

The Invisible Movement That Reading Is:
Three Chapters
in the History of a Liberal Art

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EXCERPT

My aim in this lecture is to introduce you to several ways in which we can conceive of reading as a kind of invisible movement. I've divided my talk into three chapters in the history of this liberal art, with three different focal points and three different historical moments. 1800: the reader / 1900: the author / and 2000: language. I've fudged the dates a bit for the sake of symmetry, so please take these round numbers as approximations. But what I want to show you is how each of these points we're looking at locates the motion of reading in a different place – in the reader, in the writer, and in language itself. And if there's an overarching idea that holds all this together, it lies in the transit from reader to author to language. The notion of reading as movement has itself been in motion over the last 200 years, and we can trace its path, at least in broad strokes.

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The Charles D. LaFollette Lecture Series

The Invisible Movement That Reading Is: Three Chapters in the History of a Liberal Art

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My charge today is to reflect on how my special discipline relates to the humanities, broadly conceived. Preparing this talk has been a welcome task, because it's given me a reason to go back through things that I've written, try to find a red thread, and define what, exactly, my special discipline is. I think it all comes down to this: my special discipline is reading, and I mean that in two ways. On the one hand, much of what I do involves producing critical readings of literary works and other objects of cultural production. On the other hand, a significant portion of my scholarly work has been devoted to thinking, in an historical way, about what reading has meant at different points in time. What does it mean to read? The answers you'd get in 1800 differ from those of today.

So in both these ways, my specialization has to do with reading, and that's fortunate for today's lecture, because I believe that reading is really the backbone of the humanities. No matter what department or discipline you're involved in, if you're a humanist, your job probably entails a lot of reading. And I should clarify here what I mean by reading, because it's more than just the consumption of words on a page. I'm talking about careful, critical reading – close reading – reading that has to do with interpretation and analysis, with the unfolding of meaning and deeper understanding. To my students: this is why the assignment to “read” three poems by Goethe is meant to be more than 20 minutes of homework. And this careful kind of reading applies not only to literature. My colleagues in rhetoric are busy reading political discourse and the visual rhetoric of advertising; classicists routinely read ancient monuments or the layout of Roman streets; and that doesn't even get into the philosophers, musicologists, and art historians. We're all, in some way, engaged in reading, and that's what I want to talk about today.

My talk is entitled “The Invisible Movement that Reading Is.” The literary buffs among you, or those with access to Google, might recognize that the phrase is drawn from Italo Calvino's novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. I read the book years ago, and this beautiful idea of reading as invisible movement stuck with me. It turns out I'm not alone. Within the history of what reading has meant, there's a long tradition of conceiving of reading in terms of movement, of describing it through metaphors of motion. For at least the last two hundred years, the way we talk about reading has often relied on a rhetoric of motion, movement, and vigorous activity. That's a bit strange, I think, because it goes against the familiar essence of reading. When we think of reading, we probably think of the secluded stillness of the study carrel or the person sitting in the airport,

passing time. Alberto Manguel captures this tension when he reflects on the process of reading and writes: “Nothing moves except my eyes and my hand occasionally turning a page, and yet something...unfurls, progresses, grows, and takes root as I read” (28). To understand the process of reading is to understand this “and yet”: the reader is passive and yet active, receives and yet creates, remains still and yet sets something in motion.

Here is the passage from Calvino. It captures this tension between what reading looks like and what reading is: “In this thin, transparent air I feel able to perceive in her unmoving form the signs of that invisible movement that reading is, the flow of gaze and breath, but, even more, the journey of the words through the person, their course or their arrest, their spurts, delays, pauses, the attention concentrating or straying, the returns, that journey that seems uniform and on the contrary is always shifting and uneven” (169). There are multiple kinds of motion in this passage. On the one hand, it is the reader who moves in barely perceptible ways: the gaze shifts; attention focuses itself and then strays. On the other, language itself is in motion as it travels *through* the reader. The two are blurred, so that it’s hard to tell when words are moving and when mental faculties are moving – to tell, that is, when the reader is moving and when she is being moved.

My aim today is to introduce you to several ways in which we can conceive of reading as a kind of invisible movement. I’ve divided my talk into three chapters in the history of this liberal art, with three different focal points and three different historical moments. 1800: the reader / 1900: the author / and 2000: language. I’ve fudged the dates a bit for the sake of symmetry, so please take these round numbers as approximations. But what I want to show you is how each of these points we’re looking at locates the motion of reading in a different place – in the reader, in the writer, and in language itself. And if there’s an overarching idea that holds all this together, it lies in the transit from reader to author to language. The notion of reading as movement has itself been in motion over the last 200 years, and we can trace its path, at least in broad strokes.

