>
> So what is the authentic instrument to be used by the reader? It is impersonal imagination and artistic delight. What should be established, I think, is an artistic harmonious balance between the reader's mind and the author's mind. We ought to remain a little aloof and take pleasure in this aloofness while at the same time we keenly enjoy—passionately enjoy, enjoy with tears and shivers—the inner weave of a given masterpiece. (Nabokov [1980] 1983: 4)

Needless to say, rereading—while exploring carefully the text and identifying in it different aspects, perspectives and saliences under renewed attention to detail—helps for aesthetic appreciation, supports literary evaluation and stimulates the process of interpretation (the reconstruction of content and the search for wider significance). It is not by chance indeed that rereading is at the hearth of the practice of literary criticism.

Marisa Bortolussi and Peter Dixon in *Psychonarratology* (2003) convincingly explain how the activity of reading takes place and also what happens during rereading by analysing data experiments. This conveys them to realize how those texts characterised by high complexity, rich vocabulary and refined literary style, require more time and effort to be processed, and also how this major deal of concentration induces more pleasure in readers during their second reading. In a similar way Shuwei Xue, Arthur M. Jacobs and Jana Lüdtke (2020) adopt the rereading approach to analyze poetic texts by using both indirect online (eye tracking) and direct offline methods (forms and marking tasks), testing whether readers' reactions to Shakespearian sonnets are different on a first and second reading, coming to the conclusion that evaluative responses to high literary texts rise on a second reading, where we "find out why certain writers endure" (as observes Prose 2006).[16]

V.

The very first step for reading is the one where the decoding process is involved, i.e., the one making people get acquainted with string letters and their meaning, thus getting access to the text, whereas the further steps are those thanks to which people reflect on formal linguistic construction and literary genres, implementing in the meanwhile imagination and interpretation processes.

Now ask: is it reasonable to practice imagining (as we practice, for instance, drawing) to imagine better? And how to contextualize this question in our lives characterized by a continuum of image-bombing? Are our imaginations somehow impoverished or threatened? Italo Calvino notoriously displays a similar worry in the fourth of his *Six Memos for the Next Millenium* [1988], *Visibility*:

> If I have included visibility in my list of values to be saved, it is to give warning of the danger we run in losing a basic human faculty: the power of bringing visions into focus with our eyes shut, of bringing forth forms and colors from the lines of black letters on a white page, and in fact of *thinking* in terms of images. (Calvino [1988] 1996: 92)

Thinking in terms of images allows us to have big and small joys (not only intellectual), not only such as when we read a novel but also as when we entertain ourselves, perhaps even lull ourselves, with those products of imagination which, no matter how big or small, distract us from reality, even if often (too often, unfortunately) they never come true. We practice imagining every time we try to change our own's perspective, we put ourselves in someone else's shoes, we imagine something for the first time, we represent ourselves an entity or a specific situation, or either when we envision some sort of experience we aren't having. Our imaginative training is therefore also strengthened through the experience of reading—that invites people specifically to imagine (propositionally, objectually, simulatively) to get access to the complexity of the work. And, just like any training, the more it is practiced, the better the results will be. Therefore, despite Calvino's fear, we still imagine what we read and printed words are a sort of a playing field for our imaginative activity.

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[16] Similar findings are reported by Hakemulder (2004), Zyngier, Van Peer and Hakemulder (2007), and Hakemulder and Kuijpers (2018).

What is interesting indeed is also that our imagination, however dynamic, will never be able to complete what is essentially incomplete (as Ingarden has extensively explained, however accurate, our imaginative completion will always be partial, subjective, and linked to the specific space-time coordinates of the appreciation; that's why even rereading many times the same text we will always add something or we will imagine it differently from previous times). "We can say that [...] every literary work is in principle incomplete and always in need of further supplementation; in terms of the text, however, this supplementation can never be completed."[17] From an *ontological point of view* literary individuals, places and events are underdetermined, whereas real ones are determined. *Pace* Brian Davis whose project *The Composites* is based on the idea of doing with literary characters what the police does with composite portraits of criminals—an idea doomed to failure because whereas our imagination tries to fill up the gaps, the software works differently, reproducing nothing but incomplete objects (actually the final result of the software is very different from what we find, for example, in a movie).[18] The failure of Davis's project shows why literary characters cannot be assimilated to real people: first of all because they do not exist (an element that should not be underestimated, since the software in question were designed to find real people), and secondly, because they are incomplete, i.e., they are not determined about all properties. And while non-existence and incompleteness may be problematic features from one point of view (just think of how many ontological and logical concerns they gave to Bertrand Russell), from another they are the reason why these creatures are so mysterious and irresistible. It is precisely because they do not exist and are incomplete that they tickle our imagination so much. We will never be able to identify them, find them, and meet them out there. After all, that is the beauty of characters in novels: the fact that they are not real, so they can be imagined and completed at will with the help of imagination. Hence no software can give Anna Karenina a face, our help is needed (even if, as we have seen, it is still not enough to arrive to get Anna Karenina's face, because actually, she has essentially *no* determinate face). Always and forever. We need to imagine by ourselves and in the meanwhile also interpret what we read trying to grasp the author's descriptive intentions.

