

**Reading as Wandering, Wandering as Theology:  
Textual Landscapes, Flaneury, and the  
Social History of Contemporary [Theological] Reading<sup>1</sup>**  
by  
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**1. Introduction:<sup>2</sup> Moral Illumination**

“The greatest gift is the passion for reading. It is cheap, it consoles, it distracts, it excites, it gives you knowledge of the world and experience of a wide kind. It is a moral illumination” (Hardwick 1985, 20).

These are the words of writer and critic Elizabeth Hardwick (1916-2007). What exactly is a “moral illumination” and how accurately does it apply to our humanly broad understanding of reading in the far reaches of society? This is, perhaps, a very privileged understanding of reading, one that emotes both the tenor and style of ethical responsibility and the reflective possibilities of spirituality, theology, and mysticism. It is from this platformed valuation and understanding of reading that we venture into the narratives that either tarnish or exalt this “moral illumination.”<sup>3</sup>

The approach we will start with today is based in apophasis, or negative theology, drawing from the work of the twentieth-century philosopher and cultural critic Theodor Adorno (1903-1969). Adorno’s writings include two significant works—*Minima Moralia* and *Negative Dialectics*—which deal with existentialism and understanding the world through the lens of negation. In short, these two different works portray a richer understanding and meaning of life by examining the fragmentary destruction and negation of the world, as Adorno witnessed during the first half of the twentieth century in war-torn, Fascist, and totalitarian Europe. By deconstructing, devolution, degradation, and the negation of one’s image of the global-political ethic, a certain reality is exposed and made more clear for general human discernment.

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<sup>1</sup> I want to thank Matt Ostercamp for suggesting the topic of “reading” and “What is reading?” at last year’s conference in St. Louis, as another area to explore. After my talk on the “Hermeneutics of Books,” he asked “What exactly is reading?” For this question, I thank him. Also, thanks to Carisse Berryhill for offering excellent discussions on reading in her 2005 UIUC online class *Theological Librarianship*, which sowed the seeds of my recent interest on the subject.

<sup>2</sup> Before giving the paper, I offered the vignette about the Starbucks barista in the conference hotel, who asked me about my paper. His name was Peter (“my rock!” I joked), who questioned me about the “definitions of reading.” When I said “There is no one real definition of reading,” he said “There must be!—I believe in absolute truth!” He was a student at an evangelical college studying missiology. This conversation provided some validation to a broader argument that all people understand reading very differently, depending on social, political, and theological perspectives.

<sup>3</sup> Specifically, the decline and death of reading, or what the theologians in the crowd might call a “*legethanatology*” (study of the death of reading).

When we approach something like reading and say “what is reading?” its complexity soon becomes vibrantly clear—“how can one possibly define such a thing?” When I asked members of my seminary community to answer this seemingly straight-forward question, participants took long pauses and then replied “Oh, actually, that’s a difficult question to answer!” Thus, we will begin with a visitation of what reading is *not* (i.e., its apophasis), or, to some extent, what is *has not become*: that is, either dead or in decline.

The title of this paper might seem a bit confusing at first: “Reading as Wandering, Wandering as Theology.” But it embodies the main points I want to make today. First, “How do we understand and define reading?” And second, “What is the relationship to theology/ies?” I will argue that the nexus here is the act of “wandering” (which embodies not just the act of “wending” or “going,” but “action” itself). There is the connotation that “wandering” is a motion of aimlessness. But I will suggest that it is partially directed by our experiences, and that *wandering* is both *an act* and *lifestyle* that is culturally and socially coded: coded in some societies to emote laziness (a negative attribute); coded in other societies as leisure (a more positive attribute). And it is with terms like “laziness” and “leisure” that we will discuss, in order to elucidate the real meaning behind “wandering” and whether there is something more well-defined or thought-out behind our actions as wanderers—either wanderers in life, which brings us to theological understanding, or wanderers in the text, which also brings us to theological understanding.

In this paper, we will look at the characteristics of how we understand reading in socially constructed forms—we will look at the “death and dying” narratives of reading, the cultural contexts of image and imagination in reading as influenced by the technologizing and reproduction of the world through photography, the idea of *authenticity* and authentic reading, and the valuations of reading as understood by some as an act of laziness, leisure, or luxury. We will also consider the theo-political implications of the contemporary history of reading, and how these implications form and move us through our daily work and personal growth.

Reading is not a simple activity of pleasure, which one participates in on a regular basis, but an inherently political act, which is part of a contemporary model of theology. It is an act of human participation, driven by social and cultural demands that are part of our global, human substance. The variations of *reading* and its narrative are so broad that a solid definition might only be possible apophatically, and that there are two aspects that must be included: a) that it is not dead and b) that there is no *authentic* or original concept of *reading*, only literal or metaphysical concepts driven by historical narratives. The rest is open for eternal debate.

## 2. Death of Reading

The University of Chicago student paper, *The Maroon*, published an article on November 6, 2009 with the following title: “Where Reading Comes to Die” (Barnum, Online).

This statement may be lost on some of us, as it refers back to a popular University of Chicago slogan, paraded around by countless students on t-shirts reading: “The University of Chicago: Where Fun Comes to Die.” But even with the subtle twist from “Fun” to “Reading,” each of them having some sense of parity with the other, it gives one pause, and makes one reflect upon the true nature of this activity—the comparison between “reading” and “fun” as equal companions, though the point of this article is a difference between “pleasure reading”

and “assigned reading.” (And in this case, the “death of reading” refers to the “death of pleasure reading.”) This perhaps gets to the point about “leisure” and “laziness” which we shall touch upon later: that the question is not about “reading” or “not-reading” but about “work” vs. “play”—if you are assigned something, it becomes work, a task, a chore, but if you self-assign, it is because you like it. It is pleasure, something you can do in your leisure time. It seems as if Americans not only have an obsession with narratives of reading, but with the ultimate narrative of demise and death of reading.

