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New perspectives on reading: an introduction

Heta Pyrhönen

In Aleksis Kivi's novel *Seven Brothers* (1870), the cornerstone of Finnish literature, there is an early scene in which the seven brothers are in the local sexton's house, trying to learn to read. In nineteenth-century Finland, literacy provided entry to adult life, for if one did not know how to read and could not recite the smaller catechism by heart, one was not allowed to marry. After two days, the going is still rough for the brothers:

At a table in the main room of the sexton's house sit the brothers, mouthing the alphabet as it is repeated to them by the sexton or his little eight-year-old daughter. Open ABC books in their hands, sweat standing out on their brows, they pore over their lessons. But only five of the Jukola brothers are to be seen on the bench by the table. Where are Juhani and Timo? There they stand in the corner of shame near the door, their hair still tousled from the grasp of the sexton's strong hand. (Kivi 43)

The brothers are so humiliated by having a small girl teach them and so incensed by the sexton's rough treatment that they escape from his house through a window. It takes them a couple of tumultuous years before they are ready to apply themselves to this task again. Eventually, each of them learns to read. They can make sense of the Bible and, perhaps more importantly, read the newspapers, thus staying abreast of what is going on in the world. The youngest and smartest of the lot even makes himself a career in journalism.

There is, of course, a long way to go from learning the technical skills of reading to reading literature. In contemporary western world, the cares of these seven bull-headed young men seem remote. With near universal literacy, reading does not seem to pose any problems. Yet on a closer look, there are intriguing similarities and convergences between then and now. It is a truism that literature does not exist unless there is someone who reads it. We are used to thinking of reading as a meeting of text and reader. We are familiar with debates about which of the two dominates this encounter: do the embedded reception structures, conceptualized as, for example, the distinction between authorial and narrative audiences, guide the reader's response? Or is reading primarily steered by reading strategies that are institutionally formed? New dimensions were added to this debate, however, when it was realized that reading is not simply a matter of relating content to form, but also responds to a text's materiality. Juhani, the eldest of the brothers in Kivi's novel, squeezes the ABC book in his hands, as if trying to force its offering physically into his head. We tend to think of reading as a purely mental activity, while, for example, in the eighteenth century when reading started to catch on more widely, it was primarily regarded as involving the body. In Karin Littau's words, reading brings together two bodies, 'one made of paper and ink, the other of flesh and blood' (Littau 37). The covers, the quality of paper, the fonts and layouts of books affect our reading. This physical dimension was better recognized in earlier times, when reading aloud was a common practice. The seven brothers read aloud, as if the sound of the voice helped them to catch on faster to the tricks of reading. Indeed, sensing the voice reverberate in the chest emphasizes the physical nature of reading.

Today, the growing awareness of its physicality involves a heightened perception of the effects of reading. Besides whetting our imaginations and challenging our intellect, reading affects our emotions. It supplies not only occasions for interpretation but also opportunities for feeling. Reading may excite us, make us weep, make us angry and anxious, or soothe us. It is because reading moves us in many ways that we find it pleasurable – or even painful. An important realization garnered from discussions and debates about reading concerns the fact that reading is historically variable, and physically as well as emotionally conditioned.

In his *Bring on the Books for Everyone*, Jim Collins places the renewed interest in questions relating to reading within the current cultural context. These issues, he argues, cannot be adequately discussed by referring solely to the triad of author, text and reader. Never before have

so many people learnt how to read. Project Gutenberg's digital versions of over 50,000 public-domain books and Google's venture to digitize the libraries of five research universities are examples of the unprecedented availability of books to these readers. New delivery systems such as Amazon, and blockbuster film adaptations of both classics and high literary fiction, as well as numerous book clubs, book sites, internet chat rooms and reading apps shape the contexts and expectations of readers. There are new agents on the scene such as bloggers, who have usurped much of the authority that literary critics and academics used to have as gatekeepers of literary value and acceptable modes of reading (Collins, *Bring on the Books* 2, 4, 7, 9).

