

# Utopia: Reading and Redemption

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*'Ce qui est a été pensé. Seul ce qui sera est à penser.'*  
[What is has been thought. Only what will be has yet to be thought.]  
E. Jabès<sup>1</sup>

This essay came about as the result of my suspicion that, in our societies of written traditions, the way we write and the thoughts we generate are intimately linked to the way we read.<sup>2</sup> The practice of reading, in its many forms, is more than just a simple technique that allows us to familiarize ourselves with what other people think and thought: just as there exists a close relationship between the content and the form of a given text, the practice of reading has an effect on the reception of what has been written. But even before any text was written, reading had had a critical effect on the form in which it would exist, informed by so many previous experiences of reading.

For centuries now, we have been reading alone and in silence, and but for a few exceptions, we also think without utterance. Our ears, now useless for the practice of reading, which does without them quite easily, are no longer well trained, to the extent that when we revive this ancient practice of reading out loud at some gathering or other, our hearing seems to have become deficient. This weakened ability to listen or concentrate becomes apparent in our drive to anticipate, which prevents us from being surprised by anyone at any time. In our quest to capture what comes out of the mouths of others (according to our own disposition and preparation, of course) a process of 'assimilation' of the word of the other tends to take place, and one of its by-products is an immutable alterity, which is a symptom of hypoacusia. The primitive, receptive function of hearing has been replaced by that of *selection*. In silent thought – which is an outgrowth of the practice of reading alone or in a low voice – the *gesture* has been cast aside. This was what led Marcel Jousse to say: '*Le péché original, et capital, de notre civilisation de style écrit, est de se croire la Civilisation par excellence.*'<sup>3</sup> In our day, we have complicated this issue with a blind faith in images and in euphemism-filled information, though this is not the topic of this essay. The

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question is this: has the technique of writing caused us to all but abandon the gesture, or does the practice of reading minimize the participation of the body, thereby producing 'deaf' texts and thoughts?

Ivan Illich, in his beautiful book on Hugh of St Victor,<sup>4</sup> describes the transition from communal reading, performed aloud, to a solitary, silent reading experience, the movement from public to private in the act of reading, a phenomenon that seems difficult to reverse in many other areas of life in our societies. 'Fifty years after Hugo . . . the technical activity of deciphering no longer generates an audience or, for that very reason, a social space. And so the reader flips through the pages. His eyes reflect the bi-dimensional page. Soon he will begin to think of his own mind as something analogous to a manuscript. Reading will become an individualist action, a relationship between an "I" and a page.'<sup>5</sup>

The need for silent reading was first expressed in the 13th century, in the chained libraries, in an effort to help people avoid distraction.<sup>6</sup> The ban on speaking and even whispering dates back to the 15th century (at Oxford, in 1412; at the University of Angers in 1431; at the end of the century, the statutes of the Sorbonne library declared the space to be 'an august, holy place where silence shall reign'). The 'order of reading' – that is, the ritual of it – moves into the public library some time afterwards, envisioning a reader who sits with a straight back, arms resting on the table, making not a sound, occupying as little space as possible, with the book laid out in front of him.<sup>7</sup> In other words, following in the tradition of Cartesian dualism, this was a reader whose body was to 'disturb' the intellect as little as possible. From that era through to the present day, we maintain this silent, two-dimensional relationship with the book, and even though things have relaxed somewhat as time has gone by – the position of the body, the very convenient paperback editions published today – this attitude prevails. But we should not confuse this attitude with a nostalgia for medieval ways, which no doubt were grounded in an ideological and political order that was buttressed by religion, with so-called 'sacred' texts. What I would like to suggest is a revival of the *gesture of reading*, to see if we may open the door to other possible forms of writing and thought that may exist in the future, that are *forthcoming* – or, in the words of the poet, that have yet to be thought.

At first I thought about these other forms of reading as utopia, but as time has gone by, the very literal interpretation of the term *non-place*, the strong sensation of extra-territoriality was what seemed to predominate. Utopia was ceding its place to a notion of *redemption*, to something rather messianic that is intimated in the final words of Walter Benjamin's 'Thesis on the Philosophy of History' which discusses the question of the future in the Jewish tradition:

. . . for every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.<sup>8</sup>

We must clarify our terms first, however: here we are not talking about 'messianism' in the ideological sense of the term, at the service of religious powers. Derrida suggested we call it 'messianicity'.<sup>9</sup> In this essay I reclaim Benjamin's use of the term 'redemption' (with its slight echo of Rosenzweig).<sup>10</sup> In this essay, the allusions to reading experiences that have to do with Jewish traditions do not allude to a specific religion or nationality but rather to the notion of the foreigner, someone without a

territory to call his own – characteristics that are shared by thinkers like Kafka, Derrida, Jabès, Blanchot, Bakhtin and others.