Another article entitled “The Death of Reading, Continued . . .” by Jennifer Schuessler appeared in the *New York Times*, on Jan. 25, 2008, and breaks this idea down into different modes. To quote Schuessler’s article, “In 1841, strangers on the train could chat about whether Little Nell was going to be written out of Dickens’ latest serial. Today, we huddle by the water cooler debating whether Tony Soprano got whacked,” (Schuessler 2008).

This statement is problematized, though, by the issue of “popularity.” As it informs us, the serialized novel was far more mainstream, like say, the *Sopranos* to popular culture today—that is to say: Dickens *was* pop culture at one time. The shift, which has to do with temporality, comes with the years that Dickens has weathered library shelves, college syllabi, and the prophetic imagination, becoming (from layers of generational readings) a classic author, while other media ascend to take a new position as pop culture.

Yet, there is something else happening in the history of reading and the history of popular culture—and that has to do with a rupture in cultural imagination. During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, there was a turning point in how the perception of “the real” was understood: as noted in the work of cultural critic Susan Sontag, the advent of photography in the 1830s and 1840s created a new understanding of “image,” with such things as distant as foreign lands or as intimate as the human body. The photograph reorganized the paradigm of imagination and afforded readers a new sense of what something was or looked like through a text. As Sontag notes in her work *On Photography*,

“Humankind lingers unregenerately in Plato’s cave, still reveling, its age-old habit, in mere images of the truth. But being educated by photographs is not like being educated by older, more artisanal images. For one thing, there are a great many more images around, claiming our attention. The inventory started in 1839 and since then just about everything has been photographed, or so it seems. This very insatiability of the photographing eye changes the terms of confinement in the cave, our world. In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing. Finally, the most grandiose result of the photographic enterprise is to give us the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads—as an anthology of images,” (Sontag 1977, 3).

Images—images of the world, images of the country, images of the city, and images of the human in the world; images of peace and tranquility and images of war and destruction. A generation after photography entered our world, the United States were (not “was”) torn asunder in the great conflict of the American Civil War. (After the war the U.S. became singular, united under the rhetorical pen of Lincoln.) Mathew Brady (1822-1896), the most formidable

photographer of this conflict, captured not only the most striking, horrifying, and gruesome images of the war, but re-calibrated the American conscience and its self-understanding through photography. The understanding of both death and imagination was altered by the realism and replication of life in photography. As the seminal scholarship of Harvard president Drew Gilpin Faust shows, in her book *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, the idea and role of death took on new, magnified meaning during and after the Civil War. (Faust 2008).

This comparison is not between narratives of death; rather, it is an understanding of how the image of the world, creation, textuality, and art itself changed through the photographic lens, and how this change altered the reading imagination. It is a transition for the reader, where prior to the photograph, imagination was informed by life, art, music, and other abstractions. The scholar Terje Hillesund makes an interesting assessment of two kinds of reading: *Imaginary* and *Reflected*—the first being informed by novels and such—“readers get involved in a story, conjuring up vivid images . . . ;” while the second is informed by philosophical type texts—“readers get involved in argumentative texts, eager to understand, interpret and learn,” (Hillesund 2010). It is the first that we are concerned with. After photography, the reader was now infused with seizingly and paralytically exact reproductions of “the real,” and how the reader read was now informed by these new bits of information.

The writer Wade Cutler suggests, “The successful . . . reader is able to read larger than normal ‘blocks’ or ‘bites’ of the printed page with each eye stop. He has accepted, without reservation, the philosophy that the most important benefit of reading is the gaining of information, ideas, mental ‘picture’ and entertainment—not the fretting over words. He has come to the realization that words in and of themselves are for the most part insignificant” (Cutler, Online).

Mr. Cutler’s postulation that words are subordinate to the *mental “picture”* reveals the level of need we have when interacting with texts, because even if the words are somehow less important, it is the gap of possibility filled by the imagination that is important and significant—and it is that imagination that we are driven by to create new ideas, worlds, or theologies. Technologically, we have advanced, in some ways, beyond this in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but only in momentary, partial transitions.

In the same way that photographs informed or changed the cultural milieu for the reading world, so too did films in the early twentieth century; and now in the twenty-first century, we are confronted with yet another rupture of cultural imagination: with the interactive information cloud known as the Internet. This cloud of supposed “super-knowledge,” with virtual realities, alternate online living and acting spaces, or optional lives as avatars (such as 2nd Life), is an invisible architecture of self-creating, but one which is in some ways an imagination that is already created for us. It is a pre-fab imagination that informs us who we are and how we decide to think and act. But most transformational is that the pre-fabricated imagination of cyberspace has now influenced us, the Millennials, and most of all Generation Z or “Digital Natives.” Being born and living in a completely digital world without having known the transition into *that* world is part of the cultural shift. But this total digitality is part of the *narrative decline and death of reading*, because implied in this death narrative is the inherent relationship to or with books, the “presumed antiques” of digital nativeness.

But let us return to the consideration of these implications: the so-called “death of reading” is something that is complicated, yet seems to have been around for a while, not just in the last ten or fifteen years of Internet ascendancy. For instance, consider this statement from an advertisement:

In this intense age of mass-production *reading has become almost a problem* [my emphasis] of moments. Yet the need for it has increased. For it is in books—good books, that we find those essential experiences which bring to us a fuller knowledge of the relationship of Life. It is the truth, the reality, they awaken in us, that make them so valuable, so indispensable (*The Independent*, 1921).

“Intense age of mass-production” could be 1945, 1960, 1985, or even 2010. But it was 1921. The value of reading was already seen in decline 89 years ago!

