

Alexander Samely

Reading and Experience: A Philosophical Investigation

Contributions to Hermeneutics

Volume 13

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Hermeneutics is one of the main traditions within recent and contemporary European philosophy, and yet, as a distinctive mode of philosophising, it has often received much less attention than other similar traditions such as phenomenology, deconstruction or even critical theory. This series aims to rectify this relative neglect and to reaffirm the character of hermeneutics as a cohesive, distinctive, and rigorous stream within contemporary philosophy. The series will encourage works that focus on the history of hermeneutics prior to the twentieth century, that take up figures from the classical twentieth-century hermeneutic canon (including Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur, but also such as Strauss, Pareyson, Taylor and Rorty), that engage with key hermeneutic questions and themes (especially those relating to language, history, aesthetics, and truth), that explore the cross-cultural relevance and spread of hermeneutic concerns, and that also address hermeneutics in its interconnection with, and involvement in, other disciplines from architecture to theology. A key task of the series will be to bring into English the work of hermeneutic scholars working outside of the English-speaking world, while also demonstrating the relevance of hermeneutics to key contemporary debates. Since hermeneutics can itself be seen to stand between, and often to overlap with, many different contemporary philosophical traditions, the series will also aim at stimulating and supporting philosophical dialogue through hermeneutical engagement. Contributions to Hermeneutics aims to draw together the diverse field of contemporary philosophical hermeneutics through a series of volumes that will give an increased focus to hermeneutics as a discipline while also reflecting the interdisciplinary and truly international scope of hermeneutic inquiry. The series will encourage works that focus on both contemporary hermeneutics as well as its history, on specific hermeneutic themes and areas of inquiry (including theological and religious hermeneutics), and on hermeneutic dialogue across cultures and disciplines. All books to be published in this Series will be fully peer-reviewed before final acceptance.

Alexander Samely

Reading and Experience: A Philosophical Investigation

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Preface

The writing of this book has biographical roots in my training in philosophy and Jewish Studies at Frankfurt University in the early 1980s. My impressions of Karl-Otto Apel's seminars on Kant and on the ethical presuppositions of conversation are among the most vivid, but equally long-lasting were the effects of the sophisticated views on meaning in language of my teacher in rabbinic hermeneutics, Arnold Goldberg. Later I had the chance to undergo further, less formal but more formative, training in philosophy, by way of the meetings of the Manchester Phenomenology Reading Group formed in 2000. The first book we read was Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, an eye-opening encounter for me. Joanna Hodge and the late Gary Banham were my most effective teachers in the early years. I remain grateful to all past participants of this reading group and continue to learn from its current members.

A second point of origin for my interest in reading is my scholarly work on the historical sources of Jewish Bible interpretation in antiquity. Very little of this will surface in the current book, but I will occasionally articulate questions regarding the methodological foundations of the historical humanities, questions which reflect my experiences as a historian of ancient literature.

I owe much to Maurice Samely for our ongoing discussions of literary art. He also rekindled my interest in modernist fiction, beginning with a long conversation about the opening page of Faulkner's 'The Bear' some 12 years ago. He read various earlier versions of the current book.

I thank my former doctoral student Marton Ribary, now at Royal Holloway, University of London, for identifying, partly summarizing and discussing with me classic publications in the psychology of reading in 2014, and, for many years of stimulating discussion, my colleagues at Manchester University. At the beginning, these included the voice of my late Arabist colleague Norman Calder, and they continue today with Philip Alexander, Daniel Langton, Jackie Suthren-Hirst and others. I am grateful to the members of the biblical studies 'Texture' network, Andrew Teeter, William Tooman, Michael Lyons and Jacob Stromberg, for inspiring workshops at Harvard and St Andrews on reading and coherence, and to colleagues in the 'Comparative Metaphysics' project for allowing me to learn from them about text

characteristics in some of the traditions of Asia, Africa and South America, and for discussing with me methodological puzzles which partly overlapped with the phenomenology of reading. My thanks go in particular to Nick Bunnin, Lucia Dolce, Agata Bielik-Robson, Ana-Maria Pascal, Cosimo Zene and Stephen Green, some of whom also read earlier drafts of this book.

A strange little debt of another kind may also be mentioned. I connect a number of locations in the vicinity of my home in South Manchester, the site of regular urban walks between 2014 and 2019, with specific insights that have helped me crystallize some central theoretical positions. There is a maple in High Grove Road which prompted me to think about the manner in which spatio-temporal contiguity works in contrast to textual contiguity; an oak tree on Styal Road whose bark structure, which I initially experienced as ‘nature’ in separation from ‘society’, invited thoughts on the social mediation of meaningfulness experienced in solitary solidarity with a tree; and a piece of ground with irregular tarmac fissures on Lomond Road, which led me to revise some rigid ideas about the apparent independence of perceptions from language. Then there was an SUV which appeared suddenly behind me as I was riding my bike up a hill on Parrs Wood Lane, and a wooden sculpture of a jumping fish on Princess Parkway, both teaching me something about the way visual information of a single moment’s perception can become unpacked subsequently; and finally, some written signs dotted around Peel Hall Lane, as they monopolized my initial visual attention over the shapes of non-verbal objects, plants and buildings. Most of these encounters with things and organisms will appear as illustrations in this book.

I thank my Department, Religions and Theology at the University of Manchester, as well as the Faculty of Humanities, for granting me a two-semester sabbatical in 2019, during which much of the drafting of the final version of this book was accomplished.

I salute young musicians everywhere, both inside and outside the confines of ‘classical’ music, as they dedicate their lives to acquiring the skills and interpretative arts necessary to bring to life the music of earlier generations in new places and times, or to create new music. And I acknowledge the joy of contributing to the nurturing of university undergraduates in a number of humanities subjects over many years. It has been an increasingly poignant and awe-inspiring experience for me to see young people again and again setting out to transform themselves as they travel from the shores of their school knowledge towards the bewilderingly limitless horizons of university knowledge and its modes of questioning all knowledge. It has been a privilege to observe and provide occasional support to this renewal and reshaping of cognition and ethics across the generations.

Manchester, UK
October 2023

Alexander Samely

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Chapter 1

Introduction: A New Way to Look at Reading



y como yo soy aficionado a leer aunque sean los papeles rotos de las calles....and since I'll read anything, even scraps of paper in the gutter....

Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, p. 74 (Part I, Chap. 9).

I had read it before, but it seemed quite new.

Ernest Hemingway, *Fiesta*, p. 128.

But she knew he didn't love her. Not to have cared enough to scratch out that 'disgust', so that she couldn't read it!

Katherine Mansfield, *Garden Party*, p. 209.

Reading takes no measures against the erosion of time (one forgets oneself and also forgets), it does not keep what it acquires, or it does so poorly, and each of the places through which it passes is a repetition of the lost paradise.

Michel de Certeau, *Practice*, p. 173.

Abstract Reading a text constitutes a daily activity for millions of people around the world. Yet the processes involved are largely opaque to readers, and many questions on text reading puzzle even philosophers, psychologists, neuroscientists and scholars of literature. What role does the unconscious play in text reading? How is reading a text different from merely looking at a page full of writing? How is it possible for texts to connect to their readers' lives, sometimes even against their will? Are we like computers when we read? This chapter will propose a new way of looking at reading which connects hitherto fragmented answers to these questions. It will claim that one needs to examine the reader's synthesis of experience if one wishes to understand how a plurality of meaning experiences can constitute the activity of 'reading a text'.

