

The Word on the Street: Public Reading and Reading in Public

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Most of what literary critics like to describe, prescribe and circumscribe as reading has only a shingly kind of foothold in what most people most of the time think is happening when they do the thing they think of as reading. Symmetrically, most of what most people are doing when they perform the action, or undergo the experience, popularly understood as reading appears to be beneath the notice or beyond the ken of literary critics. What follows points to some striking and possibly formative changes in the landscape of noninstitutional reading that, like most forms of vernacular reading activity, appear to have gone unobserved within literary studies.

Reading is like thinking. We do it, purposively and systematically, without knowing exactly what it is we are doing or how we are doing it. Rather like thinking, most of our understanding of the process of reading is governed by fantasy-projection – things we assume we must be doing, or would like to think we may be doing, when we read. Like many fantasy-projections, this one is designed to ensure and secure the pleasing idea that reading is a rare and precious accomplishment, one that determines who and what we are. By looking at the kinds of radiation and diffraction which the act of reading has undergone over the last century or so, I want to be able plausibly to move the motion of a general ecology of reading, in being, in matter, in which we take part rather than necessarily making the pace.

Modern literature is acutely aware of the multiplication and dispersal of forms of reading across different kinds of scene and occasion. In large part, this is an uneasy response to the increasing prominence of advertising, though in fact this is itself part of a larger history of writing and reading in public, or visible proclamation, to which the modern word (dating in print from 1949) ‘signage’ economically refers. Signage, a word that seems to hint at alliance with terms like ‘foliage’, ‘garbage’ and ‘verbiage’ as well as more neutral terms like ‘carriage’, is the insistence of the visible letter in the public world. It is evoked by Dickens in the passage of *Bleak House* which reflects on what it must mean to be illiterate in a modern city:

It must be a strange state to be like Jo! To shuffle through the streets, unfamiliar with the shapes and in utter darkness as to the meaning, of those mysterious symbols, so abundant over the shops, and the corner of streets, and on the doors, and in the windows! To see people read, and to see people write, and to see the postmen deliver letters, and not to have the least idea of all that language – to be, to every scrap of it, stone blind and dumb! It must be very puzzling to see the good company going to the churches on Sundays, with their books in their hands, and to think (for perhaps Jo *does* think at odd times) what does it all mean, and if it means anything to anybody, how comes it that it means nothing to me? (Dickens 1972, 274)

Not to be able to make out meaning does not in the least mean not capable of meaning. Dickens recurs to the name of Jo for an example of a kind of elementary machine reading in *Great Expectations*, in which Joe Gargery's method of reading is to pick out delightedly the letters of his own name:

“Why, here's a J,” said Joe, “and a O equal to anythink! Here's a J and a O, Pip, and a J-O, Joe.” ... “Give me,” said Joe, “a good book, or a good newspaper, and sit me down afore a good fire, and I ask no better. Lord!” he continued, after rubbing his knees a little, “when you do come to a J and a O, and says you, ‘Here, at last, is a J-O, Joe,’ how interesting reading is!” (Dickens 2003, 45-6)

Dickens performs a somewhat similar action with the words ‘I am’ in the words that follow on little Jo's awareness of his unawareness, in a passage that in writing on Jo's behalf mimes the process whereby Jo is both subject of and subject to the words that read out loud his illegibility:

To be hustled, and jostled, and moved on; and really to feel that it would appear to be perfectly true that I have no business here, or there, or anywhere; and yet to be perplexed by the consideration that *I am* here somehow, too, and everybody overlooked me until I became the creature that I am! It must be a strange state, not merely to be told that I am scarcely human (as in the case of my offering myself for a witness), but to feel it of my own knowledge all my life! ... His whole material and immaterial life is wonderfully strange; his death, the strangest thing of all. (Dickens 1972, 274)