Yet, how about the following:

There is a widespread impression . . . that the general capacity for sustained reading and thinking has not increased . . . with the passage of the years. On the contrary, the indications . . . are rather of emasculation. Everything must be made easy and short . . . ‘the good old times,’—always the times of the grand-parents—people had fewer books, and fewer people read; but those who did read, deterred neither by number of pages nor by dryness of treatment, were equal to the feat of reading. Today, on the contrary, almost no one rises to more than a magazine article; a volume appalls (Adams 1901, 224).

This is 109 years ago.

Though the idea of reading a volume was appalling for this writer more than a century ago, this narrative of “reading in decline” or “death of reading” has shown itself in more than one account in the American literary landscape over the last hundred years—in the fields of education, technology, and speech, the proclamations have been loud, sometimes furious, and quite clear. In a piece by Gertrude Elizabeth Johnson from 1940, she writes “Reading is dead! It has not lived in the average classroom—only ‘words, words, words’ uttered in isolated form.” (*Studies in the Art* . . . 1940, 194). In 1922, a piece in *The Technology Review* notes “Summer reading is dead. The ancient requirement that students between their Freshman and Sophomore years shall read and report upon a certain number of non-professional books in the summer is a thing of the past.” (*Technology Review* 1922, 416). And from a publication of the National Association of Elocutionists published in 1898, the author of an essay speaks about types of reading that are taught to school children. The publication notes: “. . . Stereotyped reading is dead: life responds only to life,” (NSAA 1898, 45-6).

Now, the varieties of “death narratives” here are similar, yet evoking different meanings: in the first instances, it is mass-production and technology, the idea of a sped-up life-style already in the 1900s, 1910s, and 1920s that is pushing reading into an obsolescent act (such as “the volume appalls” because it takes too long to read); the latter instances are styles of pedagogy of reading in schools—that styles of reading (interpretive, investigative, attentive, and meaningful reading) are dead in American schools and, thus, among American youth. These “death narratives” have something in common with more contemporary “death narratives,” which say

“fewer people are reading,” in that there is an educational element. But what is different today is that the narratives are driven by the element of e-reading and Internet technologies, rather than simply the shortfalls of the American educational and social systems.

With this in mind, it is the words of either Steve Jobs, who has said “People don’t read anymore” (Markoff 2008) or even the results of the 2002 NEA study “Reading at Risk,”—which has been highly criticized for inconclusive statistical results regarding reading—which underscore the narrative dissonance of reading hurtling toward demise and destruction. What “reading” are we talking about? And what solid evidence are we drawing from?

If reading is, in fact, a living organism, as such narratives are suggesting, then what is killing it? Diagnostically, part of the answer comes from Prof. Stephen Krashen, who notes that it is not so much that reading is *dying*, but that social, economic, and cultural context plays into the survival of the organism (Krashen 2005). Another part of the answer may come from the exponential increase in reading media and how we understand what “reading” means both specifically and broadly, whether this is “reading old fashioned books” or “reading general bits of information on the Internet while sipping coffee in the morning,” or even simply “looking at someone and determining their state of emotion,” as in “reading someone’s feelings.” The curious pronouncement of Apple founder Steve Jobs that “people don’t read anymore” (Markoff 2008) is even more curious when you look at any amount of bibliographic readership data. Sure, we are living in a “digital age,” but books are still being printed in massive quantities. According to writer Frank Fiore, “. . . about 550,000 books were published last year” globally. The actual number is probably much higher. Fiore continues by citing Bowker’s “Books in Print” from the past few years. He writes, “Bowker, the global leader in bibliographic information management solutions, released statistics on U.S. book publishing for 2008. Bowker is projecting that U.S. title output in 2008 decreased by 3.2%, with 275,232 new titles and editions, down from the 284,370 that were published in 2007” (Fiore 2009). Despite this decline of number of total books published, the number sold is still relatively high. According to the *Los Angeles Times* in 2009, newly published books accounted for some fairly huge numbers. The *Times* writes, “The area that did the best was the important category of adult fiction—it has held steady since last year, with 208 million books sold. Taken on their own, sales of hardcover fiction were up 3%” (LA Times 2009).

Crain’s New York Business reported the same statistics, but with some broader information:

Overall unit sales through December 20 came in at 724 million, a drop of just 3% compared to the same period in 2008. The biggest decline by category was in adult non-fiction, with sales of 272 million units, down 7% from the prior year . . . Sales of adult fiction hardcover books rose 3% to 36 million units. Trade paperbacks in the category also grew their sales, to 79 million, an increase of 2% over the prior year. “Bottom line, it’s really pretty impressive,” said Lorraine Shanley, a principal of consulting firm Market Partners International. “When you look at every other medium, and you look at books, and you see they held their own in one of the most difficult years we’ve had in a generation, that’s good news.” Ms. Shanley added that when e-books were taken into account, industry sales were essentially flat with 2008. E-books are generally considered to make up between 1% and 3% of total book sales” [i.e., between 7 and 21 million e-texts] (Flamm 2009).

Statistics such as these are still astoundingly large: even with an overall drop in sales of new books in recent years, there are nearly three-quarters-of-a-billion NEW books being sold a year, globally. Another interesting statistic is the comparative market of book publication since the public use of the Internet. In an article entitled “The Death of the Book” (note the suggestive “death” narrative again), author S. David Mash writes, “Ever since the advent of the World Wide Web in the mid-1990s, average annual book title production in the U.S. is 28.6% higher than during the decade preceding the WWW. Unfortunately, the dizzying growth curve of free information on the Internet seems to have an inverse relationship to its academic utility” (Mash 2000). This is certainly a very interesting insight. Yet what else needs to be recognized is that this does not account for the “used books” market—the under-the-radar sales at church fairs, yard sales, and library book fairs, which when all accounted for could rival these statistics. But no firm data exists to support under-the-radar used book sales. A website called “booksalefinder.com” lists monthly sales of used books by state and localities—if one does a basic tally of its advertisements, many of these local book sales tout 20,000-50,000 used books each, easily making the used book market in northern Illinois a multi-million volume enterprise. I almost never buy new books, but I buy many, many used books. Perhaps, for every new book, I buy 40 used books. So is reading really dying, if more than a billion books are still being bought and sold a year?

