READERS *and* READING CULTURE IN THE HIGH ROMAN EMPIRE

A Study of Elite Communities

WILLIAM A. JOHNSON

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in the High Roman Empire**

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Acknowledgments

In a few places, I have used or adapted material that has seen earlier life in print: Johnson 2000, especially for the first two sections of chapter 1, and Johnson 2009b, for an earlier and less documented version of chapter 9. Johnson 2009a contains in part some materials derived from chapter 6. In all cases, the formulation here supersedes earlier work.

Like any broad-ranging study, this book is made possible only by virtue of its dependence on the work of earlier scholars, but three scholars deserve special mention. Champlin's work on Fronto (1980), Holford-Strevens on Gellius (2003), and Nutton's many works on Galen (see references) were invaluable guides to the sometimes difficult terrain of these lesser-studied authors, and though none are scholars I know personally, they have nonetheless acted as *magistri* as I have worked into these areas of study (and, of course, they are not to be taken to task for the failings of this virtual pupil).

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Abbreviations

Periodical abbreviations follow *L'Année Philologique: Bibliographie critique et analytique de l'antiquité gréco-latine* (Paris). Citations of papyri follow Oates 2002.

ANRW: *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung*. 1972–. Berlin.

CAH: *Cambridge Ancient History*. 3rd ed. 1970–. London.

CMG: *Corpus Medicorum Graecorum*.

DNP: *Der Neue Pauly, Enzyklopädie der Antike*. 1996–. Stuttgart.

IG: *Inscriptiones Graecae*. 1873–. Berlin.

ISmyrna: G. Petzl. *Die Inschriften von Smyrna. Inschriften griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien* 23–24 (1–2). 1982–90. Bonn.

Kühner-Stegmann: Kühner, Raphael. *Ausführliche Grammatik der Lateinischen Sprache*. Vol. I rev. Friedrich Holzweissig. Hannover, 1912. Vol. II rev. Carl Stegmann, 5th ed. rev. Andreas Thierfelder. Hannover, 1976. (Reprt. 1997 Hahnsche Buchhandlung, Hannover.)

LDAB: *Leuven Database of Ancient Books*. Web resource: http://www.trismegistos.org/ldab/.

LSJ: Henry George Liddell & Robert Scott, rev. Henry Stuart Jones. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. 9th ed. 1940. New supplement added 1996. Oxford.

Mayser: Edwin Mayser. *Grammatik der griechischen Papyri aus der Ptolemäerzeit, mit Einschluss der gleichzeitigen Ostraka und der in Ägypten verfassten Inschriften*. 1926–38. Berlin and Leipzig.

OCD: Hornblower, Simon, and Antony Spawforth, eds. *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. 3rd ed. 2003. Oxford.

OLD: P. G. W. Glare, ed. *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. 1982. Oxford.

PCG: R. Kassel and C. Austin, eds. *Poetae Comici Graeci*. 1983–. Berlin.

Preisigke: Friedrich Preisigke. *Wörterbuch der griechischen Papyrusurkunden, mit Einschluss der griechischen Inschriften, Aufschriften, Istraka, Mumienschilder usw. aus Ägypten.* 1924–31. Berlin.

PIR²: *Prosopographia Imperii Romani.* 1933. 2nd ed. Berlin and Leipzig.

RE: *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft.* With many supplements. 1893–.

TLL: *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae.* 1900–. Leipzig.

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Chapter 1

Reading as a Sociocultural System

INTRODUCTION

Despite some movement in recent years,[1] it remains true that for most of the last century, scholarly debate on ancient reading has largely revolved around the question, "Did the ancient Greeks and Romans read aloud or silently?" Given the 1997 work of Gavrilov and Burnyeat,[2] which has set the debate on new, seemingly firmer, footing, the question is at first glance easily answered. Without hesitation we can now assert that there was no cognitive difficulty when fully literate ancient readers wished to read silently to themselves, and that the cognitive act of silent reading was neither extraordinary nor noticeably unusual in antiquity. This conclusion has been known to careful readers since at least 1968, when Bernard Knox demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that the silent reading of ancient documentary texts, including letters, is accepted by ancient witnesses as an ordinary event.[3] Gavrilov and Burnyeat have improved the evidential base, by refining interpretation (especially Gavrilov on Augustine), by focusing on neglected but important evidence (Burnyeat on Ptolemy), and by adding observations from cognitive psychology.[4] The resulting clarity is salutary.