The advent of the other in the heart of the reading experience resounds in this excerpt from Derrida: 'the archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed. It opens out to the future.'<sup>11</sup> In this light, the act of reading recalls the Benjaminian definition of *Jetztzeit* or 'now-time' that is full time: a present moment in which the past (that which has been written) and the future come together, reading comes from a time of 'what will be' of that thing that, as Jabès put it, 'remains to be thought' and this 'not yet' resists the representation that remains subordinate to 'what already is'.

We can begin, then, by establishing clear differences between utopia and redemption. Unlike Stéphane Mosès in *L'ange de l'histoire* [The Angel in History],<sup>12</sup> I don't find it necessary to look at them as opposites, just as the relationship between the Self and the Other is not one of opposition but of inescapable difference. To place the Self and the Other in conflict would be tantamount to aligning them beneath a common system that would neutralize the radical alterity, and the principle of the excluded third would then become problematic.

Let us follow the lead of Mosès in the matter of differences: while utopia would signify infinite movement toward an unattainable goal, redemption implies a breakthrough of that which is 'absolutely other' in time. Harking back to Derrida, we could conceivably situate redemption within the ungovernable logic of spectrality. In Mosès' terms: 'Utopia, as a category of historical time, only proposes that the imagination accept a new combination of already-familiar elements; Redemption, on the other hand, materialises against all expectations, with the unpredictable nature of all that is utterly new'.<sup>13</sup> There is a notion of 'always-possible imminence' in Redemption, as something that breaks through alterity, and this is distinguishable from the representational order in Utopia that acts more as a critic of the present time rather than as an anticipation of an unattainable future. This distinction brings with it two attitudes that, in turn, are the result of stereotypes: utopia is commonly associated with activity and even activism, while messianic redemption is often associated with passivity. In our societies the former tend to have a better reputation than the latter, but once again it is important to disentangle the binary logic that polarizes things into positive and negative terms: passivity cannot be written off as a simple lack of activity – we learned that much from Lévinas.<sup>14</sup> This passivity could be defined very positively as a kind of hyperaesthesia, a heightened capacity for being affected. In other words, the passivity required by the act of waiting around for Redemption manifests itself through a state of keen attention that does not surrender to the temptation of anticipation.

How does this *passivity* manifest itself in reading? Does silent reading guarantee it? I repeat: if 'passivity' is construed as a lack of 'activity' then yes, said reading will come close to this definition; but we would do well to remember that this is about thinking of passivity in the positive sense – that is to say, of redemption as a breakthrough in an alterity that alters the order of the present. The Talmudic tradition calls for *bechavruta* reading, which means reading in (friendly) company and out loud. This practice is an effort to procure intimacy with a text that, all too easily, can become an intimidation of letters, an appropriation on the part of the reader. The

testimony of our reading companion (who, obviously, also knows how to read) forces us to listen to the text and keeps us from succumbing to the temptation of relying on our faculty of vision, which will try to appropriate this perception for itself. Reading, then, finishes the journey by taking the long way around, through a witness, guarantor of that which is unattainable. The text is conceived in the interpretation of the Mishná (Pirkei Avot 2:15) as 'burning embers;' to read this properly one must 'blow' on the embers: knowing how to 'blow' on them is the key to reviving the flames. The metaphor of fire appears frequently in this tradition, and the Jerusalem Talmud<sup>15</sup> in fact suggests that the primitive Torah was written in 'black fire upon white fire'. Apparently this idea alludes to the black letters as Written Torah, and the blank, white spaces as the infinite interpretations that comprise Oral Torah (or Talmud) which, though a printed document, is always unfinished, is always *forth-coming* in some way (for example, the first page of the book never begins with page A but page B, leaving the possibility open to something that precedes B). Isaac the Blind, a bold kabbalist of the 12th to 13th century, proposed the following reading: 'the form of the written Torah is that of the colours of white fire, while the form of the oral Torah bears the chromatic appearance of black fire'.<sup>16</sup> A blind wise man can read the blank, white space like all the colours of written text and the black letters as a mere appearance of colour, a simple commentary. This led Scholem to the mystical conclusion that 'in this land, the strictest sense, the written Torah does not exist'.<sup>17</sup> With this, the much-vaunted metaphor of text as territory is placed under scrutiny: if the text is fire then it is not of a territorial order; it is not a place but rather pure future, a potentiality in ascension. To read it, one will have to exercise as much attention as possible so as to perceive that which is latent in the blank, white spaces, then receive it and transmit it through the act of reading. And here we find the dramatization of the ghostly aspect of reading. The key may be formulated, once again, through the voice of the poet: '*Le visible – disait-il – n'est, peut-être, qu'un invisible anxieux de se faire connaître*'<sup>18</sup> [The visible – he said – is nothing, perhaps, but an invisible anxious to be known].