1 The Main Thesis

On any given day, there will be millions of people around the world engaged in reading a text, whether a work email or a legal letter, the Bhagavadgita, a book on cell biology, a blog or the novel of a popular writer. Yet the activity in which they are engaged is largely opaque to them, and many questions on text reading remain unanswered even by

philosophers, psychologists, neuroscientists and scholars of literature. Great strides have been made in the study of reading in literate adults by these disciplines since the nineteenth century, yet many questions still lack agreed answers: What role does the unconscious play in text reading? How is reading a text different from merely looking at a page full of writing? How is it possible for texts to connect to their readers' lives, sometimes even against their will? Are we like computers when we read?

This book will attempt to advance our understanding of reading by integrating it into a wider exploration of the synthesis of experience. This involves assigning a role to 'unconscious' experiences. The view that I will defend is that, just as there is a non-deliberate synthesis of experience more generally, a notion that goes back at least to Kant, so there is a non-deliberate synthesis of the reader's experience of meaning units in a text. I will aim to show that what we call 'interpretations' is grounded in the reader's sporadic discovery of such meaning experiences, previously unconscious but already motivating their understanding. In defining this unconscious, I will go back to the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, and develop his notion of a 'passive synthesis' of experience, so as to throw new light on all aspects of the reading process, including some which have often been glossed over or treated as obscure.

In clarifying the nature of reading as readers experience it in certain modern contexts, I will approach it as an embodied, temporal, social and historically situated practice. I will study these dimensions through a phenomenological examination of first-hand experiences of texts as meaningful. Reading a text thereby shows itself as involving the performance of a series of temporally discrete acts by which one understands the meaning of individual text parts, such as sentences. The overall unity of this experience, the reader's (often entirely tacit) sense of the text, is the result of a dynamic synthesis that links and contracts meaning experiences in a manner that is neither deliberate nor conscious.

My results chime with positions that have been popular in the academic discourse on text meaning for some decades. However, I provide different and more detailed evidence; and ultimately, my theory ends up standing on a theoretical ground separate from any proposed so far. I review some of the ways in which reading research has been framed in recent psychology, neuroscience, philosophy and literary studies. I will propose a phenomenological language which allows restating the contributions of these disciplines to the study of reading, while overcoming to some extent their specialist isolation from each other. This language also enables connecting four dimensions, usually kept apart, in which experiences of the meanings of a particular text can diverge for different readers: differences of historical situation, of cultural location, of personal identity and of embodied neurodiversity.

2 An Example

Let me start with the following question: How does the experience of understanding a text invite the discovery of new meanings after the reading of a passage or the text as a whole has already taken place?

By way of illustration, let us assume that am engaged in reading a long email from my line manager summarizing an executive meeting she attended. The message explains the various positions that were expressed and the outcomes that were decided, with direct consequences for certain tasks which I, as a member of her team, need to prioritize from now on. I read through the message quickly but without skipping any part. As I reach its end, I get the feeling that I have somehow overlooked – *something*, I don't know what. A dim recollection prompts me to scroll up to the earlier lines. Without really knowing what it is that I am looking for, I scan the text again. I assume, without thinking about it, that I will be able to recognize, when I see it, whatever matches my dim feeling. My eye catches a sentence which now, upon seeing it again and re-reading it, strikes me as my manager implicitly distancing herself from one of the newly decided priorities. This whiff of criticism is not something of which I had become aware during my first read-through of the message, but now I can see it clearly in her words. I now also recognize this criticism as 'matching' what I had been dimly looking for when deciding to scan the text again. I realize that my first reading of the sentence understood it only up to a point. On the other hand, it is clear that I did not miss the implied message entirely, for otherwise I would not have been prompted to re-read the text.

What is going on in such a case? How can a reader become aware of the – ultimately justified, in their view – feeling of having 'missed' something in a text, when they have just completed reading it? How can some aspect of a text leave a meaning trace with the reader, so that they overlook something and yet not miss it? And what does it mean that one can explore the *visual* space of a page of text in such a manner that one sees *meanings*? Experiences of this kind are exceedingly common, or at least, they are common in those modern contexts where a reader has sufficient time and interest to follow up a prompt to reflection. They can furthermore occur with all kinds of texts, from a work email to a novel, a poem, a love letter or a scientific article.¹ Hence, they are not restricted to either factual or fictional genres, or to either thematic or narrative writing. But what underlies such reading experiences is not well understood. I will try to show that the very possibility of such acts, by which a reader follows up a 'dim feeling' through re-reading a passage and then discovers a new meaning, points to fundamental aspects of how all reading works and how texts 'have' meaning.

3 Unconscious Meanings and Passive Synthesis

The example just given points to central concerns of this book. I examine three facets of reading as having a basis in a synthesis of experience: (a) the fact that the reader can discover to have experienced meanings of which they were not aware; (b)

¹Michel Henry uses the case of a biology textbook to illustrate his view that the acquisition of scientific knowledge is based in the very life world whose reality certain uses of that knowledge may undermine; *Barbarism*, pp. 11–12; cp. Sect. 7 of Chap. 12 below, on calculations.

the fact that such meanings had already, prior to being discovered, the ability to colour tacitly the reader's understanding of other passages in the same text; and (c) that, as a result, passages can point back to each other by way of earlier 'unconscious' meaning experiences. I will characterize this synthesis of experience, following Husserl, as 'passive', that is, as non-deliberate and non-conscious.² Passive synthesis refers in particular to tacit retentions of earlier meaning experiences (henceforth, 'retentions') and latent anticipations of possible future experiences (henceforth, 'protentions', using the Husserlian terms).

I will employ the word *meaning* for conscious as well as unconscious meaning experiences – the former being a theme to consciousness when they take place, the latter being meanings which the reader did not thematize when they lived through them, but only later (such as the whiff of criticism implied in the text imagined above). Before the content of the as-yet unconscious meaning experience is discovered by the reader's hindsight reflection, I will refer to it as *meaning-designate* (plural, meanings-designate).

I employ the term 'unconscious' for something that the reader experienced without being aware of it then, but of which they may become aware; and, as a corollary, I use the word 'conscious' only for that which a person can remember once having been aware of, or is currently aware of. Some philosophical usages draw the line differently. Thus, in the first decades of the twentieth century, Husserl called every experience 'conscious' of which a person may become aware with hindsight.³ Subsequently, he referred to this usage – also adopted by Sartre – as 'improper' (*uneigentlich*).⁴ Later still, Husserl can be found to employ the term *unconscious* for such meaning experiences, that is, before hindsight reflection renders them

²The expression 'passive synthesis' is also used by certain philosophers after Husserl; see Sect. 3 in Chap. 2 below and *passim*.

³For Husserl, see *VzPdiZ*, pp. 471–473 (Beilage/Appendix IX); cp. *TzPdiZ*, No. 41, p. 157 [291]; *OPCIT*, pp. 122–124 and 301–302. According to Serra, the later Husserl chose to avoid separating the conscious from the unconscious (*Archäologie*, pp. 266–267). For the wider issues, see also Varela, 'Specious Present', pp. 289–290. For Sartre, see *Imaginary*, p. 64 ("a latent consciousness" would be a contradiction in terms'), and Sartre, *L'être*, p. 20/*Being*, xxx; see the discussion in Smith, *Experiencing*, pp. 125–144; cp. Schuetz, 'Multiple Realities', p. 560 (and see the end of Sect. 4 in Chap. 3 below). Accounts of literary art have taken the reader's unconscious for granted for a long time, as in Russian Formalism; see Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', pp. 3–24.