Yet I suspect many will be dissatisfied with the terms in which the debate has been couched. I know that I am. Can we be content with a discussion framed in such a narrow—if not blinkered—fashion? In the fury of battle, the terms of the dispute have crystallized in an unfortunate way. That is, the polemics are such that we are now presumed fools if we suppose that the ancients were not *able* to read silently. But is it ignorant or foolish to insist

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1. E.g., Cavallo and Chartier 1999, the essays in Johnson and Parker 2009; for an overview see the bibliographical essay in Werner 2009.
2. Gavrilov 1997, Burnyeat 1997.
3. Knox 1968; "at least" since Knox's conclusions are (as he acknowledges) in part anticipated by the more cautious reading of the evidence in Hendrickson 1929, by Clark 1931, who argues briefly but vigorously against the notion that silent reading was extraordinary in antiquity, and by Turner 1952a, 14 n. 4, who adduced evidence for silent reading in classical Athens.
4. Gavrilov 1997, 61–66 (on Augustine), 58–61 (on cognitive psychology); Burnyeat 1997.

that in certain contexts reading aloud was central? In any case, and much more important, are these in fact the right questions to be asking? The moment has arrived, I think, when we need to reconsider whether the scholarly discourse is furthering what, I take it, is the goal: namely, understanding ancient reading. As a preliminary, and so that we can call to mind clearly the curious juncture to which we have now arrived, it will be useful first to review briefly how we have come to such a pass—in which sociological consideration of ancient reading has been typically conceived within the terms of a debate over silent reading.

DID THE ANCIENTS READ SILENTLY OR ALOUD? A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CONTROVERSY

The roots of the debate are set in Eduard Norden's *Die antike Kunstprosa*, an influential work whose first edition in 1898 brought to scholarly attention a passage in Augustine (6.3.3)—wherein, it appears, Augustine finds it "inconceivable" that his bishop and teacher Ambrose reads silently to himself.[5] At issue for Norden is not the idea that the ancients were unable to read silently, but rather that reading aloud of literary texts was the norm throughout antiquity.[6]

The controversy fully engages in 1927,[7] when Josef Balogh ("Voces paginarum") makes now a much broader case: that for all texts (not simply

5. *Unbegreiflich*: Norden 1898, 6. The passage runs: "When Ambrose read, his eyes ran over the columns of writing and his heart searched out the meaning, but his voice and his tongue were at rest. Often when I was present—for he did not close his door to anyone and it was customary to come in unannounced—I have seen him reading silently, never in fact otherwise. I would sit for a long time in silence, not daring to disturb someone so deep in thought, and then go on my way. I asked myself why he read in this way. Was it that he did not wish to be interrupted in those rare moments he found to refresh his mind and rest from the tumult of others' affairs? Or perhaps he was worried that he would have to explain obscurities in the text to some eager listener, or discuss other difficult problems? For he would thereby lose time and be prevented from reading as much as he had planned. But the preservation of his voice, which easily became hoarse, may well have been the true cause of his silent reading."

6. Observations on the Augustine passage form the conclusion to a lengthy paragraph whose theme sentence begins, "Wir haben aus dem Altertum selbst einige Zeugnisse für die Sensibilität der Menschen jener Zeit gegenüber der Musik des gesprochenen Wortes": Norden 1923, 5–6. Starting with the second edition, Norden collects passages exemplifying "die Gewohnheit lauten Lesens" in an appendix; see Norden 1923, 451–53. Before Norden, the importance of reading ancient literary texts aloud is already frequently propounded: see Balogh 1927, 85 (on F. Nietzsche); Hendrickson 1929, 192–93 (on C. M. Wieland); Norden 1923, 6 (on E. Rohde); cf. Gavrilov 1997, 57. More on the early history of the controversy in Valette-Cagnac 1997, 11–15.