Bleak House appeared in the same year in which commercial toilet paper was first marketed in Britain. This seems emblematic in a number of ways. First of all, *Bleak House* is a novel in which paper and waste are closely associated, with its many sacks of mouldering, yet also smoulderingly incendiary bags of official documents. But, more importantly, it is a novel that seems to testify to the cheapness of paper, and the ubiquity of surfaces on which to sign and signal, along with the growing autonomy of those processes from the human subjects they hustled and jostled and kept in various kinds of motion. Literary writing shared those surfaces, with the advertisements for many kinds of commodity that were crammed into the spare spaces surrounding the text in the serial parts of nineteenth-century fiction. But the space of reading was also exteriorised. As Walter Bagehot remarked of Dickens's writing in 1858:

London is like a newspaper. Everything is there, and everything is disconnected. There is every kind of person in some houses; but there is no more connection between the houses than between the neighbours in the lists of “births, marriages, and deaths”. As we change from the broad leader to the squalid police report, we pass a corner and we are in a changed world. (Bagehot 1915, 3.84-5)

Bagehot sees London as pre-adapted to the ‘essentially irregular and unsymmetrical’ (Bagehot 1915, 3.79) constitution of Dickens's mind, which operates in ‘graphic scraps’ (Bagehot 1915, 3.80). The word ‘graphic’ aptly embodies the oscillation between iconicity and legibility of these outward and visible signs. Although ‘graphic’

refers as much to writing as to drawing, when *The Graphic* weekly newspaper first began to appear in 1869, the word referred to the fact that it was an illustrated paper, like the *Daily Graphic* that began publication in New York in 1873. The graphic space of London is both fragmented and impermanent; both businesses and the visible signs that announce them come and go overnight, as in the evocation in *Sketches by Boz*, of the draper's shop that suddenly springs into existence:

a handsome shop, fast approaching to a state of completion, and on the shutters were large bills, informing the public that it would shortly be opened with 'an extensive stock of linen-drapery and haberdashery.' It opened in due course; there was the name of the proprietor 'and Co.' in gilt letters, almost too dazzling to look at. (Dickens 1995, 81-2)

There is for Dickens often something hallucinatory and even alexic about the appearance of written letters, which hover, as they do for the two Jo's, between the condition of apprehension and comprehension, both faster and slower than reading, as for example in his memory of the sign on the door of a coffee house to which he resorted as a young child:

in the door there was an oval glass-plate, with COFFEE-ROOM painted on it, addressed towards the street. If I ever find myself in a very different kind of coffee-room now, but where there is such an inscription on glass, and read it backward on the wrong side MOOR-EEFFOC (as I often used to do then, in a dismal reverie), a shock goes through my blood. (Forster 1876, 1.29)

Events are sometimes described in Dickens's writing in terms of the ways in which they might be rendered in newspapers or public notices, like play-bills, as in the account of the spat between tipsy ladies in Seven Dials in *Sketches by Boz*: 'The scuffle became general, and terminates, in minor play-bill phraseology, with "arrival of the policemen, interior of the station-house, and impressive *dénouement*" ' (Dickens 1995, 93). It is during the nineteenth century that the word 'notice' starts to refer commonly not only to information or intelligence generally but more particularly to the written object that gives notice – 'notice-board' is recorded in print from 1819. The word that mediates between the document and the displayed notice in Victorian fiction is the word 'bill', which means a public advertisement, the notice of an account due and an item of the paper currency with which a bill might be paid. Its power simultaneously to arrest and make restless the attention is suggested by an episode involving the swindler Captain Wragge in Wilkie Collins's *No Name*:

A sudden parting of the crowd, near the second-class carriages, attracted the captain's curiosity. He pushed his way in; and found a decently-dressed man – assisted by a porter and a policeman – attempting to pick up some printed bills scattered from a paper parcel, which his frenzied fellow-passengers had knocked out of his hand.

Offering his assistance in this emergency, with the polite alacrity which marked his character, Captain Wragge observed the three startling words, 'Fifty Pounds Reward', printed in capital letters on the bills which he assisted in recovering; and instantly secreted one of them, to be more closely examined at the first convenient opportunity. As he crumpled up the bill in the palm of

his hand, his parti-coloured eyes fixed with hungry interest on the proprietor of the unlucky parcel. When a man happens not to be possessed of fifty pence in his own pocket, if his heart is in the right place, it bounds, if his mouth is properly constituted, it waters, at the sight of another man who carries about with him a printed offer of fifty pounds sterling, addressed to his fellow-creatures. (Collins 2004, 150)

The mode of reading involves a kind of modulation which is reversed in the scene from *No Name*, in which Captain Wragge first glimpses the words FIFTY POUNDS REWARD and then picks up the bill to read.