⁴In one of the draft notes from 1930, one reads: 'Wir haben also "Bewußtsein von" in verschiedenem Sinn und in verschiedener Fundierungs-stufe: (1) Das ursprünglichst zeitigende Bewußtsein, in dem durch die Urimpressionen (Urpräsentationen, Urretentionen und Urprotentionen) sich "immanente Daten" (die Empfindungsdaten, mit ihren Gefühlsmomenten, auch die Triebmomente, alles in der Weise des innerst Zeitlichen) konstituieren, aber auch die Erscheinungen-von, die Ichakte, alles was überhaupt zeitlich-innerzeitlich eins ist. (2) Akte. Das eigentliche Bewußthaben, darauf Gerichtetsein des Ich. Das Bewußtsein sub (1) ist uneigentliches Bewußtsein, ist keine "Intention". Problem dieser Uneigentlichkeit und warum es mitgerechnet wird als "Bewußtsein von". Unpublished manuscript Group C ('Zeitkonstitution als formale Konstitution'), 6, August 1930; Archives Husserl de Paris, as quoted by Bégout, *Généalogie*, pp. 31–32, note 3; cp. Husserl, *Krisis*, p. 193/*Crisis*, p. 188.

conscious.⁵ This is the usage I will follow, so that I include under the term unconscious meaning experiences that took place, but that were unthematic or unconscious at the point at which they took place. If and when a person subsequently becomes aware of such a previously unconscious meaning experience, they thus become aware of a new aspect of what is already in the past for them, a new aspect of their own *self's past*.⁶ The key application of this idea to the topic of reading is the following: the 'unconscious' meaning arises from some unthematized aspect of the meaning of an earlier passage in the same text, and the prompt for the reader to become conscious of that hitherto unthematic meaning arises from a later passage, hence the two passages become explicitly connected in the understanding of the reader. This phenomenon, and the time lag involved in it, will be a central topic of my investigations.⁷

4 The Notion of the Meaningful

Modern European thinkers as diverse as Russell and Sartre postulated that acts of sense perception can reveal themselves later to have had contents that was not 'noticed' at the time they were performed.⁸ Contemporary psychologists similarly

⁵Cp. for contemporary accounts in the light of empirical psychology, Dretske, 'Perception Without Awareness' and Tye, 'Nonconceptual Content'. I will explain intentionality later in this book. See Husserl, *Krisis*, p. 240/*Crisis*, p. 237, where he speaks of modes of intentionality that are "'unconscious" in the usual narrower sense of the word', and alludes to Freudian ideas of the unconscious as the repressed (see next note); and the posthumous, *Lebenswelt*, e.g., pp. 101–104 (text 11, March 1933). Kant allowed for the 'I' not to be conscious ('bewußt') of its connecting a manifold (he uses the word synthesis) in an action of the understanding: *KdV* (B 130–132), pp. 134–135/*CPR*, pp. 245–246; elsewhere he speaks of having representations ('Vorstellungen') without one being conscious of them ('ohne uns ihrer bewusst zu sein') across a range of examples, *Anthropologie*, § 5, pp. 417–419/*Anthropology*, pp. 23–25.

⁶Husserl conceptualized the unconscious emphatically as open to discovery by the self, and thus habits of thought or behaviour as open to revision by the self; cp. Ubiali, 'Habitus'. See Derrida, *Speech*, p. 63; Bernet, 'Husserl and Freud', pp. 327–351; Holenstein, *Assoziation*, pp. 321–345; Serra, *Archäologie*. See also Francesco and Marraffa, 'The Unconscious', pp. 14–15 with reference to Brentano and Sartre. Ann Banfield discusses, in engagement with Sartre and Russell, the literary representation of consciousness in modern fiction, in *Unspeakable Sentences*, pp. 186–188, 196–199, 310–311; Chap. 6 below will address this topic. On my use of the term 'meaningful' in relation to the unconscious, see Sect. 4 below, and Sect. 3 in Chap. 5.

⁷And Husserl understood the importance of that time lag; see, e.g., Husserl, *Erste Philosophie*, pp. 88–89/*First Philosophy*, p. 292. See further note 54 in Chap. 3 below.

⁸Sartre, *L'être*, p. 19/*Being*, p. xxix; in his earlier *Ego* (p. 46), he speaks of 'unreflected' consciousness leaving a 'non-thetic' memory. Russell in *Theory* argues that 'faint and peripheral sensations' (p. 8) or 'things not attended to' (p. 9) must be included in 'experience'. For the influence of Russell's philosophy on some modernist writers, in particular Virginia Woolf, see Banfield, *Phantom*, pp. 128–134, and her *Unspeakable Sentences*. For contemporary Anglo-American philosophical concerns, see, e.g., Tye, 'Nonconceptual Content', pp. 512–517 and Kriegel, 'Unconscious Content'. On the various uses of 'phenomenology', sometimes linked to Nagel's

speak of ‘unconscious or subliminal’ perception.⁹ I too postulate that a person may have an unaware awareness, as it were, of a perceptive content, such that that content can later be recouped in recollection. Such acts of recouping are an everyday occurrence, for example when one recalls a moment after seeing a bus leave the bus stop, that its displayed number had a shape incompatible with ‘372’ which is the bus one needs, even though one had not ‘seen’ in that moment, as the theme of one’s seeing, the number on that bus or its shape. I take phenomena of this nature to chime with that of a ‘dim feeling’ which makes us hunt down text meanings that we had read and understood, but did not *quite* understand, by our somewhat later lights.

Kant, for whom the notion of synthesis was central, argued that, in order to account for a self or ‘I’ being able to unify its experiences as ‘mine’, one needs to postulate that all one’s representations (*Vorstellungen*) are capable of being accompanied by an ‘I think’.¹⁰ Husserl maintained similar notions.¹¹ The Kantian ‘I think’ is a transcendental condition of the possibility of subjectivity: it cannot be understood as claiming some kind of empirical fact,¹² or as being an ontological anchor of reality.¹³ Yet it could be taken as a metaphysical absolute.¹⁴ Kant conceptualized the ability to catch up with oneself as the possibility of me appearing (*erscheinen*) to my ‘inner sense’, that is, the synthesis of temporality¹⁵; even the recognition of

‘what it’s like’ (to experience X) rather than to Husserl, see Gallagher and Zahavi, *Mind*, pp. 49–51. Cp. Levine, ‘Thought’, p. 103, and Galen Strawson, ‘Real Life’, pp. 286–287. See also Flanagan, *Really Hard Problem*, which I discuss in Sect. 4 of Chap. 2 below.

⁹See, for instance, the overview article by Zeman, ‘Consciousness’, pp. 1275–1277.

¹⁰*KdrV* (B 132), p. 136/*CPR*, p. 246. Speaking of the unity of apperception in the understanding, Kant mentions ‘the standing and lasting I (of pure apperception)’, as constituting ‘the correlate of all of our representations, *so far as it is merely possible to become conscious of them*’; *KdrV* (A 124), p. 178/*CPR*, p. 240; emphasis added. Linking presence to unity is a foundational move of the metaphysical tradition, for Husserl no less than for Kant, and the link is inescapable in reflection, which is the paradox that animates post-modern thought. Cp. also Nancy, *Ground*, pp. 86, 95–96 and note 12 in Chap. 4 below. On simultaneity as the source of the Cartesian certainty, see Heidegger, ‘Zeit des Weltbildes’, p. 108/ ‘World Picture’ (in *Question Concerning Technology*), p. 110. On Cartesian certainty see also Sect. 5 in Chap. 2 below.

¹¹The Husserl of *Ideas I* proposed that ‘all mental processes (‘alle Hintergrunderlebnisse’)...as belonging to the *one* stream of mental processes which is mine, *must* admit of becoming converted into actional (‘aktuelle’, literally: acute) cogitationes’. It is the irreducibly temporal dimension of one’s verification of such a ‘must’ which is my topic above. Husserl, *Ideen I*, p. 138 (emphases original)/*Ideas I*, pp. 132–133; cp. Smith, *Experiencing*, pp. 128–130. See also Banfield, ‘Name’ and Levinas, *Existence*, pp. 64–65.