Before we go back to 1800, I’d like to illustrate that the kind of reading I have in mind applies to more than just text or literature. Let’s look at an iconic American photograph. This image was taken by Margaret Bourke-White in Louisville in 1937, and it first appeared in *Life* magazine. [Image: Margaret Bourke-White, "Bread Line during the Louisville Flood," 1937]

We see African Americans standing in a line – a bread line – in front of a billboard that brags about America’s standard of living. Our reading might initially move beyond the photograph’s frame to consider the historical context in which it occurred. We note, first, that it’s 1937, and that the picture was taken in the aftermath of the Great Ohio River Flood that happened in January of that year. The flooding devastated Cincinnati, Louisville, and Evansville; it turned the Ohio River Valley into a lake for weeks. As you can see, Indianapolis took in thousands of people displaced by the flooding. So the picture is tied to a specific catastrophe. But we also know that in 1937, the U.S. was still struggling through the Great Depression. In addition to documenting a particular

natural disaster, the photograph also captures something of the toll of the Depression in the 1930s. In fact, through the 1930s, the assistance line photograph became an iconic image, a Depression-era genre, so iconic that it forms the basis for the FDR memorial. Here's another image from Chicago taken in 1931. [Image: Photographer unknown, "Unemployed men queued outside a Depression soup kitchen," 1931.] But when we compare the two, Bourke-White's photograph is stronger and somehow more devastating, and the task of our reading is to unfold how the image does what it does. How does it move us?

If we were doing this in class, I think students would likely note right away that the image's composition is divided into two sections, a foreground and a background, which correspond in two dimensions to a lower half and an upper half. As the reading continues, we find that many of the photograph's contrasts map onto this distinction between foreground and background. Perhaps most strikingly, the image is segregated by color: we see black people in the front, below, and white people in the back, above them. But there are many facets to the contrast. For example, the white family is in motion, traveling comfortably by car, while the people in the foreground stand still, stuck in place, waiting in line. The people in the car smile and gaze contentedly into the half-distance, perhaps into a bright future; the people in line stare ahead blankly or gaze directly at the camera's lens. The people in line, if they move at all, move incrementally, glacially, from left to right across the image, while the white family in the car appears to come forward, out of the image's depth, as if about to crash through the line of people.

Moreover, there is a fundamental contrast here between two different media. In the foreground, we see a *photograph* of people; on the billboard behind them, we see a *drawing* of people, so that the documentary, realistic quality of photography is juxtaposed with the caricature of the billboard's image. To read this photograph properly, I think we have to see how it presents these contrasts as related. Though the Depression was a time of widespread suffering, American society remained bisected by differences of race and class, differences in opportunity and outlook, the difference between having plenty and having barely enough. And the photograph is composed in such a way as to give these hierarchical distinctions a clear spatial expression: it sets the well-to-do white family above the line of waiting black people. All this comes through before we even get to the billboard's text, though that's where the photograph's message becomes more cutting. Within this stark contrast of white and black, wealth and need, how are we to understand the all-caps assertion "world's highest standard of living"? It would be hard to read that line without a tinge of irony, without an acknowledgement of inequality. Though some indeed enjoy a very high standard of living; at the same time, others are homeless or hungry.

The photograph's power lies in this ironic tension. It lets the reality of Louisville in the 1930s undercut the caricature of whiteness and affluence that the billboard presents. And this brings us to the second snippet of text, "There's no way like the American way." One assumes that the slogan alludes to canonical American values and institutions: democracy, capitalism, independence, self-

reliance, freedom, and so on. The photograph, however, opens the notion of “the American way” to different possible meanings. In this context, the “American way” looks less like a sure path to prosperity and more like an ideological caricature of whiteness and affluence, one that cannot or will not countenance the reality of black lives, inequality, or poverty. One can even imagine the photograph bisecting the sentence, the same way the image itself is bisected from top to bottom. For those on top, it’s “the American way,” but for those on the bottom, there really is “no way” like the idealized American dream constructed by consumer advertising. Bourke-White has produced a powerful image. Most of what I’ve spelled out here is readily apparent in some form or another, as soon as we look at the picture. It’s all there, the critique of ideology is on the surface. And yet the process of critical reading still deepens our understanding, adding nuance and texture to what we saw in our first glance. This is the kind of reading that underlies just about everything we do in the humanities, and I want this afternoon to give you three snapshots from its history.