7. The original version of Balogh's article was published in Hungarian in 1921 (Knox 1968, 421). In 1929, G. L. Hendrickson independently (see 182 n. 1) published a similar analysis of ancient reading, which is however much briefer, more cautious in its conclusions, and far less influential.

literary texts) silent reading was rare, that silent reading when it did happen occasioned surprise, and that silent reading was possible only under extraordinary circumstances and by extraordinary people (such as Julius Caesar or St. Ambrose). To support his conclusion, Balogh marshals a large array of evidence: a dozen or so passages to support his claim that silent reading was viewed by the ancients as an aberration (84–95); another dozen passages claimed as direct evidence for the reading aloud of texts (97–109); passages in which reading is equated with hearing, or in which the acoustic effect of a text is assumed (95–97, 202–14); and others. Anyone who has read Balogh's article with attention will readily discern the tendentious way in which he often presents highly ambiguous evidence, as well as his heavy reliance on late sources. But the very weight of the material—64 pages!— wins the day. With the striking Augustine passage as prime witness (86), Balogh succeeds in convincing a couple of generations of scholars. Along the way Balogh introduces, almost as an aside, a point that will become central. For he links the phenomenon of reading aloud with *scriptio continua*, that peculiar ancient habit of writing literary texts without spaces between the words (227). A *technological* explanation now clarifies why the ancients read aloud. The ancient reader reads aloud *by necessity*: faced with an undifferentiated sequence of letters, the ancient reader finds it difficult, if not impossible, to see the word shapes, and thus for all but extraordinary readers sounding the letters aloud is the only way to make sense of the text.

As the decades pass, with only the gradual accretion of the odd piece of evidence or counterevidence,[8] acceptance grows that Balogh has successfully identified a hitherto unknown "fact" about antiquity: the ancients always read their texts aloud, and silent reading of these texts was both difficult and extraordinary. By 1968 Bernard Knox ("Silent Reading in Antiquity") seems to feel it necessary to hold no punches in his effort to dislodge what is now the *communis opinio*. In a spirited and systematic attack, Knox offers a point-by-point refutation of Balogh's main points, and adds evidence of his own to demonstrate that—however the case may stand with literary texts—ancient letters and documentary texts certainly *were* able to be read silently. Once the dust settles, very little is left of Balogh's edifice. Augustine's wonderment at Ambrose's silent reading still stands tall as "Exhibit A"[9] for the notion that silent reading occasioned

8. Lesser contributions to the accumulation and analysis of evidence, not included in the survey here: Wohleb 1929; Clark 1931 (an early dissenter against the view that silent reading was extraordinary); McCartney 1948; Turner 1952a, 14; Di Capua 1953; Stanford 1967, 2; Allan 1980; Starr 1990–91; Schenkeveld 1991, 1992; Burnyeat 1991 (in anticipation of Burnyeat 1997); Slusser 1992; Horsfall 1993a; Gilliard 1993 (reacting to Achtemeier 1990); Johnson 1994; Gilliard 1997.

9. Knox's words, 422. Knox's argument against the passage (that as a poor African provincial, Augustine may not have known about silent reading, 422) has not proven convincing.