Every surface seems to become a support for inscriptions and items to be read. With the development of packaging from the early nineteenth century onwards and its growing convergence with information – advertisements and instructions for transmission or use, objects and their designations came more and more to be identified. Gerard Manley Hopkins provides a romantic gloss on this in his sonnet ‘As kingfishers catch fire’, which rapturously proclaims the capacity of natural objects to proclaim themselves. Each of them

finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.* (Hopkins 1970, 90)

Lewis Carroll’s two *Alice* books play with the growing tendency for every object in the world to bear a label, as in the jar promisingly labelled ‘ORANGE MARMALADE’ which Alice snatches from a shelf in her fall into the rabbit-hole, then tidily puts back on another shelf when it turns out to be empty, ‘for fear of killing somebody’ if she drops it (Carroll 1982, 18), or the bottle labelled ‘DRINK ME’ (Carroll 1982, 22). Labels and objects came closer together with increasing speed and density of transport. As David Trotter observes, travel by rail in particular seemed to turn travellers into parcels or postal objects. He quotes John Ruskin complaining in *Modern Painters* in 1856 that rail travel ‘is merely “being sent” to a place, and very little different from becoming a parcel; the next step to it would of course be telegraphic transport’ (Ruskin 1906, 311; Trotter 2013, 271)

Alice’s rail journey in *Through the Looking Glass* plays with the exchanges of language, luggage and logic. It is concerned with the question of direction, a word that means both where you are going and the verbal act by which you are despatched:

‘So young a child,’ said the gentleman sitting opposite to her (he was dressed in white paper), ‘ought to know which way she’s going, even if she doesn’t know her own name!’

A Goat, that was sitting next to the gentleman in white, shut his eyes and said in a loud voice, ‘She ought to know her way to the ticket-office, even if she doesn’t know her alphabet!’

There was a Beetle sitting next to the Goat (it was a very queer set of passengers altogether), and, as the rule seemed to be that they should all speak in turn, *he* went on with ‘She’ll have to go back from here as luggage!’

Alice couldn’t see who was sitting beyond the Beetle, but a hoarse voice spoke next. ‘Change engines –’ it said, and there it choked and was obliged to leave off.

‘It sounds like a horse,’ Alice thought to herself. And an extremely small voice, close to her ear, said, ‘You might make a joke on that—something about “horse” and “hoarse,” you know.’

Then a very gentle voice in the distance said, ‘She must be labelled “Lass, with care,” you know –’ (Carroll 1982, 165-6)

This is the beginning of what Michel Serres has identified as the appropriation of space through sign-pollution: just as the tiger marks his territory as his own by urinating on it, so we take possession of the world by drowning it in our visual noise:

On each mountain rock, each tree leaf, each agricultural plot of land, you have advertisements; letters are written on each blade of grass; the big name brands draw their giant images on the immense glaciers of the Himalaya. Like the legendary cathedral, the landscape is swallowed by the tsunami of signs. All species have vanished and we remain *alone in the world*, among ourselves. (Serres 2011, 70)

The sensitivity to the iconicity of script in the nineteenth century is suggested by the fact that it was in this century that graphology, the reading of the psychological signatures of written signs, was formalised, in particular in the work of Adolphe Desbarrolles and Jean-Hippolyte Michon, whose *Les Mystères de l’écriture* appeared in 1872. Sherlock Holmes, so adept a reader of every kind of physical and physiological signature, is also a believer in what a previous era might have called the doctrine of signatures, now applied literally to the interpretation of the look of letters in the analysis of character through handwriting, as indicated in an interchange with Watson early in *The Sign of Four*:

“What do you make of this fellow’s scribble?”

“It is legible and regular,” I answered. “A man of business habits and some force of character.”

Holmes shook his head.