Chapter 1: 1800 – The Immobilized Reader

If reading is, in essence, a kind of movement, but that movement always remains invisible, how can one be sure that the proper activity of reading is really taking place? In other words, if activity and passivity are indistinguishable, at least on the surface, how does one know that an engagement with books truly leads to movement in an edifying direction, that it does not in fact foster passivity and inactivity? At a distance, it all looks the same.

These questions and concerns lie at the heart of the debates about reading that took place in Germany around 1800, intense debates about the nature and purpose and value of reading.¹ In the 1790s, many German critics spoke out against reading as a plague, scourge, or epidemic, and they warned of its harmful effects. What you have to understand is that, in the late eighteenth century, reading really took hold in Germany. There were increases in education and literacy rates, a growing demand for reading material, and advances in the publishing industry – all these developments contributed to the reading revolution that took place during the Enlightenment period. In short, the number of people who read for pleasure and entertainment was rapidly growing; reading was becoming an increasingly common and widespread phenomenon. From our perspective, from the perspective of a culture that fervently believes in the benefit of reading, this is a good thing. This is progress. Reading is good, and the more people who do it, the better. So it’s surprising to see how people were talking about reading around 1800. At that time, numerous German intellectuals were denouncing reading in the most alarmist terms: it endangers your body and your mind.

Why was reading dangerous? My focus falls on one common theme in these complaints – namely, that books, particularly works of narrative fiction, have the power to immobilize their audience.

¹ A longer and more thorough version of this section has appeared in print. See my article “The ‘Invisible Movement That Reading Is’: Metaphors of Motion in the Reading Debates around 1800.”

Reading renders people inactive, lazy, and practically useless. There were two related layers to the problem of the immobilized reader: the first was a visible, physical immobility, and the second was an invisible immobility, a torpor of the mental faculties. Johann Beyer thus wrote in 1795: “The enthusiastic reader sits for days on end in one spot and views every serious occupation that would pull him away from his book as an interruption in his pleasure.” He says that readers of bad literature “sink into a lethargy of the body and the mind” (194).

One of the big issues is that there is no way to control what people are reading. It’s market driven; it’s driven by public demand and interest. And it turns out that what people are interested in reading isn’t always what intellectuals and religious leaders think they ought to read. Because they aren’t just reading moral philosophy, the Bible, and devotional texts. More and more frequently, they’re reading for pleasure: melodramatic tragedies, saccharine romance novels, swashbuckling adventure stories, and the like. You can probably guess that this concern about reading had a significant gendered, paternalistic component. Much of this hand-wringing was directed (by men) at women readers – a rapidly growing segment of the reading public, which is why many of these images from the period are of women reading. Women were thought to be particularly susceptible to the dangers that reading presented. It would make them less active, less mobile, less productive. Erasmus von Engert’s “A Garden in Vienna” was painted in the early nineteenth century, and it opens a window onto the potentially ambivalent status of reading. It depicts a tension between reading and other responsibilities. The subject compromises, divides her attention, and multi-tasks.

Others described women’s reading habits as an “addiction” and that’s not a coincidence. Within this discourse on reading, it was common to equate the dangers of reading with the dangers of drug addiction. The philosopher Johann Fichte speaking in 1804, said: “Reading, like any other narcotic, sets one in a comfortable state suspended between sleep and wakefulness. It lulls one into a sweet oblivion” (191). When they talk about narcotics, the specific drug they have in mind is usually opium. And when you think about the dangers they ascribed to reading, the opium comparison makes sense. This is what opium signified at the time – the opium den, this exotic escape where otherwise healthy, industrious people go to become listless and immobilized, lying around in a trance-like state, given over completely to the pleasure of their hallucinatory visions.

This is also what happens when you read, they thought, especially when you read narrative fiction. You remove yourself from the world of productive activity; you let yourself be enthralled by fanciful visions. And once you start using books, you can’t stop. Like any other narcotic, reading’s more insidious effects were not as easily perceptible because they were thought to take place in the mind. As Johann Beyer wrote: “Reading is one of the most seductive pleasures. Anyone who tries it *even once* is so deeply fettered and captivated that he will never be able to get himself free of it” (194). This is a remarkably alarmist tone with regard to reading. It’s a warning that sounds disturbingly similar to a PSA about the dangers of meth or opioids. And note the language of bondage and captivity: reading ties you down, you can’t move, can’t escape its clutches.