¹²Hannah Arendt paraphrases the Kantian ‘I think’ as follows: ‘this sheer self-awareness, of which I am as it were, unconsciously conscious, is not an activity; by accompanying all other activities it is the guarantor of an altogether silent I-am-I’; Arendt, *Mind*, vol. 1, p. 75.

¹³Peter F. Strawson expresses this point forcefully (but expresses more besides) by saying that, in Kant, the unity of the ‘Ich denke’, as purely formal or ‘analytic’, accompanies *all* my perceptions, ‘and therefore might just as well accompany none’; Strawson, *Individuals*, p. 102; p. 82, note 1.

¹⁴Husserl himself acknowledged the ‘already’, that is, the time lag, involved in the self encountering the self. Yet he was also led to postulate consciousness as an absolute. For the development of Husserl’s position on this, see Zahavi, *Legacy*, pp. 106–108, 112–115.

¹⁵Kant links the ‘I think’ to appearance to the inner sense in *KdrV* (B 429), p. 360/*CPR*, p. 457.

individual objects of perception under a *concept*, considered as a single act of recognition, depends for Kant on a synthesis,¹⁶ and Husserl uses the notion in similar ways. I will adapt and develop such a concept of ‘synthesis’, as central to my purpose of understanding text reading. But I will avoid Kantian terms such as ‘representations’ and ‘inner sense’, the latter with its unwarranted implication of the existence of an ‘organ’ for sensing temporality, like eyes for seeing.

An important difference of emphasis between Kant and Husserl lies, in my view, in the following. Kant may be said to have been particularly exercised by the conditions of possibility of subjects *knowing* something, including scientific knowledge; by contrast, Husserl was – in the end – more interested in the conditions of possibility of experiencing *meaning*,¹⁷ with meaning here taken as a precondition of anything that might be ‘true’. I share with Husserl this emphasis on the meaningful, a term which in my usage encompasses any experience that is or may become thematic or thematized. It thus crucially includes ‘as-yet’ unconscious meaning experiences: the trace they leave for consciousness is precisely that of a promise of something that is *meaningful*, but not yet a theme to consciousness. However, the meaningful also includes what is conscious. This can refer to the content of an act of perception, including the perception of a text’s wording; and furthermore, to the content of acts of thinking, imagining or recalling. Understanding language and perceiving things are thus both (interrelated) kinds of experiences of the meaningful, and in both cases the acute theme of an act of consciousness is embedded into – passive – synthesis.

The notion of a meaning-designate, introduced above, refers then in particular to a meaning which, in subsequent reflection, is experienced as having taken place earlier, but not as *then* thematized or conscious, yet as leaving a trace of *something meaningful*. Understanding what is involved in reading a text requires an analysis of such occurrences, as when a reader picks up with a delay on some implied meaning, as illustrated above in Sect. 2. The expression ‘meaning-designate’ treats the content of such experiences as *not yet determined*. Before reflection, the meaning-designate is not the doppelganger of a thematized content. It is precisely not already a *theme*, not the aim of an act of consciousness or intentionality, ‘promised the rank

¹⁶The temporal sense provides the ‘schematism’ by which such subsumptive recognitions happen; *KdrV* (A 137–147), pp. 187–194/*CPR*, pp. 271–277.

¹⁷Husserl’s notion of ‘pre-predicative’ experience is useful here. See in particular, Husserl, *Urteil/Judgment*. The link between meaning and experience is here recognized as general. In a somewhat different context, Galen Strawson makes the point with some verve: ‘[M]eaning is always a matter of something meaning something *to* something. In this sense, nothing means anything in an experience-less world. There is no possible meaning, hence no possible intention, hence no possible intentionality, on an experienceless planet ...’ *Reality*, pp. 208–209. Deleuze argues for the inseparability of cognition, emotion, bodily experiences in synthesis, and as ‘signs’ in *Difference and Repetition*, pp. 93–97 and passim. In engagement with Hume and Bergson, rather than Husserl, Deleuze assigns no importance to the (experienced) dichotomy between the reflected and the unconscious, as I do. But he uses a quasi-positivist and quasi-metaphysical language of description in order to be able to avoid it. See also Sect. 8 below.

of thought, but still awaiting promotion.’¹⁸ Its determination is partly shaped by the situatedness of the prompting that stimulates reflection to ‘find’ it.

The phenomenological investigation of reading experiences, as conducted here, must proceed in language,¹⁹ including the exploration of passive synthesis as that which holds non-verbal and indeterminate meaning experiences (in a sense of ‘holding’ that is to be explored in this book). But no language in which one verbalizes the nature of one’s experiences, that is, the experience of experience, constitutes a neutral medium for pinning down the ‘original’ experience. Nor is the verbalization a mechanical translation. Rather, the verbalization is a continuation of the shaping of the meaning of that experience in reflective hindsight. Hence, I will view any act that ‘puts into words’ some experience as having the potential to modify what it thematizes. This includes acts by which the reader spells out their own sense of a passage or of a text, but also in turn the acts of analysis by which the phenomenologist reflects on such a sense and such a spelling-out.

The phenomenological method as a whole is thereby situated in the realm of hindsight, as well as, by the use of a particular language alone, in the realm of historical situatedness. I take phenomenology since Husserl to offer an open-ended set of procedures for bringing into view what the embodied experience of experience shows by way of the most general structures of the meaningful. For the reason just given, those ‘most general structures of the meaningful’ can only come into view in a particular historical-cultural situation (of uncertain boundaries, see below). Reading is a bodily performance, increasingly acknowledged as such,²⁰ and this will be reflected in the investigations that follow. For the phenomenological analysis of embodied experience in general, as conducted in critical engagement with contemporary empirical psychology, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* is a consummate model. In what follows, I will attempt a similarly sustained, although much more limited, engagement with psychology and neuroscience.

¹⁸The formulation is Levinas’s, speaking in a slightly different context; Levinas, *Existence*, p. 65 (translation modified); Merleau-Ponty characterizes as the error of ‘psychologies of the unconscious’ that they double what is constituted in representations in consciousness ‘with a latent content, also made up of representation.’ *Perception*, p. 171.

¹⁹See Derrida, *Geometry*, pp. 66–79 and passim, referring to earlier critical observations by Eugen Fink in particular; cp. also Suzanne Cunningham’s critique of the Husserlian project in her *Language*, in particular pp. 92–99. Cunningham does not engage with the earlier strand of the discussion. Cp. Merleau-Ponty, *Perception*, pp. 411–412 and Botero, ‘Immediately Given’, pp. 452–454.

²⁰See, for instance, Mc Laughlin, *Reading and the Body*; Mangen, ‘Hypertext’, pp. 404–419 and the work of Kuzmičová et al., cited in note 54 below.

5 The Time Lag of Reflection and Temporal Difference

As a phenomenological interpreter of the reader's experience, or of their experience of experience, I am a participant, living through my performance of acts and living through 'my' passive synthesis of meaning – mine, even though I cannot experience myself as owning it or controlling it.²¹ So phenomenology is not a practice of scientific objectivity, in particular not if by objectivity one means the simultaneous observation of what happens on the 'inside' of a test subject, from an outside perspective.²²

Empirical and experimental studies of human consciousness and of the unconscious in the context of the natural sciences have long tried to achieve such a simultaneous observation from an outside. A current method for accomplishing this is the imaging of changes of a person's blood flow in the brain (fMRI). This is near-simultaneous with the person's experience of, say, hearing or seeing something, including cases of seeing a word flash up on a screen.²³ The near-simultaneity eliminates the potential for discovering whether the temporal difference itself – the 'time lag' I have mentioned – is in some way part of a person's experience of the meaningful. This elimination is not accidental, but stands in the service of the search for a *law*, that is, a way to sum up temporal change.²⁴ It is a search for regularities of change that are amenable to the general verbal or mathematical formulation of a correlation, which search has at times included the 'laws' of historical change itself.²⁵ Insofar as empirical or experimental scientific approaches are aimed at the experience of the meaningful, including reading, they can become involved in contesting the very boundary between nature (qua predictable) and culture (qua unpredictable but interpretable).