Ultimately, I would argue that “decline” and “death” narratives are rhetorical tropes, reflecting more upon the image of one’s self, world, and social constructs, than reflections of realities or truths. When educational systems fail, we say that reading is dead; when families don’t value reading or education in their children, we say that reading is dead; when people own massive companies or conglomerates and want to sell an electronic gadget that is somehow in conflict with “the book,” we say reading is dead. These narratives are part of what we think of as real or imagined in the world, and leads us to our next pivotal concern: the idea of *authenticity* and *authentic reading*.

### 3. Benjamin’s Answer: The Authenticity Question

One answer to the cultural, artistic, and social history of reading comes in the form of an essay by Walter Benjamin entitled “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936). Benjamin writes . . .

“From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the ‘authentic’ print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics.” (Benjamin 1936, IV).

Benjamin’s discussion of *authenticity and art* pushes us to consider the authenticity of reading or simply “authentic” reading. What exactly does this mean? There is a sense that “reading” has levels of authenticity, such as “real” reading, which constitutes a highly developed, educated, and engaged interaction with a text. That is to say, there is “one real or authentic reading,” while all else is imitation or subordinate. For instance, is there a higher value placed on a substantial philosophical text that exists in book format, say, over a news article in electronic, online format as reading objects? . . . or in how one’s reading of these texts varies?



It is here too where Benjamin's idea of politics comes in: once we've discerned that reading is no longer simply an educational act, we must recognize it as something with political implications. The politics of being taught how to read—however we define “reading”—are guided greatly by such things as socio-economics, location, and context, and, therefore direct us to various, often unexpected outcomes. The history of reading is the development of modern society; or, as Alberto Manguel writes in his masterful *A History of Reading*, “The history of reading is the history of each of its readers” (Manguel 1996, 22). The question of authenticity then, is a question of value and moral judgment. Each of us has our own values and moral judgments, so subsequently, there are seemingly limitless histories of reading in our world.

Even if more individuals learn “to read” in a literate sense, the next question is “how one learns to read.” When Noah Porter, former president of Yale, made pronouncements about reading in the 1880s, this was a selective narrative about one's understanding of reading. Understandings of reading become valued, even capitalized, because pronouncements by individuals like Porter are informed by one's religious, social, and economic locations, and from these categories are made the descriptions of reading as good/bad, lazy/industrious, and so forth. Dr. Porter, for example, goes on to describe four categories of reading valuation as seen through books: a) Good Books, b) Goodish Books, c) Good for Nothing Books, and d) Worse than Nothing! (Porter 1870/1891, 325). In some sense, valuation affects the idea of reading-ownership: what people value in texts and reading will determine how they wish to own the idea of the reading narrative and determine some form of authenticity of reading.

Manguel's brilliant treatise on reading is a *tour de force* in understanding the intricacies of reading's history, sociology, and even physiology—the interaction of text with the human. It reveals the essence that reading has infinite levels of meaning and understanding. From his own experience as a youngster in Buenos Aires working in a bookshop where he met and befriended the elder poet Borges and eventually became his reader, Manguel unearths his own understanding of reading over his lifetime, as directed from his experience reading aloud to the blind poet. What this became for him over the next quarter century, he brings forth with perhaps one of the most relevant questions for us today: who does reading belong to? When he read to Borges, he admitted that Borges owned *that* reading, not himself, the actual reader (Manguel 1996, 18-19).

There are multitudes of sensitivities in reading, which make it personal—and Manguel discourses through these beautifully. This is part of the question of ownership. As this author cleverly points out, these sensitivities to reading are so vast and nuanced that the very moments (not just acts) of reading become the most private and personal moments we participate in, or, as he quotes the Argentinian writer Ezequiel Martinez Estrada: “. . . [Reading] is one of the most delicate forms of adultery.” (Manguel 1996, 19-20) . . . as if we're cheating on the public eye or the world!

Who owns reading? No one and everyone. It is with this pronouncement of ownership and Benjamin's question of authenticity, which we must recognize reading's foundation in the political, the human *poiesis* that makes up the society of citizens, the people who are readers and determine their own histories, narratives, and theologies by reading. There is no authentic form of reading because there is no one real definition of reading—there are many.



## 4. Definitions of Reading

### *a) What is Reading?—An Historical Assessment*

In the nineteenth century, the understanding of reading was very much tied to the understanding and development of education, especially primary and secondary education. In colonial America, early motives of reading pedagogy were almost exclusively religious—as one author writes, “The religious motive was the all-controlling force in colonists’ lives; hence it is quite natural that one should find it permeating and directing the instruction in their schools.” In the early period after independence, the shift moved toward political freedom, and so too did the material used to teach reading—as the same author notes, “Reading content now had several new functions to perform: that of purifying the American language, of developing loyalty to the new nation, and . . . of inculcating high ideals of virtue and moral behavior . . . for building good citizenship” (Gray 1938, Online) similar to the work of N.F.S. Grundvig in Denmark.