Against this backdrop, in response to this alarmist rhetoric about reading, we start to see a counter-narrative, a discourse of reading as movement, reading as edifying *activity*. This notion of invisible movement gets invented around 1800 as a way to counter the accusation that reading is a debilitating narcotic. Sure, the argument runs, in many outward ways, books can seem to make people passive, lethargic, and isolated. But inwardly, books involve a great deal of effort and concentration, a setting in motion of the mental faculties. Though it *appears* that the reader is still and passive, the mind is moving all the time. In Germany at the time, the primary proponent of this position is Johann Adam Bergk, whose treatise *The Art of Reading Books*, published in 1799, sought to instruct the public on how to put books and reading to productive use, without succumbing to their dangers. As a defender of reading, he employs metaphors of motion to connect reading practices with an Enlightenment discourse of self-improvement through the exercise of mental faculties, and he uses the invisibility of readerly activity to his rhetorical advantage.

Here's one quotation to give you Bergk's view in a nutshell: "Reading is dangerous when we approach it in a merely receptive state of mind and not in an independently active state of mind" (64). He starts by ceding ground to the critics: yes, reading can be dangerous. But the critics I quoted before would have been happy with "reading is dangerous," full stop. Bergk makes that danger conditional – and that's the crucial difference. For Bergk, it can go either way. Passive reading exposes you to danger and narcotic effects. And if that's the root of all readerly evil, then the antidote is fairly obvious. Bergk rarely fails to contrast passivity with its positive alternative: a mode of reading in which the immobilized form of the reader hides a mind in constant motion. While others see excessive passivity as the *effect* of dangerous reading, Bergk sees it as the *cause* of dangerous reading. And if reading's effects depend on the subject's attitude or state of mind, then those effects can be mitigated or even flipped into their opposite.

Bergk thus imagines a radically different form of reading in which the subject is ever active and alert: "We must be independent and active and must produce a book's contents for ourselves through the movements of the mind and the exercise of reason" (61). Bergk makes the case for reading by imagining a site of motion and activity that is hidden inside the subject's "unmoving form." When the mind is in motion and the power of understanding is activated, reading becomes a productive rather than a receptive process. It's as if Bergk conceives of books as exercise equipment for the mind. What do those machines do? They allow us to move in specific ways while generally remaining in a single place. Bergk sees reading similarly as a platform on which to activate, exercise, and thus to improve one's mental faculties. He has thus moved the discussion of reading as far as possible from the narcotic-induced, trance-like state in which Fichte imagines the pure reader. Instead of immobilizing the mind or lulling us into indolence, reading is a mobilizing force, an impetus to exertion. It puts the mind in motion and thought to work.

Bergk presents reading in 1800 as an ambivalent activity, and there's evidence that this sense of ambivalence persisted into nineteenth-century discussions of reading. The American essayist and thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, sounds like a disciple of Bergk's art of reading when he writes, in 1837, "Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst" (88). For Emerson, as for Bergk, the results of reading are uncertain, and the proper use of books means reading inventively, actively, and creatively. In his explication of the correct way of reading, Emerson adopts the same late-Enlightenment language of activity and self-exertion that Bergk applied to reading at the end of the eighteenth century: "When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion" (90). Here, too, effort is the key to making reading productive. There must be an invisible form of movement hidden below the surface of the immobilized reader.

Chapter 2: 1900 – The Author's Invisible Movement

Let's skip ahead now, from 1800, to Vienna in 1900. Sigmund Freud has just published his groundbreaking work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and proposed a new method of reading the human psyche through its dreams, slips, and neurotic symptoms. My colleagues in psychology are kind enough to suppress their groans at the mention of Freud. I understand their dismay when textbook histories identify Freud as a forefather of psychology – his work isn't quantitative, it isn't verifiable, it isn't scientific. Much of it hasn't aged well. But as Louis Menand wrote recently in *The New Yorker*, "Nineteenth-century science of the mind was a Wild West show" (82). In other words, Freud isn't a unique target in this regard. He reflects an era in which psychiatry prescribed everything from hypnosis to hydrotherapy to morphine and cocaine. Nevertheless, there's a strong case to be made that, if you're interested in the history of reading you really can't overlook Sigmund Freud.

First, Freud's works count among the most influential reflections on the modern human condition. He questioned the idea of a unified self and explored instead the idea of a self in conflict with itself, a self unknown to itself, one whose desires are frequently contradictory and unsettling. This is Freud's basic insight into the human condition, and it would be difficult to name another thinker who captured the twentieth-century imagination more fully than Freud did.