When describing Aleksei Aleksandrovich Karenin—by adopting Anna's viewpoint—Tolstoy writes:

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[17] B. Smith (1979: 251) underlines that ontological incompleteness is the most important and radical difference between real and fictional individuals.

[18] https://www.brianjosephdavis.com/the-composites

> At Petersburg, as soon as the train stopped and she got out, the first person who attracted her attention was her husband. 'Oh, my God, why do his ears look like that?' she thought, looking at his frigid and distinguished figure, and especially at the cartilage that struck her at the moment as propping up the brim of his round hat. Catching sight of her, he came to meet her, his lips falling into their habitual mocking smile, and his big tired eyes looking straight at her. An unpleasant sensation gripped at her heart when she met his obstinate and weary glance, as though she had expected to see him different. She was especially struck by the feeling of dissatisfaction with herself that she experienced on meeting him. That feeling was an intimate, familiar feeling, like a consciousness of hypocrisy, which she experienced in her relations with her husband. But hitherto she had not taken note of that feeling, and now she was clearly and painfully aware of it. (Tolstoy [1877] 1930: 110)

The physical description of Karenin's ears is particularly interesting because what we, as readers, should know, is that surely Karenin's ears *have not changed at all*. And how do we know that? We know Tolstoy's novel is realistic (cf. Walton 1970—we know the specific literary genre *Anna Karenina* belongs to) and in fact, human ears do not grow overnight (differently from hairs and beard). So, how are we to understand and imagine Karenin's look? What about his ears? What has then changed? Simply Anna herself. Actually, returning from Moscow where she has met Vronsky, she is a different person from the one who has left: she has fallen in love—that's why she takes notice of that particular physical feature in her dispassionate and dry husband. From that moment on, Anna will consider her husband no longer as a man but just as a big pair of ears: needless to say, this sort of dehumanization helps Anna justify her acting and her extramarital liaison.

This is a point that can be grasped only by a reader that far for simply deciphering what is written down, tries to imagine by following the author's intentional use of language.[19] Therefore no surprise for that attentive reader (he has been prepared) when he bumps in Anna's thought referring to Karenin: "Love? Can he love? If he hadn't heard there was such a word as love, he would never have used the word. He doesn't even know what love is" (Tolstoy [1877] 1930: 156). Of course, a pair of ears does not know what love is.

The text needs the reader to gain its meaning: only when the trained eye gets attentively in contact with those black signs on the page the text does acquire its fullness. This sort of cooperation required by literary texts makes them unique in the broader domain of artworks: paintings ask us to look at them nearer or to keep distance, statues make us walk around them, vases and other small artistic objects are turned and touched while handled with care—but they all remain *external* to us, other than us, and no actual entry into them by us is allowed. Books invite us, as readers, to imagine what the author has written. This also explains why Kafka wrote to the publisher of his *Metamorphosis* that the insect itself shouldn't be depicted on the cover: because he wanted to preserve his readers' imaginative acts.[20] Literary works—even if under a certain point of view (the one according to which they are physical objects) can be considered as being similar to paintings, statues and objects one can buy and put on a shelf—are in their very essence more similar to fortresses. Neuropsychological research has explained us how to get the keys to get in, philosophy has showed us what happens once inside, which stairs and corridors could be taken, which windows could be opened, what might happen as far as we proceed, what would be the difference between climbing those steps or some others, and how much strength is required in order to visit them properly. This is literature: the castle in which to enter, inhabit, perhaps even conquer, in the awareness that, as readers, we will never really succeed in our intention, and yet we will never stop trying.

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[19] One could argue whether there is any difference under this specific point of view between the reading activity and everyday communication where people are required to pay attention to the details, to grasp hidden meanings in utterances, to individuate the speaker's intentions, and so on. Notoriously, a strong parallel between literature and conversation is the one defended by Carroll (1992) who maintains that in conversations we typically aim at understanding the intentions of our interlocutors, and in a very similar way happens during our "conversations" with literary artworks. Dickie and Wilson (1995) raised some objections challenging Carroll's supposition that conversations and works of art, as far as intended meaning is concerned, are to be considered as analogous. This is an extremely important point, but it would take us too far from the main topic of this paper.

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[20] Of course there remains also another option, the one according to which since visualizing demands a big effort on the part of the reader, the reader may choose to resist the pictorial in favor of the conceptual.

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