Kertesz: On Reading

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This recently reissued collection of photographs by the Hungarian born photographer André Kertész consists of varied visions of the ubiquitous phenomenon of reading. What a fabulous idea — to photograph and make public the universal yet personal hold of the written word on our civilization! Or is it so? There is something inherently captivating about a person reading. One often is drawn to read what another is reading (we read over another’s shoulder, or often, when someone is examining a newspaper’s inner offerings, we try to peer at the front page), and capturing the phenomenon of reading in a picture seems to be a natural extension of this inquisitive instinct. Yet, at the same time, how odd that a photograph must remind us of the overpowering presence of the written word. Perhaps we should take this volume as the counterpart to the spate of recent writings on photography. Or perhaps it should be viewed as a celebration of a relation to images in decline, a sort of record for posterity of what used to be “reading.” In any case, those photographs, I would argue, create an incomplete and distorted picture of reading. They do well in pleasing the eye but do not serve as an accurate commentary on the phenomenon of reading.

Most of the pictures are delightful and mark the presence of a master behind the lens, but all are disturbing in not being disturbing. Can this be the way reading is—ever serene, soothing, enjoyable? One may have difficulty in reading due to poor sight (p. 20) or lack of resources (pp. 10, 61), but, as such, reading is not a disturbing activity to Kertész’ readers. All reading, however, and much to our good fortune, is not like reading a Harlequin “classic.” The best books provoke or agitate the still of our hearts and minds. And even the most innocent book must cut into the mind of the reader, for when the mind stands still in reading, the resultant calm can turn to mental clay. The most evocative yet troublesome picture to me is of what seems to be a scholar sitting in a broad chair suspended amidst a landscape of books—piled on a mantelpiece and upon tables, stacked on the floor, lined on shelves, scattered at his feet—comfortably reading with legs crossed (p. 50). Lucky scholar! No paralysis, nausea, revulsion before his lifetime collection of books (the scholar, however, does sit with his back to the majority of books in view, perhaps to guard against their intrusion into his obvious equanimity). Reading may make life more bearable or on enjoyable, but not without some effort and pain—elements missing in this and all the pictures in the book. Moreover, the picture shows us this book in hand but cannot tell us why this book and not another. One can imagine the master asking the scholar to show him how he reads and waiting half an hour before his subject chose something that fit his interest and mood. Photographs cannot tell us of the many motivations of reading. One can read for entertainment in a serious surrounding or seriously in diverting places. Only the subject can tell us; the photograph remains silent.

Outwardly, as in a picture, reading is a passive taking-in, but inwardly it is an interrogation, a questioning in search of a response. We question our own potential for understanding, the author’s intentions, sources, or choice of words, the relevance of the book to our current or lifetime goals. True, modern reading has lost much of the response and responsibility to the text that characterized earlier times (Steiner 1978). Most of us do not read with pencils in hand replying to and actively creating a dialogue with the text (the only pictures in the volume that show readers responding in this way are those of college students studying, on pages 13 and 33).

Indeed, we can expect to encounter less active reading of this sort as education moves from an emphasis on learning to instrumental training with its corresponding technology of response. Students now read not with pen or pencil in hand but with colored markers whose purpose is to “highlight” main points or paragraphs. One does not respond to the text as a living presence with these markers but enunciates already dead letters in hirudic colors to be resuscitated for an exam and discarded at its close. Each book yields a present occasion for forgetting. Quite opposed to their purpose, “highlighters” mark the demise of modern reading.

Yet even with reading in critical condition at present, the mind is not dead. We still strive, as we read reviews and back covers of books, or as we chat with bookstore clerks and owners, librarians, friends, or strangers, who have read what we have, to find meaning in what has been read. Reading continues well after we put the book down, as we must reckon for some time with what was read in order to understand it. While pictures appropriate the world in a snap, reading, much like music, takes time. The photographic image excludes the temporal aspect of reading by recording the act and not the action. In addition, the symmetry of the photographic image introduces an order to reading which it does not intrinsically possess. The symmetry is reflected in this volume in the tidy shelves of books in a Paris library (p. 6) and the personal symmetry of individual collections (pp. 38–39). Reading, on the other hand, is not like these photographed shelves: orderly, systematic;
and linear. We may read from the first page to the last (and even this is not necessary or recommended in some books), but within the reading one may take a hundred different detours in thought and mood, and consecutive readings may yield insights at first unrealized. Moreover, many books have excursuses built in which become independent of the body of the text and can be read apart from the rest (“The Grand Inquisitor” in The Brothers Karamazov comes to mind), and readers may have favorite chapters or sections, conclusions or quotes, which stand out from the remainder of the book (one of my favorites is Mynheer Peepocorn’s speech by the waterfall in Mann’s The Magic Mountain). A photograph can only capture the straight lines of reading and not its circles, diversions, and detours.

All of this leads us to the observation that photography alone is ill equipped to render accurately the experience of reading. Perhaps if there were a text to supplement the pictures of Kertész’ readers, the intertextuality of words and images would better reveal the reality of reading. But there is no text, only a listing of the place and date of each photograph at the end of the book. We are left only with the marvelous photographs of André Kertész and this one thought. photographs may open our eyes to aspects of reading otherwise unseen, but only written words themselves can reveal what of reading cannot be viewed but only experienced. This book reminds us that there is no substitute for reading in order to understand reading.

Reference
• Steiner, George