Hence, Collins emphasizes that what is needed today is 'a redefinition of what literary reading means within the heart of electronic culture' (*Bring on the Books* 3). This redefinition targets all the key areas of reading: who reads, how we read, what we read as well as where we read (4). We should add 'why' – the reasons and goals of reading – to this list. In this context, it is worth noticing that such scholars as Collins and Rita Felski point to the rich variety of so-called ordinary or lay readers in their urge to academic scholars to rethink reading. Do we have an accurate picture of the rationales and goals of lay reading? Moreover, academic readers are also lay readers, which reminds us of the fact that one's roles may be multiple and overlapping while reading. Felski emphasizes that reading is much more varied, complex, and often also unpredictable than literary theory has hitherto acknowledged (Felski 136). We could learn valuable lessons, not only about reading but also about literary works, by being more open minded about the diverse goals and conventions of reading. After all, reading for pleasure and reading for study, for example, are shaped by different strategies.

Reading difficult texts

Reading Today reflects some of the issues raised by the current contexts of reading. The first group of chapters tackles what may be characterized as a rather traditional set of questions, in that it considers features that make reading difficult. The seven brothers' difficulties result not only from having to learn the alphabet and string letters together to form sensible words and sentences, but also from the demanding nature of the text. The diction and style of the smaller catechism was not familiar to Finnish peasants even though it was written in their native tongue. Moreover, the ethical teaching that the catechism provided was both

ideationally and conceptually demanding. Like all readers, the brothers encounter unfamiliar worlds, strange expressions and wilfully distorted forms that make even the most skilful readers pause and fret. They have to labour hard in order to sketch the new perspectives the text provides, learning simultaneously how to create a world mediated by language. Complex textual passages make us aware that reading is a matter of both comprehension and interpretation. They may tax us with ambiguous words, imprecise syntax, contradictions between what the text says and what it does. As Jonathan Culler points out, when we read literature the task, then, is not primarily to resolve these stumbling blocks in the way of reading. Instead, such purposefully complex passages or even whole books call on us to ponder what tactics and techniques we should resort to while reading in order to deal with challenges to our understanding and interpretation. Culler characterizes this response as directing attention to 'how meaning is produced or conveyed, to what sorts of literary and rhetorical strategies and techniques are deployed to achieve what the reader takes to be the effects of the work or passage. Thus it involves poetics as much as hermeneutics' (Culler 22).

Most obviously, various types of experimental fiction whose goal is to explore and break against the boundaries of conventions provide ample examples in light of which to examine the question of reading challenging texts. By definition, experimental literature complicates reading by refusing to fit to the familiar, the conventional and the already known and, for example, by defying attempts to make it yield a narrative. In these ways, it purposefully makes access cumbersome. Typically, the academic study of reading has found such texts particularly rewarding. In the first chapter, Natalya Bekhta considers cases that verge partly or wholly on the unreadable – at least, on first reading. By impeding sense-making and interpretation, these cases compel readers to consider not only what accounts for unreadability but also how it can be overcome. Such texts require careful and innovative rereading in order for readers to be able to devise new reading strategies that fit and do justice to the difficulties the texts present. Thus, a suitable (re)reading in this instance refers to safeguarding purposefully the text's strangeness as well as finding pleasure and meaning, for example, in affective responses. Whatever strategy a reader comes up with, the upshot is that readers are ingenious in finding modes and strategies that respect that which is challenging, yet nevertheless find ways to deal with it in a meaningful way. Hence, texts that appear unreadable do not usually remain in this state.