Second, I think it's helpful to reframe Freud's work – away from his own scientific ambitions, and more in the direction of reading and the humanities. For this is what Freud really develops around 1900 – a new way of reading that seeks to uncover meaning in the mind's phenomena, in its symbols, images, figures, slips, and symptoms.² It's clear, for example, that Freud conceives of the dream as a literary text when he says that dreams are "represented symbolically by means of similes and metaphors, in images resembling those of poetic speech" (5:659). This is the analysis part of psychoanalysis, the interpretation in the interpretation of dreams: Freud promises that he can take

² For more on Freud's method of reading and his notion of signification, see my book *Reading Riddles: Rhetorics of Obscurity from Romanticism to Freud*.

the indecipherable hieroglyphs of dreams and neurotic symptoms and make them as readable, as legible, as the figures of poetic language. His method of reading will allow one to find meaning in mental phenomena just as readily as one does in a novel or poem.

If we can agree that the project of psychoanalysis is grounded in a set of ideas about reading, then it's important to add that Freud's approach to reading the psyche draws frequently on a rhetoric of motion and movement. Contrary to what we saw in the reading debates around 1800, though, Freud does not locate that movement in the reader. He locates it, rather, in the author, in the generator of language and meaning – be it the author of a poem, a dream, or a traumatic symptom. He describes desires, thoughts, and associations moving back and forth in the mind. Some background information here: *The Interpretation of Dreams* divides the psyche into two realms, conscious and unconscious. The dream scenes that you remember upon waking are available to consciousness. But the underlying thoughts and wishes that generate those images remain unconscious and unavailable to reflection. The basic idea is that people harbor wishes and desires that they find unacceptable, wishes that they wish they didn't have and thus repress. According to Freud, such desires and wishes find ways to express themselves – or fulfill themselves – during sleep. Because so many of these desires are shameful or embarrassing or unacceptable, Freud saw a kind of censorship at work at the border between the conscious and unconscious. The censor doesn't allow unacceptable wishes to enter into consciousness, so they have to take a detour – along so-called “paths” of association and distortion. Quoting Freud: “The wish seeks to force its way along the normal path taken by thought-processes...but it comes up against the censorship. Its further advance is halted” (572). Freud describes what happens next as a “zigzag journey,” in which the forbidden wish must find “a way of evading the obstacle put in its way by the censorship” (573).

Here's a particularly vivid formulation from *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

We may picture, by way of analogy, a mountain region, where some general interruption of traffic (owing to floods, for instance) has blocked the major roads, but where communications are still maintained over inconvenient and steep footpaths normally used only by the hunter. (533)

Associative pathways, main roads, mountain footpaths – Freud imagines the psyche as a site of incessant travel and transit. Like an urban planner of the mind, he wants to map the flows of thought at different times of day.

In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud includes another diagram, a roadmap of the associative paths that a repressed idea took (6:5). It's from a bit of self-analysis that Freud conducts as he reflects on why he couldn't recall the name Signorelli, why he could only think of something like Botticelli instead. I won't go into too much detail with this diagram; I just want to make a couple of points. First, the pathways of association and distortion that Freud describes are primarily linguistic pathways. One sees that here, in the bilingual punning on *signor* and *Herr* and the sound associations of alliteration and rhyme. Indeed, one sees it throughout Freud's analyses. Dreams and

symptoms distort their underlying ideas along linguistic and figural lines, often through the operations of wordplay.

Second, I want to point out that there are arrows on this diagram pointing both up and down. This is crucial to the project of psychoanalysis: the pathways that these thoughts construct allow for transit in both directions. If repressed wishes can use punning, wordplay, and linguistic distortion to disguise themselves and sneak into consciousness, then the analyst (the reader) can reverse engineer the distortion, can follow the same associative paths backward, from conscious expression to the repressed material. In other words, the paths constructed in dream formation run in two directions. This is how central the idea of invisible motion is to psychoanalysis: as the repressed thoughts and wishes make their circuitous way into consciousness, they forge a path or trail – and these are the very same paths that analysis follows into the heart of the dream, into the author’s unconscious. Without movement in one direction, there can be no movement in the other. The twin processes of dream formation and dream interpretation are in this way inseparable. They are like the threads of a screw that run upward or downward, depending on the twist one gives them.