Static and often numerical summings-up of what is distributed over time also pervade everyday modern life and underpin many procedures of comparing and

²¹ See below Chap. 5, Sect. 3.

²² Gestalt psychologists urged a similar conclusion. Thus Viktor von Weizsäcker suggested that the study of the biology of the human (and other) bodies cannot be 'objective' or 'scientific', at least not without contributing to modified definitions of these terms; see his 'Der Gestaltkreis', e.g., 219–229, 270–286, 318, 336 ('Grundverhältnis'). Husserl in his later work and Merleau-Ponty, among others, articulated how embodiment is interlinked with all types of cognition.

²³ For the use of functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging in reading and consciousness research, see notes 57 and 58 in Chap. 2 below.

²⁴ Husserl's *Crisis* book is of interest here, as well as Martin Heidegger's work from the mid-1930s onwards in its criticisms of the traditional and contemporary Western elimination of temporal-historical change from the idea of truth. See, for instance, 'Zeit des Weltbildes'/'World Picture', p. 80/*Question Concerning Technology* (Lovitt), p. 120/*Off the Beaten Track* (Young and Hayne), pp. 60–61.

²⁵ One influential formulation of this latter idea is Hempel's 'General Laws in History'; cp. Danto's critique which draws attention to the fact that it was a move of *historicizing* science (i.e., temporalizing it), that rendered Hempel's project moot; *Narration and Knowledge*, pp. ix–xii and passim, and his exploration of the predictive implications of laws that 'explain' the historical past (pp. 224–227); such laws would effectively assimilate time points to each other.

scoring ‘results’ in work, culture and play. The tennis score may serve as an illustration. When a match takes place, players and audiences live through a temporally extended and unique happening. The scoring system and thus the rule by which one knows when a match is finished, is open to the future: the match is open-ended²⁶ and, once a minimum number of sets has been played, a different winner remains possible until the very last point of a match. Crucially, one can only determine with hindsight what constituted the ‘last’ point. Most of this temporality is erased in the static summary score used after a match (say, 6–4 7–5). Even though that score is cumulative, it gives only a minimal view of the ebb and flow of the playing. The same score can describe very different matches,²⁷ namely points won and lost in drastically divergent sequences. In order to understand the temporal unfolding that the numbers summarize, one has to have lived through it. Experiencing a text by reading it resembles watching or playing a tennis match; it never resembles just seeing its score. One does not know how the text ‘unfolded’ by reading a summary or even a description of it. Nor does a summary (even if included in the text itself) ever settle the meaning of a text once and for all in the way a tennis score settles a match result. In reading and after reading a text, its meanings are never reliably in the past.

I will show that reading a text means to live through a temporal depth of text meanings, and that the reader can access some aspects of that depth to discover in reflection what motivated their current understanding of a passage or the text overall, thus making their meaning experiences transparent to themselves by virtue of other meaning experiences (not by way of causal explanations).²⁸

When recalling meanings that one has read, or discovering meanings—designate that earlier were athenatic, one lives through the temporality of what is non-sensory meaning content.²⁹ The interplay between meaning that is perceived or based in fresh perception (such as seeing words on a page) on the one hand, and meaning that is ‘thought’, i.e., not sensed, on the other, is crucial for reading, as well as for understanding language. We are used to thinking of our acts of perception as having a specific position in our past. But even the acts by which we experience or create unsensed (‘thought’) meaning are to some extent marked for their place in a lived-through time. A meaning content that is not sensory sometimes becomes conscious by way of some ‘token’ of sensibility, such as the echo ‘in one’s head’ of words one has silently read.³⁰ Something similar is true of what is often called representations

²⁶Or it was, at least at Wimbledon, until a new rule governing tie-breaks in the final set was introduced after the 2010 match between John Isner and Nicolas Mahut.

²⁷Cp. Sect. 1 of Chap. 13 below.

²⁸Cp. Sects. 2 and 3 of Chap. 5 below.

²⁹Hannah Arendt uses the term ‘de-sensed’; *Mind*, vol. 1, p. 77 and passim.

³⁰For a contemporary psychological view of ‘hearing’ oneself think, see, e.g., Fernyhough, *Voices Within*, which includes extensive discussions of the representation of inner speech in fiction, as well as the documented experiences of some writers with their inner voices. Fernyhough is particularly interested in the idea of thinking as internal dialogue, which has had a long history in philosophy. Cp. Gacea, “‘Internal Dialogue’”, p. 40, with reference to *Sophist* 263e3–8 in particular; Arendt, *Mind*, vol. 1, pp. 6, 31, 122–123 and passim. For a contemporary philosophical analysis, contrasting inner speech with ‘social acts of the mind’ (Thomas Reid), see Moran, *Exchange*,

or, even more confusingly, ‘mental images’.³¹ Saussure spoke of the ‘psychic character’ of our ‘acoustic images’, evinced by our ability to talk to ourselves or to recite poetry silently.³² I will explore the manner in which reading involves spatio-temporal perception in Chaps. 3 and 8, while the temporality of the interplay of acts with passivity will concern me throughout much of the book.

6 Experiences Become Synthesized – The Notion of the ‘Whole’ of a Text

Some latency of synthesis is taken for granted in almost all studies of reading. By a first approximation, it might be understood as a ‘sort of mental contamination effect’ or ‘seeping’.³³ The concepts of passive synthesis and of meaning-designate are meant to help clarify such seeping and contamination. They are designed to avoid unwarranted reifications of what it is that ‘seeps’, that is, unwarranted assignments to it of the ontology of a *thing*. The term meaning-designate names a meaning experience in the ‘state’ it has before the person who experienced it thematizes it (if ever).

pp. 190–213. I will return to the link between reading and conversation in Sects. 3 and 4 of Chap. 9 below.

³¹I take it that the category of ‘speech-imagery’ proposed by Anežka Kuzmičová for analyzing reader experiences presupposes, but does not explain, such a non-sensible ‘tokenization’ as well; see her ‘Mental Imagery’, pp. 284–285. On the notion of mental images in reading, see note 11 in Chap. 7 below.

³²‘Caractère psychique de nos images acoustiques’, translated by Harris as ‘psychological nature of our sound patterns’. Saussure continues: ‘Le signe linguistique est donc une entité psychique à deux faces, qui peut être représentée par la figure...’. Saussure, *Cours*, pp. 98–99/*Course*, p. 66 (‘The linguistic sign is, then, a two-sided psychological entity, which may be represented by the following diagram...’). See Derrida’s critique of this idea of the linguistic sign through the observation that every signified also plays the role of a signifier; for instance, *Positions*, pp. 19–20, continuing a line from his *Grammatology*, pp. 63–65. On the case of reading, see notes 3 and 4 in Chap. 7 below.