surprise in antiquity. The Acontius and Cydippe story (Callimachus, *Aetia* fr. 67 Pf. with Dig.; Ovid, *Heroid.* 20, cf. *Heroid.* 21.1ff) continues to be cited, despite Knox's rough treatment.[10] But so much doubt has been cast on the other chief classical passages (such as Horace, *Satires*, I 3.64f, 6.122f, II 7.1f; Lucian, *Adv. Indoct.* 2) that these are now largely abandoned. On the other side, the evidence for silent reading of letters seems suddenly secure. Two of Knox's examples seem particularly unassailable. At Aristophanes' *Knights* 115ff, the comedy of the scene depends on the image of a man (Demosthenes) totally absorbed in the silent reading of a letter. As for the other example—evidence as unambiguous as one can hope for—a riddle from Antiphanes' comedy *Sappho* (Athenaeus, X 73, 450e–451b) runs, "What is it that is female in nature and has children under the folds of her garments, and these children, though voiceless, set up a ringing shout . . . to those mortals they wish to, but others, even when present, are not permitted to hear?" The answer is a letter (ἐπιστολή), a feminine noun whose children are the letters of the alphabet. "Though voiceless (ἄφωνα), they speak to those far away, those they wish to, but if anyone happens to be standing near the man who is reading he will not hear him" (trans. after Knox, 432–23). Knox has made it clear then that in the case of letters, at least, silent reading is possible, and probably usual. The notion that silent reading was difficult or extraordinary in classical antiquity now depends more or less solely on the single passage in Augustine.

The reaction in the scholarly community to Knox's argument is curious. A great many, even while now accepting that silent reading occurred when people read letters and documents, continue to regard the ancient book as an alien artifact for these "early" readers, one that because of its strange physical properties *must* be read aloud. Witness, for instance, G. Cavallo and F. Hild in *Der Neue Pauly*: "In antiquity the most usual way to read a book was out loud. . . . A good reading was almost like the interpretation of a musical score. Excepting very experienced or professional readers, the lection of a book was a difficult process: the text presented itself in *scriptio continua*, and was only seldom and irregularly articulated by marks of punctuation, so that the eyes only with difficulty could distinguish word boundaries or the sense of the

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10. Discussion at Knox 1968, 430–31; L. Koenen *contra* Knox, in Johnson 1994, 67 n. 5; Gavrilov 1997, 72. The story depends on Cydippe reading aloud what Acontius has written on an apple, and the physical circumstance (i.e., that rotating the apple prevents reading ahead in the sentence) is perhaps worth remark. Physical causation and verisimilitude are, however, largely beside the point. Readers in the twentieth century do not stop to ask why Cydippe reads aloud what is written on the apple, and I suppose readers in antiquity were accepting of the fairy-tale conditions of the story in much the same way.

whole sentence."[11] Less careful scholars ignore Knox more or less outright, and the notion that the ancients could only read aloud continues with a mysterious vigor.[12]

In this context I jump to the recent (and rather strange) climax of the controversy, in 1997. In that year, a medievalist, Paul Saenger, published a book (*Spaces between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading*)[13] in which he begins with an analysis of the "physiology of reading" in ancient and medieval times (1–17). Assuming that reading aloud was the ancient habit in all or most contexts, Saenger constructs a detailed cognitive model to account for why, given the fact of *scriptio continua*, the Greeks and Romans *could not have read in any way other than aloud* (e.g., 6–9). Saenger describes in detail the trials of the ancient reader who, without either word boundaries or fixed word order, found the task of decoding the text very difficult, a challenge that grew even greater in the case of literary texts, since they tend to combine less obvious meaning with greater freedom in word order. Under these circumstances, he explains, reading orally was necessary to help in the sorting out of the ambiguities. Saenger's goal in this analysis is to chart the "evolution" of word separation, so as to demonstrate that (1) spaces between words, first widely used in the tenth and eleventh centuries, allowed for the first time a shift from reading aloud to reading silently, and (2) this change to silent reading led to the increasingly complex thought that characterizes the scholastic and subsequent periods. To make his case, Saenger must suppose for ancient reading an "orality and tunnel vision," imposed by *scriptio continua*, that "obstructed the rapid appreciation of the word within its syntactical context, making the comprehension of propositions *neurophysiologically* more difficult" (122, my italics).