Around 1900, psychoanalysis begins with an idea about mental life. It conceives of the psyche as a site of incessant transit and migration, complete with borders, guards, and illegal crossings under cloak of darkness. All this invisible movement in the author’s mind is essential: it generates the infrastructure – the interpretive paths – for Freud’s project. And that project is, in essence, one of interpretation and reading. After all, he called his most important work *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and the title captures the book’s central aim and ambition – to demonstrate that dreams – and, by extension, the mind – are susceptible to interpretation. He argues, in essence, that mental phenomena are legible. They can be read. That might sound like a remarkably humble hypothesis. And yet it formed the point of departure for a major work on the modern condition. It led to a sea change in the way people thought about the mind and the self, sexuality, and identity.

Chapter 3: 2000 – Language in Motion

Let’s leap ahead again, to more contemporary ideas about reading and movement. In this instance, the concern falls not on the reader, nor on the author, but rather on language itself. Here, if reading is to be associated with a kind of movement, that’s because its task is to trace the movements of meaning, the motion inherent in language. I’ve given chapter 3 the time-stamp 2000, but we’re really talking here about ideas that take hold in literary theory in the wake of post-structuralism, become widespread in the 1970s and 80s, and continue to influence thinking about literature and interpretation today.

You can already feel some of that shift in the Calvino passage that provided my title today. Calvino’s novel, which happens to be a self-reflexive narrative about a reader reading, was published in 1979, and you see that the focus is not only on the reader’s movement, but also on

the movement of language *through* the reader, “the journey of the words through the person.” Calvino’s novel is theoretically astute and self-conscious about narrative form, and it seems here to have internalized some of the critical discourse of its day. For in the 70s, into the 80s and beyond, the revolutionary move in critical theory was to narrow the field of analysis to literary language itself, to bracket off the movements of the reader or the author, and to examine the rhetorical moves of figural language. It conceived of meaning as not fixed, but in flux, instable, in motion. If you’ve heard in a class the phrase “the death of the author,” that’s a short-hand formulation for the kind of shift that I’m tracing here from 1900 to 2000, for the bracketing off of the author and the focus on literary language.

Roland Barthes, pre-eminent French critic of the late-twentieth century, compares the literary text to a sky and the professional reader – the commentator – to a kind of soothsayer. “Like the soothsayer drawing on the sky an imaginary rectangle wherein to consult...the flight of birds, the commentator traces through the text certain zones of reading, in order to observe the migration of meanings” (14). It’s an elegant idea, and passages like this one are part of why Barthes is a famous writer. What he means is that taking a snippet of text, examining a passage, is like drawing a rectangle on the sky. And the meanings we observe are like migratory birds, on the move, coursing through the quotation as if passing across the field of vision. The reader’s task is to follow their path, trace their course, and find meanings in their evanescence.

This thinking finds a more destabilizing formulation in Yale theorist Paul de Man’s take on literary rhetoric and figural language. He follows Northrop Frye and discusses the concept of irony as “a pattern of words that *turns away* from direct statement or its own obvious meaning” (164). Here’s a banal example: I’m walking to campus, wearing what I think is a nice pink polo shirt. A truck rolls by and the passenger shouts at me, “Nice shirt, jerk!” Not a verbatim quotation, more colorful in the original. But this is a pretty clear example of irony: it’s a statement that deviates or turns away from its typical, literal meaning. My shirt, they want me to know, is anything but nice. So irony is “a pattern of words that turns away” – de Man notes that “that turning away is the trope, the movement of the trope. Trope means to turn, and it’s that deviation between literal and figural language, this turning away of the meaning” (164-65). He’s talking about irony, but for de Man, irony is the master trope, the model for all the other tropes or rhetorical figures. It gives a name to the movement, the deviation, the disruption, and destabilization inherent in literary language. It marks our inability to fix meaning in place, to pin it down. That’s why de Man repeatedly emphasizes the strong sense of ‘trope’ as a turn or a turning away. On this view, the reader’s task is to give a rigorous account of that movement and of the limits of critical analysis.

You’ll be happy to know that I don’t intend to quote any more literary theory this afternoon. You might be less happy to know I want to close this section, instead, with an example of reading that attends to language in motion. It won’t be a strictly de Manian or post-structuralist reading, but still, one that is attuned to a late-twentieth century conception of tracing the movement in language

and meaning. I want to look closely with you at a poem, Joseph von Eichendorff's "Mondnacht" or in English, "Moonlit Night." Rather than read the poem to you, in either German or English, I direct you to the song that Robert Schumann composed, setting "Mondnacht" to music. It's what you heard this afternoon as you were coming in, before the lecture started. My chosen example brings us full circle, as we're looking back now at the early nineteenth century. To be honest, very little happens in the poem. It's about someone observing a moonlit landscape, reflecting on it, and getting swept up in imagination and nostalgic longing. We'll trace a kind of movement in the poem's language - a shift from the subjunctive mood to the indicative and back to the subjunctive. And we'll consider how that movement enacts a particular kind of experience.