A demonstration of what reading a contemporary experimental novel may require follows, as Laura Piippo tackles *Neuromaani*, a

non-linear, rhizomatic text that cannot be read in a sequential manner. Instead, readers are forced to make choices about their reading paths, many of which lead either to a dead end or to a character's death. During reading, they are made to turn the book around in their hands, as well as skip and skim its pages. One set of instructions would even lead to making the novel physically unreadable by drilling a hole in it and tying it up. Piippo concludes that a fitting reading strategy is a materialist one that pays attention to this book's material being, such as its covers and the way they feel. From there, attention moves to narrative materials that are linked with the book's cultural-historical context. Having to handle the book physically as well as struggling with reading produces affections, various bodily states in the reader as a response to reading. Hence, books such as *Neuromaani* compel us to approach reading as an integrated, holistic experience.

Vesa Kyllönen and Juha-Pekka Kilpiö meet the challenges of reading from specified angles. A major incentive to reading fiction is learning about new things such as unfamiliar worlds, historical eras, remote cultures and so on. What happens when novelists intentionally cram their books with information about virtually everything? What becomes of the role of knowledge in reading when there is simply too much information for anyone to process? Kyllönen probes the functions of such excesses in contemporary encyclopedic novels that strive to be about every conceivable thing. With this genre, readers encounter the challenge of handling what he calls an overheated system, an illusion of the totality of knowledge. By tracing and imitating the strategies characters use in handling information, readers may form a sense of specific structures organizing its overflow. Readers part ways with characters, however, in learning to see the artificial and local nature of all such structures. Hence, all attempts in encyclopedic novels to control the abundance of information, not to speak of mastering it, are bound to remain chimeric.

For his part, Kilpiö focuses on what he terms *kinekphrasis*, a particular form of intermediality that deals with verbal representations of cinema and any form of moving pictures in literature. By discussing Mark Z. Danielewski's *The House of Leaves*, Kilpiö suggests that we relate what Espen Aarseth calls textonomy, an examination of how a book functions, to textology, a study of how different media are discussed in the discourse as well as the kinds of meanings these media are assigned. Kilpiö, too, uses the characters' explorations as cues to what the novel's readers are doing while trying to interpret the layered commentaries and metatexts. He concludes that the discourse

among various medialities provides the weightiest nexus to reading such books as Danielewski's.

Reading in contemporary multimedia environments

Let us now briefly return to the seven brothers' difficulties in learning to read that resonate with the contemporary situation. Part of their humiliation stems from the fact that the sexton's eight-year-old daughter teaches grown men to read. Many readers today face a similar situation of having to ask for help from their children or teenagers in order to learn to read in contemporary multimedia environments. A host of new challenges has emerged, thanks to changing reading habits required by these environments. New technologies have created new platforms on which to read: we have desktops, laptops, e-readers (Kindle), tablets (iPad) and handheld devices (phones, iPod Touch). By presenting the content in the age-old familiar format of the page, a rectangular surface with a limited amount of information and accessed in a particular order, they appear to provide a similar reading experience to that of a book (Manovich 73). Yet these platforms also add new dimensions to the page format. For example, the graphical user interface presents information in overlapping windows stacked behind one another. This organization resembles a set of book pages, but the user-reader can not only go back and forth between pages but also scroll through individual pages. Consequently, the traditional page turns into a virtual one that is managed by scrolling up and down in a window (Manovich 74). One must learn how to manage these devices, which offer all kinds of possibilities. Many books combine different media that require skills of clicking, tapping, mousing and navigating in a vast media environment. Further, one can now adjust the text's font or the brightness of its background; while reading, one may immediately look up strange words in a dictionary or search for intertextual or intermedial allusions in the web. Lev Manovich observes that the inclusion of hyperlinks in the computer page format defies familiar notions of hierarchy, because the various sources connected through hyperlinks have equal weight. He argues that this innovation has had two significant consequences. It reflects the contemporary suspicion of all hierarchies, favouring the aesthetics of collage, and it 'flattens' the reading experience. This flattening effect arises directly from the lack of hierarchy, as individual texts infinitely lead to other texts with no particular order (Manovich 76–7).