³³The expressions are Vera Tobin’s, who explains: ‘The common thread is a sort of mental contamination effect: information we encounter in one context tends to seep into our representations of other perspectives.’ *Surprise*, p. 58. I will reject this way of framing the issue, but what Tobin describes as ‘contamination’ and ‘seeping’ seems to me indeed a component of the experiences that I aim to clarify. Tobin refers to Cosmides and Tooby, ‘Evolution’. Cosmides and Tooby define an organism’s commitment to the truth of a representation as that representation’s ability to migrate without ‘scope restriction’ across domains of knowledge, in other words, to ‘contaminate’ domains other than the one from which that representation arose (e.g., p. 64). Restrictions on such migration, on the other hand, require or consist of source ‘tagging’ for a given piece of information (= meta-representations). Cosmides and Tooby see such restrictions as allowing that organism to suspend its commitment to something being true, to act ‘as if’ (‘decoupling’, e.g., pp. 64–69) and to understand narrative fiction (pp. 89–93). On the assumptions behind this conceptualization, see note 3 in Chap. 5 below. Cp. Ubliali, ‘Habitus’.

The experience of something ‘unresolved’ after having just finished reading a text (used in the illustration in Sect. 2 above) is one of the manifestations of a meaning-designate in the experience of reading, to be explored alongside others in this book. If and when reflection sets it, the content of that passive meaning presents itself as from the past. That ‘presentation’ happens in an act of reflective thematization, and it is at that point that a meaning-designate assumes a specific content for the reflecting self. It does so in responsiveness to the occasion of reflection. Of this occasion, a just-read new sentence of a continuous text might be a crucial component: it can ‘prompt’ the act of reflection, and lead it to an earlier passage in the same text. I will show how this happens.

Readers do not merely encounter previously ‘unconscious’ meanings, and usually take that ability for granted; in some contemporary contexts, they may also acknowledge that not all of their meaning experiences are equally transparent or accessible to them, hence that they experience a boundary for consciousness.³⁴ Ordinary English terms such as latent, forgotten, dimly remembered, association, tip of the tongue, unconscious, pre-conscious, sub-conscious and many others, indicate the routine nature of the experience of such a boundary. Therefore, viable conceptualizations of reading ought to address how it is possible for readers to experience their ability to turn what was previously unconscious to them into what is now conscious, as part of their clarification of the text meaning, and by way of a temporal difference or a time lag.

An adequate empirical approach to adult reading in psychology and neuroscience would therefore, (a) avoid reducing phenomena of meaning to organic changes, that is, eschew putting (putative) causes in the place of meaning experiences, experienced motivations and clarifications; (b) address and devise ways to explore empirically the relation of meaning experiences to temporal dispersion and multiplicity (such as the time lag of reflection); and (c) draw systematically the conceptual and empirical consequences from the possibility that readers can encounter what they experience as their own prior non-conscious experience. I will point to studies in experimental or empirically oriented psychology that meet the first criterion in particular in Chap. 2 (e.g., the research collected in Wagemans; research by Varela). Work that addresses points (b) and (c) is rarer, but is also found, and documented to some extent throughout this book.

Perhaps the widest scientific context for such a reorientation of the experimental-empirical study of reading is a certain set of positions in evolutionary biology. Research into the conditions of the emergence of representational thought in self-sustaining organisms, and the ability of an organism to intuit future possibilities of itself and its environment, links this emergence to evidence for a universal tendency of vast, dynamic, self-bounding assemblies of neuron cells that become excited spontaneously, randomly or by stimuli, to converge statistically towards recurrent patterns (‘attractors’). This would account for the possibility that meaning experiences in living, perceptive or conscious organisms, including humans, arose from

³⁴For Husserl and Freud’s positions on this, see the summary in Ubiali, ‘Habitus’, pp. 111–112, and the works mentioned in note 10 above. See also MacIntyre, *Unconscious*.

non-aware materiality by way of stochastic regularities, but it is also taken to imply that the laws that govern the organization of these organisms are not reducible to the laws that govern materiality outside of the organic organization.³⁵

I have alluded above to the tacit role that a function of synthesis has played in literary studies. Among the indicators of this is the use of notions of ‘unity’ and ‘the whole’. Thus, readers have often been exhorted to read single passages of a text in the light of the whole. The reader is thus viewed as capable of gaining a sense of a unified whole which is supposed to guide their understanding of any one part of the text and, somehow, also vice versa.³⁶ As a reading procedure, this is meant to make possible the appreciation of literary art, the testing of the authenticity of historical sources and, more generally, the reading of any text accurately. This notion is also enshrined explicitly in specialized methodologies of reading, not least in judicial theories which assign explicit importance to the idea of the ‘whole’ of a legislative text when addressing the meaning of a single paragraph or sentence.³⁷ Furthermore, an author is supposed to be able to control the ‘unity’ of their work, such that its literary quality can be judged partly by its capacity for conveying a unified meaning. This trend in Western literary criticism is visible from at least Horace’s *ars poetica*,³⁸ received in the middle ages by John of Garland, and continues in modern and twentieth-century critics, from Pope to Leavis and Frye. It was embraced also by

³⁵Terrence W. Deacon, basing himself on approaches in neuroscience and evolutionary biology, has argued in effect that organically embodied evolutionary constraints do not map, one-to-one, onto specific organic functions, but provide a spectrum of possibilities open to future ‘uses’. While such constraints cannot be interpreted as emerging because of a goal (the fact of survival of an organism or species in propagation is not planned, but brute), the (cell) assemblies that are constrained by them are able to converge stochastically around new propagation-beneficial attractors that can be of a totally different order, culminating in such phenomena as representational thought and self-reflection. See *Incomplete Nature*, with an overview of his argument at pp. 541–545. While largely unconcerned with some of the relevant discussions in philosophy, Deacon provides a thoughtful exploration of the conceptual implications for consciousness arising from recent physics, biology and neuroscience. For the biological-statistical dimension of this, see the work of Stuart Kauffman (cp. note 3 in Chap. 5 below), and note 48 in Chap. 2 below; cp. also Deleuze and Guattari, who in a different approach and language which refuses to identify itself as figurative, address the link between the mathematics of chaos, ‘vital’ ideas and the brain; *What is Philosophy*, e.g., pp. 207–210. For how the notion of self-organization can be combined with an evolutionary perspective, see Varela, Thompson and Rosch, *Embodied Mind*, in particular pp. 196–202.

³⁶See the summary in Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 177–180/*Truth and Method*, pp. 182–183; Derrida, *Margins*, p. xx (‘envelopment’); Ingarden, *Kunstwerk*, pp. 153–155/*Work of Art*, pp. 146–148. One of the figurations of unity is the text as a hierarchy or as an organism, as used in Ingarden, *Vom Erkennen*, pp. 73–80/*Cognition*, pp. 73–80; Ingarden also speaks of the text’s ‘main’ function or sense, pp. 80–88/79–88. Cp. also Calinescu, *Rereading*, pp. 20–22. See further note 44 in Chap. 5 below.

³⁷Cp. Dworkin, *Law’s Empire*, pp. 231, 237; Greenawalt, *Legal Interpretation*; Amaya, *Tapestry of Reason*; Brozek, ‘Coherence’; and Dickson, ‘Coherence in Legal Reasoning’.

³⁸Horace opens his letter with a censure of books ‘whose different features are made up at random like a sick man’s dreams, with no unified form...’; see Russell and Winterbottom, *Criticism*, p. 98. On the ‘unities’ of Aristotle, see Sect. 7 of Chap. 10 below.

recent theoreticians such as Booth, Rabinowitz and Riffaterre.³⁹ My use of the notion of passive synthesis will clarify in what sense texts are experienced as having parts and wholes, while indicating the limits of this way of conceptualizing reading.