Mondnacht

Es war, als hätt der Himmel
 Die Erde still geküßt,
 Daß sie im Blütenschimmer
 Von ihm nur träumen müßt.
 Die Luft ging durch die Felder,
 Die Ähren wogten sacht,
 Es rauschten leis die Wälder,
 So sternklar war die Nacht.

Und meine Seele spannte
 Weit ihre Flügel aus,
 Flog durch die stillen Lande,
 Als flöge sie nach Haus. (1:322-23)

Moonlit Night

It was as if heaven had
 Quietly kissed the earth,
 So that in the shimmer of blossoms
 She must only dream of him.
 The breeze passed through the fields,
 The ears of grain swayed gently,
 The woods rustled softly,
 So starry clear was the night.

And my soul spread
 Its wings out wide,
 Flew through the silent countryside,
 As if it were flying back home.

The first thing I want to point out is that the poem begins in the subjunctive mood. "It was as if." We use the subjunctive to express states of unreality - things that are imagined, wished for, or contrary to fact. It marks where an expression departs from reality. By setting out in the subjunctive, the poem establishes its scene as an imagined, contrary-to-fact situation. Moreover, this first scene also insists on its own artifice through its high-flown literary language. Take, for example, "Blütenschimmer," this strange word that means something like "the shimmer of blossoms." It's not a part of everyday diction, even in German. In fact, if you google the word, virtually all the results refer back to this poem. It's an invented word for an invented scene. The description of this beautiful union of heaven and earth thus insists on its artificial nature, first through the subjunctive and second through its register of rarefied literary language. It tells us that this scene of fulfillment is far removed from any actual fulfillment. It's occurring instead in the subject's mind.

As we continue to the second stanza, we observe a shift in the poem's language. It moves from the subjunctive to the indicative. Contrary to the subjunctive mood, the indicative is used for statements of fact. The second stanza thus departs significantly from the first. The poem began with a subjunctive comparison that drew attention to its own unreality. But in the next stanza, we get a straightforward description of the nocturnal environment. By shifting to the indicative mood, the poem pivots away from the imaginary character of its opening image. It forces the imagined union of heaven and earth into the background and replaces it with a natural landscape presented as fact. This section's depiction of nature thus appears to be more immediate and authentic. It seems we're supposed to forget that, at least on some level, the subject's Romantic perception of the evening diverges from reality.

Both the mood and the momentum carry over into the third stanza through the opening conjunction "and." This conjunction continues the second stanza's sentiment and presents the subject's reaction as just another event that happened that night. The corn swayed, the woods rustled, and my soul took flight. Now, by all rights, this image of the soul spreading its wings should be presented in the same subjunctive, contrary-to-fact mood as the image of the magical union between heaven and earth, but it isn't, obviously. And this is where the opening "and" or "Und" leads us astray. The poem's first two parts present a contrast or a kind of choice: on the one hand, there's a soaring figural expression that signals the subject's longing for a fictional utopia, and on the other hand, a depiction tethered to the more prosaic reality of the natural landscape. The third stanza's imagery clearly returns to the expressive mode of stanza one, the fanciful subjunctive. But that opening "and" suggests precisely the opposite. It suggests that the third stanza is nothing more than a continuation of the second part's sober description, and the continued use of the indicative only reinforces that false suggestion. The effect is to blur the distinction between the subjective sphere of inwardness, longing, and imagination and the objective sphere of nature and external reality. It's as if the lyric subject gets swept away by its own descriptions, so that when it reintroduces the high-flown imagery of fulfillment in stanza three, it neglects to mark that language as a departure from reality, as a purely imagined instance of fulfilled longing. The subject is so immersed in its own fantasies that it presents the soul's flight as just another fact.