“Look at his long letters,” he said. “They hardly rise above the common herd. That *d* might be an *a*, and that *l* an *e*. Men of character always differentiate their long letters, however illegibly they may write. There is vacillation in his *k*’s and self-esteem in his capitals. (Doyle 1981, 96)

The work of rapid association and transposition which this can effect is suggested by the stream of Leopold Bloom’s reflections in Joyce’s *Ulysses* on occasions for advertisements, prompted by seeing a sign reading ‘Kino’s 11/- Trousers’ on the side of a rowboat on the Liffey:

Because life is a stream. All kinds of places are good for ads. That quack doctor for the clap used to be stuck up in all the greenhouses. Never see it now. Strictly confidential. Dr Hy Franks. Didn't cost him a red like Maginni the dancing master self advertisement. Got fellows to stick them up or stick them up himself for that matter on the q. t. running in to loosen a button. Flybynight. Just the place too. POST NO BILLS. POST 110 PILLS. Some chap with a dose burning him. (Joyce 2008, 146)

The experience of modern life can come to be seen as a state of incessant address, a word which contains primary ideas of alignment, erection or setting upright, as when one dresses a piece of stone. The authority of the Times New Roman typeface, commissioned in 1929 from Stanley Morison, derives in large part from its imitation of the script incised on Trajan's triumphal column in Rome. The history of public proclamations depends upon the more or less enforced elevation of the eyes to what lies, not passively beneath one's gaze, but in front or above. Banners and placards are held above the head. It is not surprising that such proclamations should aspire to the greatest altitude of all, in the sky. Skywriting appeared for the first time on Derby Day 1922, when an aeroplane traced the words DAILY MAIL in the sky over Epsom, the feat being repeated the following day over Hyde Park and St Paul's. Advertising had moved into airspace long before this, with messages inscribed on balloons and airships, but this was the first attempt to use the imaginary space of the sky as an inscriptive surface. The feat was performed by Major Jack Savage, who had been a pilot with the Royal Naval Air Service during the War, and, by 1924, his air-advertising business would be employing seventeen pilots working across five countries (Taylor 2016, 755). This scene is much less well-known nowadays than its recapitulation in the opening chapter of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, in which an advertising aeroplane draws the gazes of pedestrians in London's West End:

Suddenly Mrs. Coates looked up into the sky. The sound of an aeroplane bored ominously into the ears of the crowd. There it was coming over the trees, letting out white smoke from behind, which curled and twisted, actually writing something! making letters in the sky! Every one looked up. (Woolf 1992, 16)

J. Hillis Miller articulates a common response to this scene, which sees the letters as furnishing a principle of continuity in an otherwise multiplied and unstable social world:

Such transitions seem to suggest that the solid existing things of the external world unify the minds of separate persons because, though each person is trapped in his or her own mind and in his or her own private responses to external objects, nevertheless these disparate minds can all have responses, however different they may be, to the same event, for example to an airplane's skywriting. To this extent at least we all dwell in one world. (Miller 1982, 180)

And yet, of course, the reverse is also true. Far from being among the 'solid existing things of the external world' that bind us into a common experience of the world, it was apparent to all that, as *The Times* assured its readers in 1922, 'aerial advertisements cannot be written in indelible smoke' ('Sky Writing By Aircraft', 1922,

5). The letters of the skywriting aeroplane are cryptic, intermittent and literally vapid, and brought to intelligibility only through the itself intermittent act of reading undertaken by its spectators:

Dropping dead down the aeroplane soared straight up, curved in a loop, raced, sank, rose, and whatever it did, wherever it went, out fluttered behind it a thick ruffled bar of white smoke which curled and wreathed upon the sky in letters. But what letters? A C was it? an E, then an L? Only for a moment did they lie still; then they moved and melted and were rubbed out up in the sky, and the aeroplane shot further away and again, in a fresh space of sky, began writing a K, an E, a Y perhaps?

“Glaxo,” said Mrs. Coates in a strained, awe-stricken voice, gazing straight up, and her baby, lying stiff and white in her arms, gazed straight up.