Meanwhile, in a paper published the same year in *Classical Quarterly*, A. K. Gavrilov ("Techniques of Reading in Classical Antiquity")[14] uses some

11. *DNP* 2.815, s.v. "Buch" (the common simile of the musical score originates in Hendrickson 1929, 184). Similarly, E. J. Kenney in the *Cambridge History of Latin Literature*, 12: "In general it may be taken for granted that throughout antiquity books were written to be read aloud. . . . It might be said without undue exaggeration that a book of poetry or artistic prose was not simply a text in the modern sense but something like a score for public or private performance." Kenney's remarks are quoted by Gavrilov 1997, 56, in the introduction to his article—somewhat tendentiously since the quotation is supposed to buttress Gavrilov's assertion of widespread acceptance among Classicists that the Greeks and Romans "did not read to themselves silently, save in rare and special cases." Kenney, however, carefully restricts his comments to the reading aloud of *literary* texts.

12. A startling example is the naive summary of the debate, which serves then as the basis for a study of New Testament texts, in Achtemeier 1990 (who seems unaware of Knox's arguments *inter alia*; corrected in part by Gilliard 1993). This example points up how conclusions on ancient reading can be vitally important to work in related disciplines.

13. The book expands upon ideas first presented in Saenger 1982.

14. Gavrilov's conclusions were already known to some specialists from reports of a similar article that appeared in a Russian journal in 1989 (reference at Gavrilov 1997, 69 n. 52).

of the same evidence from the field of cognitive psychology to demonstrate that in *neurophysiological* terms the Greeks and Romans *must have been able to read silently*. In addition to pointing out the disposition toward silent reading among mature readers in a variety of cultures, Gavrilov details how the concept of the "eye-voice span" proves the necessary ability of any lector to be able to read silently: "the person reading aloud needs to be able to glance ahead and read inwardly selected portions of the following text; the more experienced the reader, the more easily and reliably they do this. That is why for virtuoso reading aloud one requires not merely the ability to read to one-self, but skill at it" (59). Like Saenger, Gavrilov is able to use "science" to "prove" the conclusion he brings to the investigation.

In the same article, Gavrilov usefully raises doubts about the traditional interpretation of the passage from Augustine, in which he sees not Augustine's surprise at Ambrose's silent reading per se, but Augustine's puzzlement and irritation that Ambrose reads silently "in the presence of his parishioners" (63). I prefer to emphasize more the relationship of teacher to student, but in any case it does seem clear—once it is pointed out—that the "surprise" is occasioned by the specifics of the social scene in which this silent reading is set. That is, Ambrose, as *magister*, is expected to share with his students both his texts, that is, his readings aloud (in a world where books were relatively rare), and his thoughts on these texts—exactly as Ambrose implicitly does elsewhere, as at *Confessions* 6.4.[15] When, despite allowing the students to come visit, Ambrose does not read the texts for all to hear and does not comment on the texts, the students naturally wonder why. Seen in this way, the scene may then be good evidence that in this particular social context (of the *magister* with his disciples), reading aloud was the expected behavior. But the passage does not speak to general habits of silent reading one way or the other—and thus the once grand construction of Balogh collapses altogether. As a final kick to the ruins, M. Burnyeat appends to Gavrilov's article remarks on two passages (Ptolemy, *de iudicandi facultate et animi principatu* 5.1–2 Lammert; Plotinus, *Enneads* I 4.10), in which reading silently and concentrating hard are equated; thus proving that at least some ancient thinkers were not unaccustomed to the notion of silent reading.[16] Gavrilov's