The third stanza depicts the lyric subject being swept along in its reverie, and the movement of the poem invites the reader to be swept along as well, to be moved along with the poem's lyric "I." In other words, the poem functions best and derives its sharpest effect when the reader fails to notice the return of counterfactual, subjective imagery, when the lyric subject is able to reintroduce its fantasy under the guise of continued objective description. Throughout the poem, the lyric subject has gathered momentum in a properly Romantic trajectory – the moonlight, the murmuring woods, and the nighttime breeze all set the imagination to work and the soul in motion – and it's just at this point that the poem applies a brake to the subject's recuperative fantasy. With the final line, "*As if it were* flying back home," the subjunctive, counterfactual situation of the first stanza returns. It abruptly diminishes the soaring finale of the soul in flight and exposes what the rhetoric

of the third stanza has so far been ignoring: the persistent discrepancy between the natural world and the images that world evokes in the subject's mind.

In "Mondnacht," the lyric subject ultimately wants to erase the difference between fantasy and reality. It longs for a world in which there's no need for the subjunctive because the mind's movements can make present what is absent and recover what has been lost. Eichendorff's poem lets that desire operate and expand: by the third stanza, the distinction between fact and fantasy doesn't seem to matter anymore – at least until the concluding line. Eichendorff has been preparing the ground for this transition for some time, but it's only in the final line that the subjunctive returns to cast aside that illusion of harmony and fulfillment, and to reveal the lyric subject's misperception. The repetition of the verb "fliegen," to fly, in the last two lines emphasizes the shift in tone by highlighting a difference within two similar verb forms. Only a slight change separates "flog" and "flöge," the indicative from the subjunctive. It's an umlaut, which in German indicates a turning or twisting around of sound – that same turning, tropic movement that de Man identifies in figural language. This minor vowel change, this movement within language itself, takes the action out of the real and places it back in the realm of wishful fantasy. The language of Romantic imagery remains evocative, but any hope that one could realize the longing evoked by such images is a delusion. (Which is to say, the soul can't actually take flight, the subject can't go back home, it can't reclaim the past that's been lost.) At the last possible moment, the poem snaps back against the lyric subject. The movement of language halts the subject's flight of fancy and reclaims the distinction between reality and wishful thinking.

The writer Anne Carson has described poetry as "an action of the mind captured on a page," and I think that's a nice description of what's going on in Eichendorff. For Carson, when you engage with a poem, you're set in motion: you "enter into that action," "you're moving with somebody else's mind through an action" (Cited in Zapruder, 58). Eichendorff's poem does that by allowing the reader to travel through, or along with, the action of the lyric subject's mind. What's crucial is that the poem doesn't just deliver some trite message about inspiration, longing, and the power of fantasy. Instead, it enacts for the reader a movement of imagination and error. It thus allows the reader to experience that moment of realization and deflation, to feel something of the reality check that halts fantasy in its tracks.

We've covered a lot of ground this afternoon, from photographs to intellectual debates, to psychoanalysis, critical theory, music, and poetry. We've moved across time, from 1800-2000, and across various disciplines in the arts and humanities. I've tried today to show you three different ways one could conceive of reading as a kind of movement – in the reader, in the author, and in language itself. My aim has been to make that invisible movement that reading is somewhat more visible. I started with a fairly obscure title, I know. But if I've done my job today, then the title shouldn't seem so obscure to you anymore. It simply designates a crux in the history of thinking about what reading means, and we've seen people locate that movement in various places. Truth be

told, though, I don't think the various forms of movement can be disentangled. In this sense, Calvino's passage has it right, because it blurs the line between the reader's movement and the movement of language. It presents the two as so intertwined that it's hard to tell where one begins and the other ends. It's an image that has stuck with me, and I hope it's one that sticks with you too, perhaps as an afterimage that lingers once this talk is over.

How does reading move us? How do we let ourselves be moved by language? When we trace the movement of signification and meaning in a poem or photograph, when we follow the movement of an author's train of thought, when a book sets our understanding in motion and our faculties to work, this is when reading moves us. This is how we allow ourselves to be moved by reading, by letting the movement of language move us. And if reading doesn't move us, why read at all? As Kafka put it, "If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow to the head, what are we reading for? A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us" (Cited in Anz, 18). Kafka was intense. He thought of reading not just as movement, but as a particularly violent form of movement, as a disaster, a blow to the head, or the strike of an axe. But his point is similar: that reading can break apart what we thought was fixed and solid, that it can set us adrift and set us in motion. Or more recently, the poet Matthew Zapruder has described how we need the strangeness of literary language "to jar us awake" (43). He writes: "When we are attentive to the language of poetry...words and ideas can loosen and break free for a moment, so we can experience them anew" (14). Friends, whether or not an axe is the instrument you need books to be, may your reading let you experience words and ideas anew, may your books move you, and may you be ever alert to the signs of that invisible movement that reading is.

Thank you.

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