But let us return to the question of *passivity* as we await the arrival of the absolutely other when we read – that is, the *forth-coming* aspect of this practice. Hugh of St Victor, quoted by Illich,<sup>19</sup> says: 'the world should become a foreign territory for those who wish to read with perfection. The poet [Ovid] says that "Our native land charms us with inexpressible sweetness, and never ever allows us to forget that we belong to it." The philosopher must learn, step by step, to abandon it.' The attitude of the reader within this framework (which in ethical terms alludes to heteronomy) so strongly prefers the attuned ear to the proffered word that he says: 'I prefer to learn from others with modesty than to shamelessly impose my own ideas.'<sup>20</sup> Without a doubt, recreating this attitude toward reading would facilitate an academic discourse that would be less plagued by 'sad passions' (to speak in Spinozian terms), one in which there might be more listening and less agonizing anticipation. This is a heteronomy whose origins lie in receptive passivity.

Reading as future, the place of the body in reading, is foretold in the Bible in a very disturbing scene in Ezekiel 3:3. "'Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.'" So I ate it and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.' If the ears have been neglected in the modern practice of reading, then the other

senses are in even worse condition. Nevertheless, God's imperative arrival before the prophet (known as revelation), ordering him to eat a book in the form of a scroll with writing on both sides, was the origin of a medieval ritual through which small children were introduced to the practice of reading, and it has survived to this day in certain religious circles. The letters of the alphabet (from *alef* to *tav*) are written in honey on a small blackboard and each child must try to recognize the letters by running his tongue over them, so that his first contact with the Torah recalls the sweetness that the prophet Ezekiel tasted. Another custom is that of presenting verse 103 of Psalm 119 on a blackboard, written entirely in honey or candies: 'How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth.' This practice activates not just taste but touch, scent, sight and, most importantly, the 'sense of the senses': the memory.<sup>21</sup>

This is not an attempt to reproduce religious practices and their relationship to sacred texts, nor is it an attempt to secularize them. The goal is to summon the poetic gesture of reading as from its literary and philosophical contexts. It is, by means of intense concentration, an attempt to open up the mind to other possible models of listening, thinking, writing, in the hope of encouraging new ways of interacting with others, of allowing ourselves to be surprised by a world that is still to come, one that does not promise 'more of the same'.

Hélène Cixous experiences a feminine type of erotic relationship in the act of reading – in the passive voice, she states: 'I experience reading as a way of making love, the strong element of reading is the aspect of "allowing myself to be read" by the text.'<sup>22</sup> For this writer, reading and writing are experienced as 'physical activities'. Illich notes that in the age of Antiquity reading was considered 'an exhausting exercise. Hellenistic doctors prescribed reading as an alternative to playing ball or walking.'<sup>23</sup> Reading aloud demanded a good physical condition. Illich unwittingly converges with Cixous when he searches Latin etymology for the word *legere*, and alludes to an act of love. According to Benveniste in the *Vocabulaire des Institutions Indo-Européennes*,<sup>24</sup> *legere* means 'to gather, to bring toward oneself, to recognize', and its opposite appears as *neg-ligo* which means to neglect, and it also appears under *intelligo* as 'to gather selectively, retain through reflection, understand'. In Hebrew the verb 'to read' is 'to call', and the root of the noun *Mikrá*, which is used to designate the Scriptures, is in fact *KRA*, which means the reading, the invocation, and the offering of the name. Words are witnesses that retain the memory of other forms of approaching texts, other ways of understanding the relationships between human beings; in reading we hear the echo of the hospitality that means to welcome [*accueillir*] the other. Once again, Edmond Jabès: '*Le livre est le "Tu" qui, de nous, fait, provisoirement un "Je"; mais le livre est aussi autre chose; il est le "Il" qui englobe le Je/Tu; le dialogue étant, toujours, à trois voix*' (Jabès)<sup>25</sup> [The book is the 'You' that, of us, provisionally makes an 'I' ; but the book is also something else; it is the 'It' that encompasses the 'I/You' ; and in this way the dialogue is eternally made of three voices].