As for those key figures who influenced the development of reading in this same period, we cannot forget either the educational reformer Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) or educational philosopher Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841), who is considered the founder of the academic field of pedagogy. From about 1850 until 1925, according to some reading theorists, we find the influence of Pestalozzi and Herbart expanding and modulating in different ways. For instance, from ~1850 to 1880, Pestalozzian principles of education are influential in American schools, with “reading being taught as a means of obtaining general information . . .” which according to educators, was important for the development of the intelligence of the masses, who would ultimately vote and “choose leaders and determine the policies of this democracy” (Gray 1938, Online). From 1880 until the advent of World War I, “A new movement began in the field of reading instruction. This movement was the result of an emphasis upon the use of reading as a medium for awakening permanent interest in literary materials which would be a cultural asset to the individual in adult life,” and “was largely the result of the Herbartian principles of education . . .” (Gray 1938, Online). After World War I, from ~1918 to 1925, “the aim in teaching reading was largely utilitarian. Silent reading was more and more emphasized, and there was an ever-increasing attention toward comprehension . . . the goal of . . . teaching children to become more effective silent readers, in order that they might cope with the great mass of practical materials with which they found themselves surrounded” became integral (Gray 1938, Online).

In the present, reading pedagogy scholars Patricia A. Alexander and Emily Fox have identified five specific eras of reading pedagogy since 1950, each succeeding with new agendas and programs geared at solving problems that arose in the previous era or accommodating the social-political issues that need to be addressed in the present. These periods include the “Era of Conditioned Learning (1950-1965),” the “Era of Natural Learning (1966-1975),” the “Era of Information Processing (1976-1985),” the “Era of Sociocultural Learning (1986-1995),” and, most recently, the “Era of Engaged Learning (1996-Present)” (Alexander and Fox 2008, 12-32).

Such changes in the historical pedagogy of reading are exemplified by our cultural contexts and the demands of an ever-changing societal framework—a framework which is inherently driven by political needs and wants of the people. And so, at the very fundamental level, the

teaching of reading in childhood lays the foundation for a rich and multivalent potential for “reading-ness” in adulthood, and how we interact in our societies or affect policy in our world.

*b) What is Reading? A Seminary Community*

As adults who have learned how to read and have specifically an interest in the theological, religious, or spiritual life, the question of reading becomes highly personalized and singularly important. As I have done in past research, I elicited questions from my seminary community about the present topic. I asked simply “What is reading?” After completing this exercise, I’d thought of yet another question, which I was not able to ask in time: “How long can you go without reading?” Because, I know that for me, I don’t know I could go an entire day without reading. (Of course, that depends on how we define it.) Determining how long we can abstain from reading could determine various aspects of who we are and how we ultimately define ourselves in this very fundamental task. Nonetheless, when I posed this central question to members of my seminary communities (“What is reading?”), I received some interesting, yet consistent responses. I sent out over 100 requests to faculty, students, and staff, and received ~11% response.<sup>4</sup> From these, I will share some relevant themes.

Succinctly put, reading was seen as an experiential act by most surveyed. Some spoke of symbols and semiotics, the structuralist models of letters being interpreted by the mind (Braun 2010); others of metaphors of times and places and textual landscapes (Nelson, Wenderoth, Tveite 2010); while others spoke of reading as a form of meditation (Stewart 2010). One participant noted “Kurt Vonnegut once described reading as something like the Western form of meditation. It’s a rank generalization, but I love it. Whereas there are types of meditation that seek to empty the mind, usually with accompanying practices and postures designed to facilitate this process, the meditation of reading is a practice that seeks to join one’s own mind to the mind of another for a sustained moment or longer, with its own attendant practices and postures” (Stewart 2010)

Now, I did not ask the participants what “theological reading” was, nor “theology,” but simply “reading.” Yet, theologies are highly dictated by the effort and power of reading. And the acts of creating these theologies are driven by an act of search, movement, and wandering, both textually and physically, in order to discover these theologies. In our next section, we shall examine how these physical and mental wanderings are problematized by our understanding of leisure, laziness, and luxury—each of which are often used in the lexical artillery against reading.

## **5. Another Look at Reading and Theology**

### ***a. Reading as “Leisure” or “Laziness”—An Axiological Question of Economics and Morality***<sup>5</sup>

Historically, many writers believed that the content and context of reading determined one’s

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<sup>4</sup> The statistical response is not sufficient for a full analysis, but I provide them here for brief insight on the topic of understanding reading in seminaries.

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Heidi Reible and Marya Burke for many fruitful conversations on “Leisure” and introducing me to the field of “Leisure Studies” and *flaneury* and shedding light on the distinctions between leisure and laziness.

laziness or industry, or some sort of moral right. Yet, I propose that what needs to be clarified is the distinction between “leisure” and “laziness,” especially in relation to reading. These are axiological questions, questions of value. The difference between “leisure” and “laziness” is economic and moral intent: the intent of leisure is economic—we can have leisure if we can afford it; while the intent of laziness is moral—we have it whether or not we can afford it, since it is an action of moral choice to conduct or not conduct ourselves in such a fashion. Thus throughout the vision of understanding reading in history, the identities of “leisure” and “laziness” are often seen as parallel, if not equal, bedfellows, when in fact, they have distinct and very different meanings. Let us consider some examples.

*The Journal of Education* notes, “There is no harm in wide reading, provided you *really* read [my emphasis]. Merely tickle, with the worthless straws of literature, what you are pleased call your minds, is utter laziness” (JE 1887, 380). In the book *Edwin Booth: Recollections by His Daughter*, “laziness” and “reading” are coupled as part of the same human condition: “only laziness, reading newspapers, and my natural state of loaf, are the cause of my condition,” (Grossmann 1894, 123). Or like Booth’s “laziness and reading,” in the work of Lusty Scripps we find: “I was at once quarantined in my cabin and enjoyed days of the utmost laziness, reading books which had for years been postponed” (Gardner 1932, 209).