“Kreemo,” murmured Mrs. Bletchley, like a sleep-walker. (Woolf 1992, 16)

The letters written against the sky blur into it, just as the act of inscribing letters blurs into the other elements of the scene that this opening chapter of *Mrs Dalloway* assembles, notably the mysterious car moving through the London streets:

It had gone; it was behind the clouds. There was no sound. The clouds to which the letters E, G, or L had attached themselves moved freely, as if destined to cross from West to East on a mission of the greatest importance which would never be revealed, and yet certainly so it was – a mission of the greatest importance. (Woolf 1992, 17)

Mission, transmission, emission and omission melt smokily together, the process of making up and making out letters forming a sort of mobile, impermanent bond, gluey and fluid at once, like toffee perhaps, in the act of collective making-legible, collectivity and collegiality being etymological kin.

The message written on the sky in the inaugural act of skywriting DAILY MAIL was in fact a wholly phatic one, since the product it advertised was in fact a newspaper, which had already become the modern world’s most insistent vehicle for advertising messages. In its reporting of the event, the *Daily Mail* bragged that it was ‘the largest advertisement the world has ever known’ (‘Writing on the Sky’ 1922, 8). The message is accordingly here the medium, less a sign than a signature, the purpose of which is to signify its own making. This is made clear by the admiring account of the *Daily Mail* stunt published in the *Illustrated London News*, which produced a drawing of an imaginary display of the letters ‘ILN’ inscribed in smoke above the Houses of Parliament, along with a diagram of how the feat would be achieved (North 1999, 82-3). The inscription on the sky has the self-signifying quality that Michel Serres defines in the ‘here lies’ of the epitaph:

“Here lies” someone or other, a bandit, shepherd or king, earth in earth, ashes in black darkness, an autonomous or transposed ancestor, rapidly invisible since dissolved. What do his name, his quality, his lived body, his title – all endlessly substitutable – matter? For what lies, in fact, is the here ... The universality of being, scattered in space, densifies, compacts, or is formed here, in this singular or quasi-defective space. (Serres 2015, 192)

Our contemporary preoccupation with the spectacles of commodity means that most commentators on the skywriting passage in *Mrs Dalloway* neglect the menace that is associated with the aeroplane. Vincent Sherry, who observes the strong associations between the advertising aeroplane and the recently concluded war – one of the most engaged observers being the veteran Septimus Smith (Sherry 2003, 265) – is one of the exceptions, while Paul K. Saint-Amour goes further in seeing in the aeroplane’s ‘embodiment of illegible alterity’ the demand for ‘an imperiled aerial reading’ (Saint-Amour 2015, 115). In the screenplay for *Things to Come* H.G. Wells imagines the message ‘SURRENDER’ being written by aeroplanes in the sky (Wells 1935, 91). There is a long poetic history of making out battles in heaven in the form of cloud-masses; the aeronautical correspondent of *The Times* not only imagined the deployment of skywriting for propaganda purposes in war in 1922, he (presumably he) went as far as to suggest that not only would one be able to read the signs of combat in the air from smoke and vapour trails, there would be mechanical battles in and over those very signs:

[T]here can be no doubt that in the near future, generously developed, it might easily rival the tape-machine and wireless telegraphy for the dissemination of news. If one machine can write one or two words at an altitude of ten thousand feet, to be read by millions of people simultaneously, there is no reason why sentences should not be produced rapidly by a fleet of these machines ... From the spelling out of a single word, or a single sentence, it is easy to foresee the stage long messages will be written by cooperating machines. Already several experiments have been made with the Morse code, and the purposes to which, over sea or land in wartime, such a system of communication might be put are clearly apparent. One can imagine, too, the sort of aerial conflict that would arise when, if the operating machines were not successfully attacked, efforts would be made to blot out their messages with heavy smoke clouds. The writing of misleading orders would offer a fascinating occupation to the imaginative, and the possibilities of the use of smoke writing for propaganda purposes over the enemy’s lines would be considerable. (‘Sky-writing by Aircraft’ 1922, 5)

Where proponents of the art of skywriting emphasised its vast reach and legibility, the distinctive feature of Woolf’s rendering of the skywriting is the fact that it embodies meaning in emergence, construal rather than appearance. It recalls a number of other such literary acts of letter-by-letter making out. One is Malvolio’s reading of the letter he is deceived into thinking is from Olivia:

MALVOLIO: [*Takes up letter.*] By my life, this is my lady’s hand these be her very c’s, her u’s and her t’s and thus makes she her great p’s. It is, in contempt of question, her hand... [*Reads.*] *To the unknown beloved, this, and my good wishes.* Her very phrases! By your leave, wax. Soft – and the impressure her Lucrece, with which she uses to seal. ’Tis my lady. (Shakespeare 2.5.80; 2008, 242)

Another analogue is to be found in *Bleak House*, a novel that is full of forms of cryptic signature and spelling out, in the performance of writing by the illiterate but lexically-avaricious Krook:

Richard and Ada, and Miss Jellyby, and the little old lady had gone by him, and I was going when he touched me on the arm to stay me, and chalked the letter J upon the wall – in a very curious manner, beginning with the end of the letter and shaping it backward. It was a capital letter, not a printed one, but just such a letter as any clerk in Messrs Kenge and Carboy's office would have made.

'Can you read it?' he asked me with a keen glance.

'Surely,' said I. 'It's very plain.'

'What is it?'

'J.'

With another glance at me, and a glance at the door, he rubbed it out and turned an a in its place (not a capital letter this time), and said, 'What's that?'

I told him. He then rubbed that out and turned the letter r, and asked me the same question. He went on quickly until he had formed in the same curious manner, beginning at the ends and bottoms of the letters, the word JARNDYCE, without once leaving two letters on the wall together.

'What does that spell?' he asked me.

When I told him, he laughed. In the same odd way, yet with the same rapidity, he then produced singly, and rubbed out singly, the letters forming the words BLEAK HOUSE. These, in some astonishment, I also read; and he laughed again.

'Hi!' said the old man, laying aside the chalk, 'I have a turn for copying from memory, you see, miss, though I can neither read nor write.' (Dickens 1972, 106-7)

In an astonishing act of machine-writing and machine-reading, Krook writes out the name of the very novel he inhabits, using the very matter of letters of which he is made (and ultimately unmade). Krook's spelling-out alternates ostension and concealment, like the enigmatic words MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN inscribed on the wall during Belshazzar's Feast (Daniel 5.25). It is not so much signification as signalling, in the form in which it was adopted in Morse code and ouija boards alike. Public reading often involves this kind of cryptic insistence of the letter, which decomposes words into their written elements, making visible the material forms which must ordinarily be kept invisible, or rather unapparent, as they are 'read through' in the act of reading.

The fact that its central character is a canvasser of advertisements helps make Joyce's *Ulysses* as alive to the mobile materiality of writing as *Bleak House*, and nowhere more so than in the ambulant forms of the sandwichboard men advertising the stationer Hely's. As with the skywriting in *Mrs Dalloway*, the contingencies of city life threaten all the time to decompose the word that the marching men collectively compose:

A procession of whitesmocked sandwichmen marched slowly towards him along the gutter, scarlet sashes across their boards. Bargains. Like that priest they are this morning: we have sinned: we have suffered. He read the scarlet letters on their five tall white hats: H. E. L. Y. S. Wisdom Hely's. Y lagging behind drew a chunk of bread from under his foreboard, crammed it into his mouth and munched as he walked... He crossed Westmoreland street when apostrophe S had plodded by. (Joyce 2008, 147-8)

The apostrophe of public display always seems to involve some apotropaic averting (apostrophe and apotropaism both derive from ἀπό away + στρέφειν to turn) in its address, some conspicuous yet cryptic elision or illegibility amid the appearance. If this is a reading which resists or repels immediate understanding, it also, by that very token invites it, the text becoming a riddle or rebus which draws readers in, or draws viewing subjects into the act of reading and so into the condition of readers. The Skywriting Corporation established in 1923 in America by Allan J. Cameron and Leroy Van Patten launched a skywriting campaign for Lucky Strike cigarettes, inditing the slogan 'L S M F T' (Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco) across American skies. Reading here is not something you do exactly, so much as something done to, through or with you; the medium works by means of you. Bloom recognises the animating itch of curiosity in his idea for a writing-based advertising spectacle:

I suggested to him about a transparent showcart with two smart girls sitting inside writing letters, copybooks, envelopes, blotting paper. I bet that would have caught on. Smart girls writing something catch the eye at once. Everyone dying to know what she's writing. Get twenty of them round you if you stare at nothing. (Joyce 2008, 147)