15. The scene at 6.4 is helpfully clarified and placed into the broader context at Stock 1996, 63–64.

16. Burnyeat 1997. Again, this evidence was already known to cognoscenti, from a letter Burnyeat wrote to the *Times Literary Supplement* (Burnyeat 1991). Balogh 1927 was also aware of the Ptolemy passage (first brought to notice by A. Brinkmann), but he glosses over it: 105 n. 27; cf. Burnyeat 1997, 75. The Plotinus passage was first cited as a central piece of evidence in Stock 1996, 286 n. 53. To Burnyeat's two passages, add the list of "passages where silent reading is more or less certainly implied" at Gavrilov 1997, 70–71, though much of this evidence is more ambiguous than he allows. (Gavrilov omits Antyllus, excerpted in Oribasius, *Collectiones medicae* 6.10.23–24 [CMG VI 1.1, 163–64 Raeder], who writes of the great consumption of wet

conclusion, to which Burnyeat appears to subscribe, is that *"the phenomenon of reading itself is fundamentally the same in modern and in ancient culture.* Cultural diversity does not exclude an underlying unity" (69, my italics).

But is this a proper conclusion? If we accept that the ancients did read silently, yet know also (what no one disputes) that they commonly read aloud, does it follow that ancient reading was really so like our own? Has this century of debate in fact brought us to no better understanding than that the ancient readers' experience was, essentially, ours? My interest lies not, finally, in entering the controversy over whether the ancients always read aloud. Given the terms of the debate—wrongful terms first set into motion by Balogh—I think that Knox and Gavrilov and Burnyeat have made sufficient response. I wish, rather, to redirect scholarly attention to what is, I think, a much more interesting set of problems: how exactly the ancients went about reading, and how the ancient *reading culture* (as I will call it) does in fact differ from the reading-from-a-printed-book model familiar to us today.

READING CULTURE: WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "READING"?

When Gavrilov speaks of "the phenomenon of reading itself," he seems to mean the cognitive act of reading. It is this, he states, that "is fundamentally the same in modern and in ancient culture."

But is reading solely, or even mostly, a neurophysiologically based act of cognition? Anthropologists, ethnographers, and sociolinguists have increasingly come to recognize in reading a complex sociocultural construction that is tied, *essentially*, to particular contexts. In a now classic study of literacy in more privileged ("Maintown") and less privileged ("Roadville" and "Trackton") communities in the Piedmont region of the Carolinas,[17] Shirley Heath describes in detail the ways in which many aspects of reading are informed by the reader's subculture. Maintown children (1982: 51–56), for instance, learn from an early age to use children's fiction as a frame of reference for constructing real-world knowledge. While reading with parents and other adults, they learn school-oriented ways of using a text, such as interactive "initiation–reply–evaluation" sequences,[18] which model the sort

things in the body for those who "read audibly," τοῖς ἀναγινώσκουσιν ἀκουστόν, a phrase that seems to imply the commonness of its opposite.)

17. Heath 1982, cf. Heath 1983; conveniently summarized, with illustrative examples from other cultures along the same lines (as, e.g., Clanchy 1979), in Street 1984: see the chapter "The 'Ideological' Model," esp. 121–25.

18. Standard terminology in early childhood education. A simple example: Initiation (teacher) = "What time is it?" Reply (student) = "1:30" Evaluation (teacher) = "Very good." Replacing "Very good" with "Thank you" would make this interaction unmarked conversational discourse rather than instructional or pseudo-instruction discourse. Heath has in mind text-centered interactions that follow this sort of formula.

of give-and-take used later in formal education. But they also learn to value fiction for its own sake, and to replicate it by telling stories that are not true. Moreover, they learn that writing may represent not only real events, but also decontextualized logical propositions to be used in taking meaning from their environment. Children from Roadville (1982: 57–64), on the other hand, while they also learn certain sorts of school-like habits of inter-action with texts (e.g., "what-explanations"), regard the text itself from a markedly different stance. In this working-class, Christian community, reading to children past the toddler age is not interactive but performative, and behind the performance is the assumption that the stories told are "true"—real events that tell a message. The fundamental relationship between book learning and "reality" differs: in Roadville, events in the real world are seldom compared to events in books; explicitly fictionalized accounts are thought to be "lies"; and the children are poor at decontextual-izing their knowledge and applying it to different frames of reference. For our purposes, what is crucial is that the differing reader responses are engendered not by the particular text, nor by the education of the reader, but by the sociocultural context in which the reading takes place. The meanings that readers construct differ, that is, largely in dependence on the (sub)cul-ture in which the reading occurs.