Perhaps the confusion of these terms “leisure” and “laziness” go back to their quotidian use in early American vernacular, as seen in *George Crabb’s English Synonymes* under the entry “Idle, Lazy, Leisure, Vacant” from 1849. In Martin Wallen’s work *City of Health, Fields of Disease: Revolutions in the Poetry, Medicine, and Philosophy of Romanticism*, we find a scathing critique of reading types (which somehow foster laziness), in favor of the morally right brand of reading. The author writes, “Popular reading, consisting of promiscuous interpretations of uninformed works, ‘transmits the moving phantasms of one man’s delirium’ into the empty space of entranced brains. Certainly this is a kind of exchange, but only of a diseased sort governed by delirium, daydream, and laziness—the greatest sin of which Wordsworth says an author can be accused” (Wallen 2004, 37-8). Reading and laziness as the greatest of sins?—this is some hamartiological exercise!

One of the most striking and intriguing articles is in the publication *Public Opinion*. The article is entitled “Is Reading a Form of Laziness?” (subtitles: “The Use and Abuse of Free Libraries. Do They Encourage Love of Learning, or a Form of Laziness?”). The article reads, “[Free libraries] are obliged to confess that the number of real students is small indeed; they complain bitterly that the vast majority of readers demand no more than the trumpery novel, which, as an anodyne, is a formidable rival to the gin-palace . . . The truth is that reading is not of itself a good or useful action. It is with many merely another form of laziness.” (*Public Opinion* 1902, 528)

Scholar Michael J. Meyer’s work on literature and the Bible reveals some level of the American literary interpretation of reading and religion imbued with a twist of this laziness, with an analysis of John Steinbeck’s novels. Meyer writes, regarding the Edenic myth, “Junius’ concept of Eden is that of laziness: reading books, dangling his feet in the stream, and ignoring reality.” (Meyer 1993, 98-99).

Again, looking at the moral implications of laziness, they are surely tied to reading as moral degradation of the self, but primarily to the content, which one is reading. If one reads the Bible, this is a curative; this has been around for a long time, and found in Islam as well—in

*The Recitation and Interpretation of the Qur'an: Al-Ghazali's Theory* (Quasem 1979, 52), we find the discussion of reading the Qur'an as cure for laziness. The question of laziness is not necessarily the statement "I'm reading, therefore I'm lazy"; rather it is "I'm not reading the *holy texts*, therefore I'm lazy." (It is in the content that the morality of reading is struck.)

**b. Reading as Wandering, Reading as Theology: Metaphoric and Physical Flaneury**

The activity of wandering possesses a negative connotation of absent-mindedness, and aimlessness, even laziness. Culturally, though, the idea of the "wanderer" is less attractive to Anglo-American audiences than in the Franco-Romantic societies of Europe. The idea of the *passigiatta* in Italy—or wandering by strolling—and *flaneury* in France are the two most prominent examples of this. Wandering is not only socially acceptable, but part of the cultural fabric in these places. And it is through these lenses that we can perhaps more properly understand the idea of reading as a holistic set of events. Because it is in the multi-tiered understanding of reading that we can view the kinesthetic-cum-imaginative symbiosis of reading as an action/event of both the body and the mind. As readers, we are engaged in not only the relationship with the text physically, in how we move, adjust, shift, seek, and wander to find that perfect reading spot, but we move, adjust, shift, seek, and wander in our imaginative [see Hilsund's distinctions of "imaginative reading"] understandings of the text; thus, we must be acutely aware of this symbiotic physical-mental relationship of reading and wandering.

Several texts expound, underscore, and qualify the Francophilic culture of wandering and reading, including most famously Walter Benjamin's *Arcade's Project* (originally in German), Andre Kertesz's photographic text "On Reading," and Louis Huart's *Physiologie du flaneur* (1841). An English work on the topic by Albert Smith is entitled *The Natural History of the Idler upon Town* (1848)—though similar in nature, the use of the word "Idler" does no justice to its French equivalent "flaneur," which has a clearly more sophisticated and nuanced meaning. The flaneur in France seems to have had a different quality than the Idler in England in the 1840s, though both are mocked—Huart defines the flaneur as "an animal with two legs, without feathers, in a thick coat, smoking and flaneuring" (Rose 2007, 8). Though, as German Literature scholar Margaret Rose points out, the concept of the flaneur in the 1840s is quite different from the flaneur in the twentieth century, the flaneur of Walter Benjamin, who is more sophisticated, more philosophical, and perhaps more serious.

Perhaps the best contemporary example of this may be found in Edmund White's masterful little book *The Flaneur: A Stroll through the Paradoxes of Paris*. White's narrative is both an historical look at the Flaneur, specifically in Paris, and a memoir account of himself becoming an acclaimed American writer in France. He excavates the historical markings of Paris, wandering through histories of the city and of the flaneur, of museums, famous and not so famous; of ex-pat American writers, jazz musicians, and artists, and where they lived; of French thinkers, politicians, and poets; and of the history of sexuality. It is in these mini-histories of the city that White constructs various identities. If self-creation is part of the theological discourse, it is in this self-creation of White's *The Flaneur* that this most secular of texts, plump with literary allusions, sexual slangs, and cultural motifs, is in fact a beautifully crafted masterpiece. And it is more precisely a masterpiece of theology and language, melded into one's interior castle and belief in something spiritually erotic and mystically sophisticated: the flaneur-wandering self,

wandering, writing and reading, in order to come to an understanding of the cosmos and the divine (White 2001).

### c. *Paradigms of Reading*

In the next section, I wish to address paradigms of reading; specifically, how we understand reading depending on the economy of time, luxury, and what I will call the “formula of reading”—ontology, axiology, and deontology.