Cars and aeroplanes are not the only means of vehiculating the word. Almost every device for putting things and persons in motion, trains, automobiles, escalators, and elevators, suggested new modes of display, advice, warning and instruction. Words could either occupy and stabilise the reading eye during transit or, with the development of ticker-tape displays and kinetic neon signs, could impart motion to writing and reading, in what Michael North has called 'a literal cinematography', or 'logocinema' (North 2005, 73, 66) The first road signs were milestones, which often, like epitaphs, encouraged the traveller to pause and reflect. With the development of road-markings in the early twentieth century, accompanying and regulating the growth of motor vehicles, the lines on the road came more and more to make it rather than merely mark it out.

Robbie Moore suggests that the stock-market ticker-tape produced a new reading practice, one that, however, could never quite be practised in any reading present:

The reader of the ticker looked for the relations between ticks, seeking not a discrete piece of information but a direction, a pattern. It was a reading practice which yearned towards the future, a reading practice whose ultimate goal was not to understand the message sent, but to anticipate the message yet to be sent. (Moore 2016, 138)

The reading machinery of public displays is anticipated and mirrored by the device known as ‘The Readies’ invented by Bob Brown in the early 1930s. Brown anticipates the dematerialisation of the word in contemporary reading devices, with his reading machine, which is essentially a device for scrolling words in a line across the visual field of a reader. His hope was that words might eventually be ‘recorded directly on the palpitating ether’ (Brown 1930, 40).

The word “readies” suggests to me a moving type spectacle, reading at the speed-rate of the day with the aid of a machine, a method of enjoying literature in a manner as up-to-date as the lively talkies. In selecting the “The Readies’ as title for what I have to say about modern reading and writing I hope to catch the reader in a receptive progressive mood. I ask him to forget for the moment the existing medievalism of the BOOK (God bless it, it’s staggering on its last leg and about to fall) as a conveyer of reading matter. I request the reader to fix his mental eye for a moment on the ever-present future and contemplate a reading machine which will revitalize his interest in the Optical Art of Writing. (Brown 1930, 27)

Brown promised that his machine would not only make traditional kinds of reading easier and more convenient, but would also help in the development of a new kind of reading. This would be a reading which would be purged of the implication of soliloquy or subvocal sonority. The dedication of Brown’s 1930 book *The Readies* is ‘TO ALL EYE-WRITERS AND ALL READERS WHO WANT AN EYEFUL’ (Brown 1930, n.p.), and Brown proposed a model of the unreeling tape to replace that of the interior monologue:

Why wasn’t there a man-made machine like the running tape-of-thought device in the mind which would carry words endlessly to all reading eyes in one unbroken line, a reading machine as rapid and refreshing as thought, to take the place of the antiquated word-dribbling book? (Brown 1931, 168)

Brown’s optical reading may be regarded as the obverse or even adversary of the epitaph-like close reading being developed in Cambridge as a remedy for the superficiality and automatism of mass media. For the kind of reading that was made both possible and necessary by Brown’s Reading Machine starts to erode the idea of reading as an action consciously performed by a reader on an object. Rather, it resembles the automatic reading with which Gertrude Stein experimented when a psychology student at Harvard (Solomons and Stein 1896). ‘I was almost a book myself’, wrote Bob Brown (Brown 1931, 154). The avant-garde and experimental texts that Brown assembled as specimens for his reading machine seem in some sense closely entrained with the diffractive and distractive yet curiously insistent reading practices made common in the modern world. Indeed, Brown makes the connection explicit between his mooted reading machine, and the avant-garde experiences of text in motion it stimulated, and these newly-familiar reading experiences:

We are familiar with news and advertisements reeling off before our eyes in huge illuminated letters from the [t]ops of corner buildings, and smaller

propaganda machines tick off tales of commercial prowess before our eyes in shop windows. All that is needed is to bring these electric street signs down to the ground, move the show-window reading device into the library, living and bed-rooms by reducing the size of the letter photographically and refining it to the need of an intimate, handy portable, rapid reading conveyor. (Brown 1930, 33)

One of the most important symptoms and outcomes of the intensification of public reading has been the increase in sensitivity to the effect of typefaces. In the first centuries of printing, the varieties of typeface were very limited and slow to evolve, meaning that their materiality had little chance to mingle with and inflect meaning and response. The explosion and prodigious variability of typographic form during the twentieth century, and especially in the era of word-processing, which made different fonts and faces easily available to writers as well as readers, has produced something like a psychotypographic complex among readers, allowing the look of letters has come to be ever more constitutive of their meaning, tonality and effect.