Recent anthropological and ethnographical studies, in an effort to avoid the sort of vague generalities that so often devolve from discussion of *lite-racy*, now frequently attempt more specific terminology, which seeks to refo-cus our view of the use of texts by the choice of a sometimes startlingly wide-angle lens. The resulting view could not be more different from that which dominates discussion of reading in ancient studies. Three prominent examples: Shirley Heath speaks of a *literacy event* as "occasions in which written language is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies"; Brian Street proposes, more broadly and abstractly, *literacy practices*, referring thereby to "both behaviour and conceptualisations related to the use of reading and/or writing"; and R. D. Grillo extends this yet further to *communicative practices*, in which he includes "the social activities through which language or communication is produced," "the way in which these activities are embedded in institutions, settings or domains which in turn are implicated in other, wider, social, economic, political and cultural processes," and "the ideologies, which may be linguistic or other, which guide processes of communicative produc-tion."[19] Note how such terminology privileges study of sociocultural prac-tices over the emphasis on a specific technology or medium.

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19. Summarized and quoted in Street 1993, 12–13. The quotations are from Heath 1982, 50; Street 1988, 61; and Grillo 1989, 15.

Quite so wide a refocusing may, to be sure, make more sense for modern ethnographers than for historians of ancient culture. We do not have the opportunity to take field notes from living informants, and the level of specificity advocated (which may in any case be overwrought) is simply not possible. But contemporary studies have, nonetheless, much to teach us about the deep dependency between a particular culture, narrowly defined, and the reading of texts, broadly defined. As will already be clear, reading is not, in my view, exclusively or even mostly a neurophysiological, cognitive act—not in fact an individual phenomenon, but a sociocultural *system* in which the individual participates.

For clarity's sake, and to help us begin to think this through, I list here some simple—if not simplistic—propositions:[20]

1. The reading of different types of texts makes for different types of reading events. Reading a tax document and reading love poetry are essentially different events, even for the same person in the same time and place.

2. The reading of a given text in different contexts results in different reading events. Reading love poetry in a scholastic context differs essentially from reading love poetry over wine with a lover. Reading alone differs essentially from reading with a group.

3. A reading event is in part informed by the conceived reading community. Whether based on an actual group (such as a class), or an imaginary group (intellectuals, lovers of poetry), the reader's conception of "who s/he is," that is, to what reading community s/he thinks to belong, is an important, and determinative, part of the reading event. Reading love poetry in a given context (say, alone in one's living room) differs depending on whether the reader thinks of the reading as preparation for class, or as participatory in elitist enthusiasms for high poetry.

4. The reading community normally has not only a strictly social component (the conception of the group), but also a cultural component, in that the rules of engagement are in part directed by inherited traditions. A reader's stance toward course material is informed by scholastic traditions, some peculiar to the institution; more hazily, a reader's stance toward the sort of material favored by enthusiasts for high poetry is informed by a set of inherited—that is,

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20. Partly in order to avoid the political and other baggage that follow the term *literacy*, I will prefer the following terms: *reading* (by which I mean the experience of reading, broadly conceived), *reading events* (by which I mean to emphasize the contextualization of a particular "reading"), and *reading culture* (by which I mean to signal the cultural construct that underpins group and individual behaviors in a reading event).

trained—dispositions (such as attention to intertextual references, or appreciation for certain aesthetic characteristics).

5. Reading that is perceived to have a cultural dimension (most obviously, literature of any sort) is intimately linked to the self-identity of the reader. Thus a person who identifies with the cultural elite will feel disgusted, or even polluted, by the reading of a "trash" romance novel; uplifted, and self-validated, by the reading of difficult, but "excellent," literature.