This general sense of flatness may have invited a questioning of the symptomatic model of reading, associated with both ideological critique and psychoanalysis. This symptomatic practice seeks a latent meaning behind a manifest one, for it holds that a text's meaning lies in what it does not, cannot, or ought not say. It is the task of reading to dig up these signifying layers that constitute the text's 'true' meaning. In this view, the textual surface is not thought to require close examination; therefore, it is seen as superficial and deceptive (Best and Marcus 4). Yet what is called surface reading pays attention to what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible and not hidden or hiding in texts. It looks *at* the surface instead of looking through it. It insists that reading tactics bent on problematizing, interrogating and subverting texts have completely forgotten the complexities of literary surfaces. Surface reading thus treats, for example, the textual surface as materiality, as hosting complex verbal structures of literary language, as evoking affects, and as enabling critical descriptions of what a text actually says about itself (Best and Marcus 9–13). Thanks to its rejection of the depth hermeneutic, it takes texts at face value, focusing on what is said literally. To use Sharon Marcus's example, when female friendships in Victorian novels are not read as a veil for forbidden lesbian desire, one notices that these relationships frequently remain central even after the protagonists' marriage. Hence, letting friendship mean friendship highlights visible features in these novels that symptomatic reading has paradoxically made invisible (Best and Marcus 12).

The new reading devices raise questions about their effects. Apparently, reading on an electronic platform differs from reading a hard copy. Do its material properties require a new reading strategy? One solution has been to distinguish between deep or slow and quick reading strategies that consider the specific goals of reading. Slow reading is related to the New Critical practice of close reading that lingers over textual details and analyses form and structure, as well as constructing and negotiating meanings. Scholars such as John Miedema and Tom Newkirk observe that this practice, however, also refers to the deliberately unhurried pace of reading as an antidote to the skimming, skipping and click-and-go strategies associated with quick reading. The latter is typically linked with electronic reading platforms. Whereas quick reading does not aim to retain the content of reading in long-term memory, slow reading, in contrast, may even be considered a type of meditative exercise.

Undoubtedly, the nature of reading expands when we are reading on a platform that enables the download and playing of literature, films, television programmes and songs from the same sites and on the

same device. Reading becomes a new kind of activity when it is combined with intermediality – with viewing and listening. Anna Weigel and Matti Kangaskoski, in their respective chapters, use examples of works existing in printed and electronic versions in order to compare how reading a printed text differs from reading the same text on an electronic device, such as a tablet or a smartphone. Weigel focuses on transmedial and interactive literature featuring complementary music, interviews, pictures and film trailers that readers access via a specially designed app. Although print and electronic versions convey the same narrative, they do not provide the same reading experience, she concludes. Transmedia storytelling requires us to broaden the concept of the narrative text, as its auditive and (moving) pictorial elements interrupt and even disturb the reading experience. These same elements, however, also deepen our understanding of the story world as well as enabling a rounded emotional involvement.

Kangaskoski emphasizes the different reading strategies required by print and digital texts. The conventional reading tactic of following a linear, preorganized sequence that can be applied to the print version of Stephanie Strickland's *V* cannot profitably be applied to its digital version. Given the fact that the latter makes possible an astronomical number of possible combinations and reading trajectories, reading cannot but trace each reader's unique, individual path. Consequently, reading becomes a playful putting together of subjective and personal collages that possibly no other reader ever assembles. This strategy is becoming increasingly familiar from what Collins calls play-list culture ('Use of Narrativity' 654), which prizes an individual reader's choices as a means of identity formation as well as expressions of the self.