The privileging of textual unity has, however, been challenged profoundly since at least the middle of the twentieth century, often as part of a wider critique of Western ‘metaphysical’ attitudes and of claims that the subject is transparent to itself. Theorists like Barthes, Hartman and Derrida, and from a different perspective, Bakhtin, have argued that the unity of a text is impossible or undesirable, and that it stands in the way of the text’s literary ‘readability’.⁴⁰ Such challenges often imply or present a critique of memory in its role for the constitution of the self, as a ‘subject’ allegedly transparent to itself. Emphases on memory being productive rather than merely reproductive are important to the case of reading as well. For if the remembered or described past is not seen as objectively available to consciousness, then the reader can also not be exhorted to take into account ‘the whole’ when reading ‘the part’, at least not without further ado. My investigations are located within this field of tensions, as I examine the nature and basis of reader experiences of textual unity, disunity and part-whole relations.

7 Active and Passive, Present and Past, Written and Oral

I begin the task of situating my project by drawing attention to a couple of conceptual oppositions on which my analyses rely, but which they also interrogate. The first of these is the contrast between acts and passivity, in particular the polarity between a singular act of reflection, experienced as occupying a specific moment in time, and an as-yet unreflected, unconscious or latent meaning-designate of passive synthesis. This distinction may look like it depends on prior unexamined oppositions between past and present, passive and active, and potential and actual. I will try to justify a sharp distinction of past from present, as experienced, in Sect. 1 of Chap. 16. As to the opposition between act and passivity, this will not emerge unqualified from my investigations, in that the notion of passive synthesis will lead

³⁹Of John of Garland’s six ‘vices to avoid in a poem’, most concern ‘incongruence’, which echoes Horace: ‘There are, then, six vices to avoid in a poem: The first is incongruous arrangement of parts, the second, incongruous digression from the subject; the third, obscure brevity; the fourth, incongruous variation of styles; the fifth, incongruous variation of subject matter; the sixth, an awkward ending.’ John of Garland, ‘Parisiana Poetria’, p. 652. For Alexander Pope, publishing his *Essay on Criticism* in 1711, ‘All comes united to th’ admiring Eyes’ (line 250). F. R. Leavis frequently raises unity in his criticism, as when speaking of ‘inconsistency of a kind that partly empties the theme of *The Portrait of a Lady* of moral substance’ (*Tradition*, p. 215), while for Frye, ‘understanding a poem literally means understanding the whole of it’ (*Anatomy*, p. 77). See also Booth, *Rhetoric*, p. 221, and Rabinowitz’s ‘rules of coherence’ (*Before Reading*). For Michael Riffaterre, the poem’s unity is what makes it poetic; see *Semiotics*, pp. 2–3, 4–6.

⁴⁰Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 20; Hartman, *Wilderness*, p. 32; Derrida, *Margins*, pp. 317–8. See also Sternberg, ‘Mimesis’; Allen, ‘Reading the Novel’; Rorty, ‘The Pragmatist’s Progress’; White, *Content*; and Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 81 (and see Sect. 4 of Chap. 9 below). For links to some ancient Jewish perspectives, see Handelman, *Slayers* and Stern, *Midrash*.

me to highlight some of the limits of the self-transparency of the human subject – limits which are as such encountered as part of the subject’s experience, including, as I said above, in reading. I will characterize the line that separates passive from active as constituted dynamically in the form of an interplay and an interpenetration, for example through the notions of re-reading and habituation. But my questioning of dominant metaphysical distinctions in Western discourse does not take the path of a thinker like Gilles Deleuze, whose very language blends the cognitive with the affective, the mental with the bodily, and the temporal with the material.⁴¹ And the most profound debt I owe to the metaphysical tradition is perhaps the distinction of the actual from the potential or possible, which will be a recurrent aspect of my account of the experience of experience.

A second set of contrasts is the separation of written from oral texts. In tune with the strong questioning of oppositional – ‘metaphysical’ – thinking, as championed by Derrida and others, but also at some distance from it, Michel de Certeau has drawn attention to the lack of symmetry in the opposition between ‘writing’, as a definitionally delimited concept, on the one hand, and orality on the other, as an unthought reservoir, foil or ground.⁴² I agree with this questioning, for example when the opposition is employed in reconstructions of a literary culture’s ‘oral’ past. Nevertheless, I distinguish a text being visually read, which constitutes my main topic, from a text that is being listened to, being shown in sign language, or becoming experienced in other ways. These different perceptive pathways cannot be assumed to leave unaffected how the experience of textuality constitutes itself, in particular in its temporal dimension.

Acts of clarification in which the reader articulates, from one temporal moment to the next, their previously lived-through, but latent, inchoate sense of a passage or a whole text, are likely to be common in all engaged modes of text reception, but take a specific form in the sighted reading of written texts. Their possibility and nature will concern me throughout this book.⁴³ I will conceptualize an act of reflection as a single temporal moment of thought that thematizes something *as* something,⁴⁴ but not as one whose significance is capable of being wholly transparent to the thinker in the same moment.⁴⁵ This makes experiences of being puzzled, of having to correct oneself and of being moved to re-read an earlier passage, important indicators of what constitutes text reading.⁴⁶

⁴¹ See notes 22 above and 31 in Chap. 2 below.

⁴² Certeau, *Practice*, p. 133. My pointers above (and elsewhere in this book) to the figure-ground distinction of Gestalt theory are deliberate: this theory resonates with non-foundationalist discourses, visible in the work of thinkers from Merleau-Ponty in *Perception* to Nancy in *Ground*.

⁴³ I will outline a ‘theory’ of the temporality which such acts embody in Sect. 1 of Chap. 16.

⁴⁴ For this formula of an act of ‘intentionality’, see Sect. 2 in Chap. 3 below; cp. also Sect. 1 of Chap. 9.

⁴⁵ Before Kant and Descartes, such a metaphysical position had already received a clear subjective turn in Augustine’s *De Trinitate* (X, Chap. 10, 14–16; Matthews/McKenna, pp. 55–57).

⁴⁶ For the principle of phenomenology here indicated, see notes 18 in Chap. 5 and 36 in Chap. 11 below, as well as Sect. 2 in Chap. 13.

8 The Historical Situatedness of This Investigation; Reading as a Practice Situated in the Species

How can one conceptualize appropriately the personal and historical situatedness of this investigation? Is what I say about reading and texts in this book meant to be transcending a particular reader, me, and a unique time and place – mine? From a certain perspective, the answer to this has to be ‘yes’. For one cannot experience and mean the results of one’s reflections on one’s experiences, their validity or evidentiality, other than in the form of a generalization *beyond* a specific, unique and idiosyncratically personal I, here and now. This is the case for reasons that phenomenology and other philosophical discourses have long tried to articulate, and I will return to those in the second Chapter. Reflective thought, including sceptical thought, is itself experienced as tying itself to patency, validity or evidentiality, that is, to implicit claims to intersubjectivity or generality which further reflection may reveal (or reveal and correct).⁴⁷

On the other hand, I do not assume my claims to be universal. A text can become meaningful to a particular reader only within a context, which crucially includes a particular language, and a selfhood. The person of the phenomenologist is no exception to this. So, while I cannot see my understanding of how reading works as if it were exclusively valid only to myself, phenomenological reflection also shows that any understanding of texts or how reading works must be grounded in a particular historical identity and context. In experiencing validity, I thus tacitly postulate the existence, at least in principle, of other ‘readers like me’, or more precisely, of ‘readers that are like me as I am in my current context’. This limitation is indeed what the current investigation postulates.

