

The Encounter Between Reader and Text*

Reviewed by
David Dillon
The University of Alberta



*Margaret Hunsberger.
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What is it like to read? That is the very basic, yet almost unexplored question which Hunsberger has tackled in this outstanding dissertation. She describes reading by turning to the experience of reading itself: the reading experiences of philosophers and literary critics, of poets and novelists, of a number of her friends and colleagues whom she felt were avid and able readers, and, of course, of herself as a reader. She listened to these various voices, felt with them, and distilled from them what she considered to be the essence of the human experience of reading. She speaks—descriptively, experientially—with one voice, as Everyman the reader.

So what *is* it like to read? The overriding metaphor which emerges throughout her study is that the reading experience is like an encounter between persons, an ensuing dialogue between partners which gradually builds shared meaning between them. We and the text begin as strangers, but the potential is there for acquaintance, friendship, perhaps even intimacy. That potential is realized, however, only if we and the text open ourselves freely to honest awareness and expression of our feelings, new ideas, other perspectives, further questions. That is, if we take the risk of making ourselves vulnerable to each other. If that happens, a dialogue begins.

Dialogue is more than simple turn-taking at speaking but is characterized rather by speaking in a listening way and listening in a speaking way (more specific to Hunsber's study, reading in a writing way and writing in a reading way). We build understanding gradually through dialogue, not linearly and sequentially from beginning to end, but rather like a circle or spiral. We build new levels of meaning and explicate old ones by dialoguing with the text, others, and myself. The circle of understanding, while complete, is also never-ending, leading to new questions, new insights for as long as we wish to pursue it.

If the dialogue flourishes in this way, the powerful result can be greater awareness and knowledge of self on the part of the reader and, simultaneously, a revelation of true self to the text. This vulnerable revelation of self, to someone who does not turn away from it and has revealed self to us, satisfies us and alleviates our existential aloneness by achieving some intimacy with the text and with our fellow humans. Once we have made friends with texts, we may introduce some of them to other people we know and whom we think will like them; we may think about them when we are away from them; we may visit them again (rereading)—all of which can lead to further dialogue and building of deeper understanding.

Our experience of time, our body, and its surroundings can vary with different books as it does with different people. At times, we get so absorbed, "lost," in a book that we lose sense of time, our body, and what's around us. At other times, we are painfully aware of them. Time drags, we get tired of sitting, we are distracted by things around us.

While this experience which Hunsberger describes is possible in the face-to-face encounters in our daily lives, it seems not to happen to us very often. It is more likely to happen in the privacy of a book. Perhaps because the book takes the first step to openness, perhaps because the book does not hurt us when we are vulnerable. Is this why we are driven so to reading, why we hunger for it so much, why we become so absorbed or "lost" in books, namely, that it satisfies such a basic human need in us that is possible, yet difficult, to fulfill in our face-to-face encounters with others.

An important point to note is that, although Hunsberger was exploring the reading experience generally, many of her sources, especially her discussants, referred frequently to the reading of *literature* rather than the reading of signs, ads, street names, etc. The novel, story, or poem seems to be a very special type of discourse for us humans which facilitates dialogue, self-discovery, intimacy. It feeds our imagination, nourishes our spiritual life, allows us to transcend ourselves here and now.

The study is a truly significant one in several regards. I am afraid there is some danger at first glance of concluding that the study merely confirms (through a different methodology) things that we had already known through the fields of cognitive psychology or literary criticism, particularly since those fields served as some of her sources. However, the nature of Hunsberger's question is different from the rationalist questions asked by those fields—and the answers provided by them. By putting a human face on the experience, Hunsberger has helped us to know it in a different way. For example, a cognitive psychologist can tell us that humans seek to make sense of their world, through a hypothesis-generating and -testing procedure which sounds simple and clear-cut. Hunsberger, on the other hand, can tell us that we are "driven" to make sense, "desperate" for an integrated whole, and that we struggle towards it in a messy process which is paradoxically complete, yet never complete. Rather than acquiring reified, arms-length knowledge, we experience holistically an understanding of "what it's like." As readers we are part of her "findings."

Secondly, the study tends to break down many of the dichotomies created by a rationalist way of knowing, healing many of those wounds and recreating for many of us who see with rationalist eyes the seamless world of our daily experience. Included are those dichotomies between listening and speaking and reading and writing; those between stages of knowing; and those between various disciplines, such as philosophy, literary criticism, cognitive psychology, humanistic psychology, and literature itself. She has achieved this same wholeness in the writing of her report, no mean accomplishment given her need to create chapters and chapter parts and to present them sequentially to a reader. My experience of reading Hunsberger's study was like examining a piece of sculpture with its creator. As we walked around it, we talked and discussed various aspects of the sculpture (chapters) but always in the context of the whole piece. It was like examining the whole each time, but

from a different perspective, thus knowing the whole more completely each time, although I had known it completely before I came to each new chapter or chapter section.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the study itself—or rather the reading of it—embodies the content of the study. We experience what we read about. It invites dialogue on our part. Our understanding gradually deepens, spiral-like, particularly by talking with others about it and re-reading it. We become lost in it at times. We come to know ourselves and Margaret Hunsberger and share intimacy and understanding with her. This effect is more than just a serendipitous occurrence or cute twist, but actually the ultimate validation of the study. Only if the experience described rings true for the human readers of the study is it valid. Although I was one of Hunsberg's discussants, most of whose interviews were quoted extensively (under pseudonyms) throughout the text, it was very difficult to tell which of those quotes were mine since so many sounded like things I might have said or could have said. The word had truly become flesh in me.

My only regret with the study is that it shifts occasionally from a descriptive into an explanatory mode, but that shift detracts little from what Hunsberger has accomplished. The educator who reads the study may also be somewhat frustrated with its seemingly off-handed, random and open-ended treatment of the implications for the teaching of reading contained in the insights provided by the study. Yet Hunsberger is not attempting to draw technical or methodological implications for others (a rationalist, not an existential concept). You will need to discover how this insight affects your work as an educator. I hope that even this short review has prompted you to begin a dialogue for that discovery. For that is how it should be.