All of these propositions have many ramifications, and the details could be argued at nearly infinite length—so complex is reading—but even this simple analysis should begin to make clear why I prefer to look at reading not as an act, or even a process, but as a highly complex sociocultural system that involves a great many considerations beyond the decoding by the reader of the words of a text. Critical is the observation that reading is not simply the cognitive processing by the individual of the technology of writing, but rather *the negotiated construction of meaning within a particular sociocultural context.*

An illustrative example from closer to hand may at this point prove helpful. When teaching ancient epic in translation (*Gilgamesh, Iliad, Odyssey, Aeneid*), I have been deeply impressed at the high and general level of enthusiasm, indeed excitement, that the students bring to the reading of these texts. At least some of these texts are rather forbidding, after all, and not obviously to everyone's tastes. Moreover, not many of these same people, as 40-something stockbrokers or business executives, would on their own find these texts very engaging. Why is it that students commonly find difficult texts like Homer's *Iliad* or Vergil's *Aeneid* (or Dante or Milton or Joyce) so deeply exciting *within the context of a class*? As I see it, this has far less to do with cognition than with the construction of a particular reading community, one that validates itself through texts deemed important to a shared sense of culture and cultural attainment. In a successful humanities class, we are not so much teaching texts as creating a reading community in which the members find self-validation (as smart, cultured, etc.) in the negotiated construction of meaning from these texts.

But let us think through this simple example further to see if we can gain a more vivid idea of what is intended by a *reading culture*. How, in this scholastic context, does such a culture materialize? In part, the reading culture devolves from traditions maintained by the institution. Institutionally, universities work toward creating the disposition that knowledge of, and directed engagement with, particular humanities texts is socioculturally important: it is elemental (or so says the cultural tradition)

to being educated, a necessary item in the cultural baggage of those who aspire to the elite of the society. In part, though, the reading culture is contrived by the teacher. Individually, teachers work toward creating the disposition that a particular text (the one we are studying in class) is meaningful and relevant: it is a necessary tool if the student is to apprehend the knowledge, and experience that sense of meaningfulness, that bonds the group together as a productive, self-validating unit. Yet the group itself is also complex: not only the class, but also that more vague conception of people who are "educated" or "intellectual," or even "sincere." Part of the reader's conception is bound, then, by broad cultural influences well beyond institutional or pedagogic manipulation. In any case, the group dynamics—the construction of the attitude that Homer is *important*, that Homer *should* be interesting—are fundamental to this particular type of reading experience. Which is to say: the reading experience depends on a dynamic, continually negotiated construction of meaning within the context of the conceived group. Reading is, to be sure, the individual's construction of meaning, but it is never wholly interior; rather, sociocultural influences always inform the meaning that the reader seeks to construct.

In attempting an analysis of ancient reading culture, I therefore wish emphatically to promote two principles. First, we must proceed from a clear and deep perception that what we seek to analyze is an immensely complex, interlocking system. Even for particular questions ("Did the ancients read silently or aloud?") it will not do to focus narrowly, as in the recent debate, on a single mode of inquiry such as cognitive analysis. Similarly, the analyses (not reviewed here) of scholars like Goody, Havelock, Ong, and their followers—who find in writing, and in its reflex, reading, a *technology* with (various) determinative consequences for the society—will, from this point of view, be seen as too simplistic, even reductionist, and too inattentive to the particulars of the specific cultures under study.[21]

This leads to the second principle: that we must seek to analyze ancient reading within the terms of its own sociocultural context. Let us return for a moment to Bernard Knox's important 1968 article (summarized above). Toward the opening of that article, Knox writes (421–22) the following:

> Balogh's insistence that silent reading was not just unusual but almost unheard of seems to go too far; common sense rebels against the idea that scholarly readers, for example, did not develop a technique of silent, faster

21. The problems of this sort of technologically determinative analysis are by now well rehearsed. For summary and criticism, see Thomas 1992, 15–28; Finnegan 1988, 1–14; Street 1984, esp. 44–65; Olson 1994, 1–20, 36–44; Johnson 2002, 10–13.