But what kind of boundary is drawn by the qualification ‘like me’ or ‘like me in my context’? How much and what kind of contextual difference is required for another reader’s experience not to be ‘like mine’ any more, so that what makes sense to me in a given text makes no sense or a different sense to them? Take, for instance, a modern Western reader’s likely inability to experience an ancient text which contains the factual pronouncement, ‘The sun orbits around the earth’, as meaningful in the ‘same’ way in which an educated ancient reader could have experienced it then, namely, as valid without giving that validity any thought.⁴⁸

Divergencies of meaning experiences among readers of the same text are obviously routine, for a great variety of reasons. At times, they seem to arise patently from differences between the situational contexts of readers (as in the example just given). So what would a difference in understanding a given text look like that

⁴⁷ See the discussion of this in Sect. 5 of Chap. 2 below.

⁴⁸ The way ‘factual’ claims receive their meaning from the discursive practices into which they are embedded (in a particular language), and in which they receive meaning from and give meaning to a society’s ‘ethical’ values, is examined with care by Bernard Williams in his *Limits*, pp. 141–146; on the first point, see also Quine, ‘Two Dogmas’, pp. 42–46, and in particular Kuhn, ‘Commensurability’, as well as note 34 of Chap. 15 below.

would indicate a fundamentally divergent experience of textuality, not just culturally different meaning experiences? The former would have to be an experience of textuality so different that it required an *entirely* different phenomenology of reading from the one here proposed.

Arguably, one cannot even experience meaning in a text (and in a language) without being part of *some* context that restricts the possibilities of the meaningful.⁴⁹ The fact that literate humans belong to the same biological species⁵⁰ does not yet touch on what is meaningful in a particular situation. The same goes for shared underlying physiological processes. Even if it should ever become possible to tie meaning experiences unambiguously to observable and specific organic changes in

⁴⁹Related to this question is that of the reader's prejudices and tradition, for which see Sect. 5 in Chap. 5 below. It may be of interest here to note that Terrence Deacon, in his reflections on how it might have come about that organisms used 'information' and 'interpretation', as these terms are employed in evolutionary biology, insists on the necessary connection to a context (or environment) in each case. He points out that the drying rate of a wet towel, considered without an observer who is pursuing some theme or purpose, could be potential information on many different themes, but constitutes no actual information without such an observer. This seems to be the counterpart in evolutionary theory to arguing, as I do above and at other points in this book, that a text, considered in isolation from all conceivable readerly contexts and thus purposes, has only the *potential* to be an item that carries meaning. Deacon interprets organisms of a certain minimal complexity as capable of being responsive to their environments according to evolutionary 'goals' (i.e., reproduction), and thus of 'interpreting' them. He contrasts this to towels drying or to mechanical feedback devices such as temperature sensors which do not 'interpret' anything. One might generalize this across texts and biology in the following way: organic or physical states (including the text as a material object, but also DNA) become interpretable or become information only if they are part of some *loop* of function or purpose, whether on the level of an organism (that is, without self-generated goals) or in a situation of reading. See Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, pp. 438–447. For an exploration of the parallel ways in which text meaning and genetic information depend on context, see Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, pp. 158–176; for an example of interpreting a machine (a set of coupled cellular automata) as imposing an 'interpretation' of an environment, see, Varela et al., *Embodied Mind*, pp. 151–157.

⁵⁰Two examples of a species-based, and thus universalizing, empirical approach to reading are Perfetti and Bolger, 'The Brain', who speak of the human brain being 'approximately universal' (p. 300); and, considerably older, Marshall, 'Cultural and Biological Context'. Cp. also Perfetti and Frishkoff, 'The Neural Bases' and Dehaene, *Brain*, who proposes a 'fringe brain plasticity' (as opposed to a wholesale plasticity) as a constraint on the range of cultural variations in higher brain functions, including language learning, writing systems and reading; see the summaries pp. 6–7 and 303–324. For a concrete example of extreme plasticity related to language competence, see Santoro, 'The Curious Hole in My Head'. Paul B. Armstrong attempts to apply notions of brain plasticity, such as Dehaene's, directly to the experience of learning (or not learning) to appreciate 'difficult' artistic music and literature, in *How Literature Plays*, pp. 37–53 and passim. Throughout his book, Armstrong provides helpful summaries of neuroscientific advances, e.g., pp. 103–111 on neurons firing, as well as addressing the historical versus evolutionary time scales, pp. 116–119. (I will return to Armstrong's work in Sect. 4 of Chap. 2.) For an example of the speed (48 h) with which the functionality of a region of the brain can change in response to a limb being constrained, see Newbold et al., 'Plasticity'.

the brain (e.g., ‘neural correlates’),⁵¹ such a ‘causal’ derivation would not begin to address the possibility of varied meaning experiences from texts.

So, if personally, structurally or contextually plausible divergencies of meaning experiences among readers of the same text are routine, are there nevertheless other kinds of divergencies that would be fundamental enough to remove from this picture, for example, the role of a synthesis of experience, or to indicate that reading does not arise from sense data received in acts of sense perception, or to negate the role of an interplay between latency or acuity? And if I encountered such a practice, would I even still recognize it as constituting the ‘reading’ of a ‘text’? All such terms are culturally situated, regardless how basic.

Despite these conceptual conundrums of situatedness, it may be useful to specify what domains of difference have the potential to point to radical divergencies in this way, according to my current context and experience. The following four come to mind: sensory pathways, reading practices, cultural-historical contexts and neurodiversity. (1) Contemporary possibilities for sensory pathways include sighted visual reading, Braille, listening to a text, watching sign language, employing lip reading or receiving signs by the Tadoma method, possibly others (see Chap. 3, Sect. 6). (2) There are a number of well-attested historical uses of texts that differ from the most widespread habits of reading today: habitually reading a text aloud versus reading silently,⁵² reading mainly in company⁵³ versus reading as a solitary activity, and encountering only a small number of re-read texts during a lifetime versus encountering a constant flow of new and diverse texts.⁵⁴ (3) Often discussed today are the contextual divergencies of culture, historical location, gender, class, race and economic or other power inequalities. (4) Finally, there are differences of bodily self

⁵¹ From the point of view of a ‘naturalizing’ phenomenology, Gallagher and Zahavi emphasize that the organic changes in the brain that synchronize and integrate signals are ‘dynamically unstable and will thus constantly and successively give rise to new assemblies...each emergence bifurcates from the previous ones in a way that is determined by its initial and boundary conditions. The preceding emergence is still present in (still has an effect on) the succeeding one as the trace of the dynamical trajectory (corresponding to *retention* on the phenomenological level)’; *Phenomenological Mind*, p. 81 (emphasis original). See note 47 in Chap. 2 for ‘neural correlates’.

⁵² For an overview of most of these differences, see Littau, *Theories of Reading*, pp., 13–22; cp. Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, pp. 175–176 and the critique in Chartier, *Order of Books*, pp. 17–18. The prevalence of silent reading in Western, in particular Greek and Roman, antiquity is the subject of some controversy. See McCutcheon, ‘Silent Reading’ for a recent treatment which assumes silent reading to have been quite common; see also Johnson, ‘Sociology of Reading’. Reading aloud as a standard practice is linked to the use in Western text transmission of *scriptio continua* by Saenger, *Space*. A passage in Augustine’s *Confessions* (6.3) which expresses surprise at St Ambrose’s habit of silent reading is often considered important to this discussion; see, for instance, Stock, *Augustine the Reader*, pp. 61–63; and cp. p. 289 note 99. See also Griffiths, *Religious Reading*, pp. 52–53 and *passim*, and Dagenais, *Ethics of Reading*, pp. 20–25; cp. note 16 of Chap. 15 below.

⁵³ For some empirical research on silent reading in social settings today, see Kuzmičová et al., ‘Reading and Company’, pp. 70–77; cp. Long, ‘Textual Interpretation’.

⁵⁴ I will return to some of the situational differences of reading practices in Sect. 4 of Chap. 15.