#### i. **The Economy of Time and Reading (Lesung und Zeit=Reading and Time)**

The relationship between reading and time is a very salient and real issue to consider, because it is with time that we can determine how to spend our days, and whether we spend our days passively observing our worlds or actively engaged with them. Such considerations of time force us to consider how the length of the day can or must be utilized toward the practical, in order to earn us money and sustain us; or how, if we have financial security, we may be able to engage in acts of leisure (a mode of economic freedom) or luxury (an excessive mode of economic freedom)—both being moral considerations. As reading can be many things to many people, how does time—generally speaking—play into the act of reading and the amount of time we give to performing that action? And does the reading action have a socio-economic and political result based in the economy of time?

Not too long ago, someone wrote a piece in the *New York Times Sunday Book Review* about “giant books,” specifically novels running more than 1,000 pages—like Richardson’s *Clarissa*, Sholokhov’s *And Quiet Flows the Don*, or the two-volume meganovels like *The Yeshiva*, by Chaim Grade, *The Demons*, by Heimito von Doderer, and the irascible *Man Without Qualities* by Robert Musil, or even Proust’s 3,000 page, seven-part-novel *Remembrance of Things Past*. Of course, none of these comes close to Chicagoan Henry Darger’s 60-year-effort of madness about the Vivian Girls, entitled *In the Realms of the Unreal*, a novel surpassing 15,000 pages in length—and only surviving in manuscript and read likely by no one. The point of the *New York Times* article was “how many of us readers of these monsters are out there?” This question prompts me to ask a follow-up question: not just “how many?” but “who . . . ?” and “why . . . ?” The reasons for reading such monstrous books are many, yet one of these reasons, just as with reading other types of books, has to deal with time—the availability of time to read. Generally speaking, if you have means, you can spend more time reading; if you don’t, you cannot.

It is also tied to reading’s inherent identity of valuation: who values reading? Do poorer populations value reading for its “moral illumination,” to quote Elizabeth Hardwick again—or do these populations value reading for the potential that reading, thus education, can garner in terms of monetary and social advancement? Ultimately, this question is too complex for a simple “yes/no” answer. Human beings are diverse, yet it is still a question to think about, even if we cannot sufficiently answer it. This too makes us consider then, why in literacy studies in certain developing societies, we find some groups not supportive of reading and literacy—as if it were not highly regarded in the social fabric of families and communities, especially agrarian systems: perhaps that reading is still in conflict with “production of” crops or the sustainability of family units; thus this conflict and competition arises in a (social-political-economic) location that has no time for either leisure or laziness, because survival is the focal consideration. (NB: there is a certain devaluation of reading on my immigrant side of

the family, but not education, as long as it provides a practical need for support of the family unit).<sup>6</sup>

## ii. Reading as Luxury: Smollett's Example

This brings us to another category of economic understanding of reading: that being luxury. Let us look back a few hundred years, to Scotland, in the eighteenth century. It was in that locale that a poet and writer of the picaresque novel, Tobias George Smollett (1721–1771), fashioned a cultural theory of luxury through intense social critiques of Britain. Smollett's works, including *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748), *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* (1751), and *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771), each had a lasting impression on successive writers.

Yet, it is in the scholarly treatment of luxury itself that John Sekora acutely analyzes the role of Smollett's thinking on the topic and his treatment of European society of the time. In *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett*, we find the Scotsman's unbridled attacks on luxury in almost all of its known forms. As Sekora writes, "The seventy volumes Smollett wrote or edited during his later career represent the most sustained attack upon luxury of the period and bespeak the continuity of previous attitudes into the 1750s and 1760s" (Sekora 1977, 136).

Smollett effectively defines the *history of luxury discourse* for generations in his writings. As Smollett traveled around Europe and wrote both fiction and non-fiction accounts of luxury, he recognized its power to influence society in very profound ways. As Sekora writes, ". . . Smollett insisted that the spread of luxury carried with it profound political implications" (Sekora 1977, 137).

Ultimately, our understanding of Smollett and his contribution to the luxury discourse lies with his assessment and critique of its influence on politics. The roles that luxury and luxuriant behavior have in society are all fully political.

Though Smollett's considerations were primarily around wealth in the eighteenth century, it is still a question of what constituted wealth in the subsequent society through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, specifically the ability to read and advance in education. In this country, it would be a valid statement to say that the ability to read at some level was a luxury well into the 1860s, when a seminal piece of legislation, the *Morrill Act of 1862*—known as the Land Grant College Act—changed the literary and educational framework of the U.S. toward exponential increases in American literacy for generations.

In 1860s America, the existence of a personal or other library (especially before the Carnegie libraries of the 1890s and forward) was a symbol of privilege, if not luxury. In modern literature, we find an example of "book" and "reading" as luxury in Esther A. Albrecht's novel *Riders of the North Star*,<sup>7</sup> which recounts the stories and lives of members of the Swedish Augustana

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<sup>6</sup> In more recent literature, we have the use of laziness and reading; in *The Lazy Husband: How to Get Men to Do More Parenting and Housework* (p. 182) we have these fine lines: "I know that laziness is a matter of perspective. When I don't jump up to help my wife clear the table because I'm more engrossed in reading the paper and less grossed out by the dishes in the sink, it's not laziness on my part, it's relaxation."

<sup>7</sup> I thank my colleague Emilie Pulver for bringing this fine historical novel to my attention. Her keen eyes and alertness to preserving seminary and library history are very much appreciated.



Lutheran Synod in the mid-nineteenth century, along with the founding of the Augustana Seminary in 1860 in Chicago. In it we get a glimpse of the paucity and luxury of reading when the reader is cast into the narrative of Katrin Andersdotter—the novel reads:

Katrin was a bit cynical, finding much to complain about . . . Wrinkles were beginning to form around her gray eyes, and her sight was failing. But she didn't care. She was busy all day with heavy work. At night the light from the fireplace wouldn't be enough to read by anyway. But who had a book?" (Albrecht 1970, 23).