There are a few contemporary examples of this foray into our habits of written civilization. Hélène Cixous says that she writes with her ears,<sup>26</sup> that this practice is 'absolutely inextricable from a living, full body'. In *The Pleasure of the Text*,<sup>27</sup> Roland Barthes proposes a manner of 'writing aloud' that allows us to hear 'a whole carnal

stereophony' without letting itself to be dissected as a message sent out with some or other particular meaning. According to Cixous, 'Writing is about keeping one's ears so sharp and so pointed that we may hear what the tongue is telling [us] within our own word at the very moment of enunciation'.<sup>28</sup> In a heteronomous gesture this is about reading and writing, about *thinking while listening* (to something or someone that comes from somewhere else), allowing the body to participate (because, as Lévinas demonstrates, the body never ceases to be the first to perceive the enquiry of the other). Another contemporary example may serve to illustrate this notion: the creative act of reading carried out by a musician. Daniel Barenboim, applying a very sensitive concept of hearing, deconstructs the text that tells the story of the fall of Jericho and proposes to use music (played by Palestinian and Israeli children and teenagers) to topple the wall erected through the one-dimensional attitude of those politicians who understand the future as 'more of the same'.<sup>29</sup>

There are other examples – especially poetic examples – that confirm the fact that, without casting them aside completely, we now have every right to disobey the rigid rituals of reading we have inherited in the academy and that, like all inheritance, to be legitimate, it must pass through the three transformations described in the first Zarathustra, of the camel that became 'a lion, and the lion at last a child'. This inheritance is with us in the form of philosophical, literary texts that have become 'hunchbacked' from so many dissected readings that the camel's hump must be broken down by the lion who will finally give the children all the leftovers (in the game, the child allows for possibilities that, in their functioning daily lives, adults tend to overlook). With this whimsical and yet responsible attitude of openness as we read and write it may be possible to begin receiving that *other* that, in a kind of redemption, is latent at every single moment, too close, and always *yet to come*, that thing that *still hasn't* been thought and that has everything to do with *justice*. But before concluding, let us clarify that this is not an abstract substantive. In a poetic reading, Paul Celan defines that moment when the universal suddenly acquires meaning thanks to its collision with the singular:

One speaks in vain of justice as long as the largest battleship has not been smashed to pieces on a drowned man's brow.<sup>30</sup>

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## Notes

1. Jabès (1993), emphasis added.
2. This essay offers a suggestion: that we replace the anticipation that often manifests itself in utopia with sensitivity (in its definition as the capacity to be affected and surprised by the future). Reading, as such, is understood as an exercise in sensitivity to the other, beyond any kind of altruistic voluntarism. These concerns are put into practice in the 'reading and writing out loud' workshop entitled 'Heteronomías' (Heteronomies), led by the author at the Institute for Philological Research at the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

3. Jousse (1974).
4. Illich (1993).
5. Illich (1993). The concept of reading in Hugh of St Victor dates back to 1128.
6. Saenger (1999).
7. Petrucci (1999).
8. Benjamin (1986).
9. Derrida (1994).
10. Rosenzweig (2005).
11. Derrida (1996).
12. Mosès (1992).
13. Mosès (1992: 67).
14. Lévinas (1998).
15. Jerusalem Talmud, Shkalim section, see Bialik and Ravnitzky (1955: 62) and Scholem (1996).
16. Scholem (1996).
17. Scholem (1996).
18. Jabès (1993).
19. Illich (1993).
20. Illich (1993).
21. Tadié (1999).
22. Cixous (1997).
23. Illich (1993).
24. Benveniste (1973).
25. Jabès (1993).
26. Cixous (1997).
27. Barthes (1976).
28. Cixous (1997).
29. Ramírez (2004). The author writes: 'Can Barenboim's voice and music achieve the power to help open the ears of the fundamentalists, not only of his country (Israel), but of the people on the other side who also refuse to listen? This issue is not a simple one, we all know that. But building peace, and reaching understandings that seem impossible start when we knock on closed doors and talk into closed ears, with weaponless proposals such as these, that are nothing less than a call to replace weapons with musical instruments, hatred and intolerance with harmony. Music is, after all, a question of knowing how to listen. And walls know how to listen, too – the Jewish people know that well enough. The trumpets of an orchestra can knock down walls, just as those that caused the stones from the walls of Jericho to come crashing down.'
30. Celan (2004).

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