Perhaps the most important and intense psychotypographic force is wielded, not by any particular typeface, but by what is known, from the arrangement of the compositor's box, as the upper case. Majuscule, or capital letters were stored in the upper case because they were needed much less often than lower case letters, on a ratio of around 1 to 5, and their meaning derives in part from this relative rarity. Capitals break into the continuity of words, to signify the structural as well as semantic functions of language. They mark the beginnings of sentences, and therefore express the sense or force of sense, the *haec*, *hic* and *nunc* of signification, as well as signifying certain kinds of special importance, above all religious, but also political and social. That is, like Serres's *here lies*, they signify the fact of signification itself. When used on their own, capitals signify the imperative and the imperious, embodying urgency, prerogative and demand. Capitals are seldom cursive, and can usually be constructed through a combination of straight lines, vertical, horizontal and diagonal. As such, and given the fact that they are much easier to engrave than cursive letter-forms, they suggest both the monumental, the impersonal and the mechanical. Only the most skilful or vainglorious pilot would ever attempt copperplate skywriting, or a seriffed font. Capitals suggest both the power needed to overcome the resistance of stone and the cruelty of that which may be incised into flesh, as in the capitals seared simultaneously into the text of Samuel Beckett's *How It Is* along and into the helpless posterior of Pim. The names of corporations and institutions are formed from acronymic sequences of capital letters. The force of capital letters actually resists and decomposes word formation, as suggested by the punitive or domineering function of certain capital letters, like Nathaniel Hawthorne's scarlet A, Pauline Réage's subordinated O, or Fritz Lang's and Ian Fleming's M, or the power encoded in words like H-bomb or G-spot. Where magical rituals employ writing, they will usually be in the form of capital letters, which allow and demand what we call 'spelling out'.

Because they signify this impersonal and mechanical power of signification, capitals have a particular attraction for those susceptible to word-magic, like psychotics,

visionaries, stroke victims and poets. Most of us understand well enough that you should only open an email the subject-line of which is typed in capitals if you are an aficionado of death threats and paranoid ravings. In that the upper case signifies the abstractly public and perhaps machine-like dimensions of language – Lacan's 'big Other' (Lacan 1991, 236) – this represents the attempt to make private and public utterance, declaration and inscription, blend. The effacement of capitals, by contrast, and especially the demotion of the most commanding capital of all, the I, enacts informality, vulnerable sensitivity, expressive spontaneity and democratic nondomination.

The capital letter is an emblem of the capitality of the letter as such, the autonomous power of the glyphic that comes from its power to constitute and exceed its occasion, a capitalisation founded on decapitation. We live in an era of machine-reading, in which we have not only taught machines to read, but learned to read more and more of the mechanism of our own reading. The visual clamour of the world, whether on the street or in the wilderness, breaks in constantly on the Hieronymic seclusion of the reader, sunk in his book, myopically averting the world's advertisement, lions, scorpions, dancing girls. For now, in a world in which there is only code, the world itself appears to be engaged in the work of attention-theft, reading itself out loud:

Things are also symbols. There is more than chemistry in chemistry. Why does this element react or not in the presence of some other element? Why does it choose it in this way? What 'faculty' in it makes election? Large masses write, molecules read. And, even more than inert matter, living matter writes, reads, decides, chooses, reacts – one would have thought it long endowed with intentions. An hour of biochemistry will quickly persuade one of the refined shrewdness of proteins. (Serres 2003, 73; my translation)

In this perspective, our own modes of reading, and our reading of our own acts of reading, may seem more than ever a kind of dialect, constituting the 'mediation between the world and the world' (Serres 2003, 70; my translation), the way, or a way, for the world to read itself into being.

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