Two decades or so later in 1875, a Lutheran pastor and future professor of the Chicago Lutheran Theological Seminary, Henry W. Roth, was traveling west across the American expanses, and came upon this Swedish Lutheran seminary in Paxton, Illinois—and noted most specifically on the fine collection of books that his Swedish brethren had at their disposal. Though fictionalized in the twentieth century, the account of Katrin Andersdotter underscores the differences of wealth and privilege among men and women in nineteenth-century societies. But this also provides us with an appropriate segue to the renewed discussion of the philosophical and ethical roles that reading plays in our lives, both today and historically.

### iii. A Formula: Ontology, Axiology, and Deontology of Reading

When considering the fundamental philosophical aspects of reading, three specific areas form a foundational understanding for who we are in our relationship to the reading paradigms: ontology, axiology, and deontology (or ethics). These three constructs are, what I would suggest, a reading formula: a) the *ontology* of reading asks "How does reading define ourselves, our being?" b) the *axiology* of reading asks "How does our understanding of value define "reading?" and c) the *deontology* of reading asks "What are the ethical implications of reading?" For some, reading is so important that it constitutes not simply an aspect of our being, but being *itself*. A Heideggerian notion might read something like *Lesung und Sein* or *Lesung und Zeit*. And however simplistic one might think this ontological statement, consider the following questions: "how long could you go without reading? And how would not reading for 24 hours affect you mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually?" In some ways, the analogy may be contextualized in the prison cell: where the absence of freedom no longer allows one to physically wander, and ultimately affects the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual states of a person.

## 6. Conclusion: Narratives, Post-Colonialism, and Reading

What is reading, really? Perhaps the question is not exactly "What is it?" but "What do we imagine it to be?" The theorist Paul Virilio suggests that the idea of "logistics" is not just a movement of objects and people, but images (Virilio 1989). Perhaps then, it is appropriate to end today with this suggestion on the logistics of reading and wandering as movements of imagination toward theological discernment. Logistics derives from the Greek *logistikos* meaning "pertaining to logic." Our logic of reading and logic of wandering inform us of our theological progress and outcomes, through the political discourses of ontology, axiology, and deontology. Historically, reading methods and paradigms have shifted, as Alberto Manguel has shown through his work *A History of Reading*. But I would argue that the levels of politics driven by logistics is far more dynamic than we might initially think. *Pre-modern reading* was privileged, priestly reading, where reading was understood as primarily, though not exclusively



as God-driven, an exercise of “community-centered” ontology; *modern reading* shifted in the times of technological advancement not just in terms of reading pedagogy, but “reading” as a cultural value, such as in the industrial, French, and American Revolutions—where reading was viewed increasingly as an object of “community” moving toward the “independent”: churches still had Bibles, but more people were reading at home, to themselves; mass production of books allowed for books to be affordable and general literacy in Europe and the United States rose dramatically in the mid-nineteenth century. And then there came the idea of *Post-modern reading*—reading that was not simply “independent” but “solipsistic” or “isolationist,” where the concern of the “reading objectification” is about the reader sequestering the self away from traditional community, history, and God, for example, and transitioning into the self-created space, of-by-and-for the self; determining who or what is part of the reading discourse, who is “friended” or “unfriended.” Readers can now read “e-readers” without the indication of a book’s cover or content, further isolating the individual from his or her surroundings. And readers have become units of information, tabulated in ALA or NEA studies; self-contained entities of the self, rarely seen as communal readers any more. Ultimately, we’ve moved from a collective understanding of reading to a much more private, individualized, and exclusionary practice, paradoxically, even while we’ve become supposedly “more connected.”

A para-Marxist model, such as this, might suggest not just that “we become objects,” but the concept of reading becomes an object: valued or devalued to the cultural norms. But so too have the narratives of reading and ownership—to recall Manguel’s question of “Who owned reading?” This question may be tweaked to read “Who owns the ‘what is reading’ narrative?” In a conversation on technology I had with a colleague a few years ago, the person told me that “technology was often seen as frightening and totalitarian—possessing control over the world.” My colleague was a post-colonial theorist, whose job it was to analyze the legacy of oppression and hegemony and social control. Considering this, some might argue that the narrative of “What is reading?”—such as the discourse that says “Reading is Dead!”—is a post-colonial narrative: it dictates to us a form of control, hegemony, subordination, and empire in a rather subtle mode. It makes us think something is true, because that is what the power structure wants us to think.

Like the language and use of the “e-reading” narrative to change the world, such a model is inherently insular and bourgeois. It is a force of high-end, capital-driven media, announcing that “the Kindle will be not only useful but necessary in changing the life of every one on the planet.” Even if one or two million e-readers are sold . . . let us remember that there are still more than one billion people who don’t have a toilet, two billion people on the planet who don’t have clean water, and five billion who don’t even use the Internet (as of 2009). The world literacy rate is roughly 82%—of those -five billion people reading, only 20 percent are reading online. Of the some one and a half billion of those people who do use the Internet, only one, or 2/1000th of them, are e-readers. (Even the telephone, invented more than a century ago, is not owned or used by everyone!) Only time will tell what the technocrats have in store for us and our futures.

Reading is always changing and should be understood as transformative. Our stories, like the stories of the Hindus as described by Wendy Doniger in her recent *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, are stories and history, myths and history, and a conflagration of mutilated

or constructed narratives each one a part of the historical fabric: because history, in either its loudest evocations or its most silenced victims, like stories, is only so true . . . and so created by imagination and its “moral illuminations.”

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