Self-recognition in reading

Seven Brothers reminds us of the fact that reading has been thought of as having nutritional value: the Bible, as the primary reading matter, was held to nourish both body and soul. Even if we no longer entertain such religious views, we nevertheless tend to hold on to the idea that reading has remarkable positive effects on us. It expands our horizons by allowing us to experience lives beyond our own, to see what the world looks like from other points of view and to watch characters who are not us but who resemble us (Schwarz 13–15). Harold Bloom reminds us that the fundamental goal of reading is the development of the self. In his view, reading is the most healing of pleasures because the mind

is expanded, not anaesthetized. As Daniel Schwarz remarks, reading calls upon us to respond fully, with every dimension of our being (15). Felski concurs, observing that literary theory offers few tools for exploring lay readers' experience and has difficulties conceding that literature may be valued for different, even incommensurable reasons. Readers frequently feel accosted by books: they have a sense of being 'addressed, summoned, called to account' whenever they see aspects of themselves in the text they are reading. Such an experience may be evoked by characters, specific situations, questions and challenges these characters face, the emotions events evoke, styles of diction, and so on. These passages provide moments of recognition, when readers appreciate something that is deeply familiar to them yet realize its simultaneous strangeness, for they see it from a new point of view. Literary texts provide them with different personas, perspectives and vocabularies to help them examine and ponder themselves. What was perhaps a diffuse intimation or a vague sensation becomes visible and acquires a distinct shape during reading. Hence, reading becomes a means of gaining better self-knowledge.

Achieving a better-tuned sense of self is but one benefit, however, for often the experience of recognizing oneself in a book involves the feeling of being included in a community of like-minded creatures. Therefore, recognition often provides comfort as well as alleviating loneliness. Collins links these views to the current understanding of reading as a form of self-transformation. Among the goals of reading today is the endeavour of shaping the self so that one becomes, as it were, 'truer' and 'closer' to oneself. In fact, for many readers it has a real therapeutic element that helps them to deal with all kinds of personal issues. Consequently, reading is transformed into a form of self-help (Collins, *Bring on the Books* 10–11).

Yet, as Felski points out, the significance of reading cannot be reduced to address readers only as individuals. Having the validity of one's experience acknowledged invites readers to engage in social diagnosis and ethical judgement as well, as, for example, postcolonial literature has amply shown. The sense of affiliation created through reading makes groups and communities visible, gives them a voice, and enables them to participate in sociocultural and political debates through literature.

Stefano Rossoni, Vappu Kannas, Serena Cacchioli and Ryanne Keltjens take on such issues as these in their chapters. Rossoni discusses how two famous readers, Don Quixote and Madame Bovary, problematize reading through their intense efforts to interpret the world around

them. Their misguided activity enables readers of these novels to probe the textual strategies through which narrative shapes the sense of our lives as well as providing access to our emotions. In spite of their delusions (or perhaps thanks to being delusional?) these two characters nevertheless carve out a space of freedom in their reading that, Rossoni argues, is a location of sensuality and pleasure. Therefore, these two figures probe the affective effects of reading.

Kannas considers these effects from another perspective when she analyses the written responses of Finnish readers to L. M. Montgomery's books in order to consider what a love-filled reading experience is. *Anne of Green Gables* and *Emily of New Moon* have been the objects of readers' passionate embrace for decades, but the academic context has long disparaged reading based on emotions and loyalty. Yet reading in childhood and young adulthood supplies for many the most memorable and lasting experiences that often are repeated regularly through rereading. Arguing that these encounters are based on equality among author, text and reader, as well as a sense of a reading community, Kannas concludes that, thanks to the emotional staying power of these books, they become parts of the self.

Serena Cacchioli in turn examines a humorous bestseller, *The Novel Cure*, the purpose of which is to offer bibliotherapy for various ailments. While probing the therapeutic potentiality of reading is still largely an unexplored field, what makes this case intriguing is that its versions in various languages differ from one another. Translations were intentionally adapted to each nationality's stereotypical conceptions of the types of psychic and physical problems it suffers from. Cacchioli's comparison thus targets both playful notions of what cures 'national' illnesses and adaptive translation strategies.

Keltjens provides yet another perspective to reading as self-improvement by considering the role of literary criticism in educating Dutch middle-class readers about what and how to read. In particular, she focuses on the critic Gerard van Eckeren's activities as a critic whose self-appointed task was to try to disseminate such knowledge about literature as would enable the growing middle class to enjoy reading both emotionally and intellectually. In Van Eckeren's reasoning, if reading experiences are pleasurable, readers may be encouraged to venture outside their comfort zones, at least occasionally trying texts more intellectually demanding than middle-brow bestsellers. What is noteworthy in his criticism is its inclusion of emotions as an indispensable component of reading if it is to have a lasting impact – a view that is only now being taken up in earnest.

Of the seven brothers, the brooding Simeoni is most deeply affected personally by learning to read religious texts: they feed his depression and gloominess. Simeoni fully throws himself into the Bible's apocalyptic visions, the frightening effects of which invade his mind whenever he is binge-drinking. This rather bleak example reminds us of the widely ranging emotions literature evokes in readers. That literary texts have this capacity to make us feel supplies a strong reason for engaging in reading. In fact, Jenefer Robinson insists that many works must be experienced emotionally if they are to be properly understood. For one thing, readers not only resort to their cognitive abilities in filling in textual gaps, but also draw on their emotions in doing so. Readers' emotional responses are indispensable in understanding characters, narrated situations and the significance of events, for example. Consequently, if we are to form a full appreciation of all aspects of reading, we must learn how emotions enter into interpretation and how they manage and guide readers' responses through the manipulation of literary form. Further, if Robinson is correct in her claim that literature – and the arts more generally – are among the most effective means for an education of emotions, it is a pressing concern for literary research to study how that education takes place through reading.

Reading in context

Although the seven brothers are illiterate for the most part of Kivi's novel, they are masterful narrators. In many scenes one of them tells others a story or recites a poem. When these oral stories, some of which are based on folkloric material widely known at the time of Kivi's writing, are incorporated into a novel, their meaning changes. The present volume concludes with an examination of the role context plays in reception. Marjo Vallittu probes context's significance with the help of film adaptations of novels, as the (potential) differences between the text to be adapted and the resulting film adaptation enable her to put her finger on the underlying reasons for these alterations. By building a model of a textual context, understood as the overlapping core shared by the adapted text and its adaptation with extratextual contexts, comprising such elements as intertextuality, temporal frameworks, and director's intentions and audience's expectations, she examines the circle of reception and interpretation enabling viewers to 'read' a film adaptation.

Reading Today acquaints its readers with various strategies and techniques of reading and their theoretical underpinnings. Although

there is a good deal of variation among these strategies, they do share a common platform: reading still matters. Perhaps, in today's media clutter, it matters more than ever before. Reading skills are in demand, if one is to navigate the contemporary overflow of literary and other texts. These skills involve an arsenal of different tactics and a shrewdness to judge what tactic to use with different text types and purposes of reading. There is often a shared goal: namely, to understand how exactly texts are put together, how they create meaning and how they affect us. Moreover, whatever tactic one opts for, the use of the chosen tactic requires practice and skill. Thus, one may say that learning to read, whether for study or pleasure or any other purpose, is a life-long task.

The varied chapters of this collection reflect the issues concerning readers and reading that interest young scholars within the Hermes Consortium for Literary and Cultural Studies. Their first drafts were discussed at the University of Helsinki during the Consortium's annual meeting in June 2014. The Hermes Consortium is a longstanding collaboration among the University of Aarhus (Denmark), the University of Amsterdam (the Netherlands), Charles University (the Czech Republic), University College London (UK), Justus Liebig University of Giessen (Germany), the University of Helsinki (Finland), the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium), the University of Lisbon (Portugal), the University of Montpellier (France), the University of Santiago de Compostela (Spain) and the University of Wisconsin-Madison (USA). The editors wish to thank the members of this Consortium for their feedback and commitment to this volume, and also Pielpa Ollikainen for her invaluable help in compiling the index.