

## *Introduction: Reading Effects*

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The brief essays collected in this *Novel* forum originated in an April 2011 roundtable, the second in a collaborative series organized by *Novel* and Duke University's Franklin Humanities Institute. Our intention in hosting these events is to provide a public forum for discussions that highlight topics and debates of critical interest to scholars and theorists of the novel. The roundtable devoted to the question "What can reading do?" emerged from the burgeoning interest in recent years in the theory and practice of reading and the array of new critical approaches that have developed, both within novel studies and across the humanities. These contemporary investigations cast an extraordinarily wide net, cutting across traditional disciplinary and historical distinctions, adopting and adapting the languages of evolution and cognitive science, tapping the resources of new media and game theory, questioning traditional approaches to hermeneutics, rhetorical analysis, and close reading. Our forum was designed to capture the exceptional range and significant challenge of this new work. Given the heterogeneity of the approaches to reading that have developed, the question "What *is* reading?" has given way to less essentializing inquiries that examine reading as practice and seek out the diversity of reading effects: hence our interest in what reading can do.

We invited Anne Anlin Cheng, William Flesch, Alexander R. Galloway, and Lisa Zunshine to present brief position papers and Kate Flint, Aarthi Vadde, and Barbara Herrnstein Smith to offer commentaries. We asked our speakers to consider such questions as: Why has the contemporary interest in the problem of reading acquired such urgency in recent years? Is *reading* an adequate term for the interpretative and analytical projects now being undertaken in literary and cultural studies? What alternatives to the traditional figure of "reading" are available for literary scholars and others working in interpretative fields? How do new media and processes of "remediation" impact our basic understanding of what reading can do? How and to what effect has work in fields such as cognitive studies or evolutionary psychology been appropriated by theorists of reading and literary scholars? What implications do emerging theorizations of reading have for the humanities or for other fields in the university?

One powerful strand of the critique of hegemonic conceptions of reading focuses its attention on the paranoid style of the hermeneutics of suspicion; it has engendered various alternatives that seek to replace the distance and knowingness that mark suspicion with intimacy, fascination, generosity, and other modes of attention that lend themselves to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick names "reparative reading." The "reparative reading position undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks" (150) than the hermeneutics of suspicion, and it proffers a path back to the surprise of reading, which scholars of various allegiances argue

has been dulled by our by now all too conventional reading habits. Of course, there is nothing obvious or simply given about the best means to pursue what Barbara Johnson calls “the impossible but necessary task of the reader . . . to set herself up to be surprised” (15). The essays collected here undertake this task in modes historical and interdisciplinary, philosophical and comparative, formal, affective, and political, and they draw on varied canons, genres, and theoretical traditions. From the “waywardness” of a “hermeneutics of susceptibility” (Cheng), the “regenerative power” of “plastic reading” (Galloway), and the “delirious reading” (Vadde) that undoes the fixity of reader and work to the “vicarious experience” of “non-causal bargaining” (Flesch) and the “sociocognitive complexity” entailed in imagining the minds of others (Zunshine), they rethink questions of reading, readings, and readers and resist any premature closure beyond their common recognition of “reading as a process of constant displacement” (Vadde). Together, they press us to examine reading’s entailments, its force, and the way in which its transitivity puts into question the place of agency and the relation between the reader and the read, subject and object. They thus spur us to ask not simply what readers do but also what reading may do to us (Flint) and to acknowledge, at the limit, “some of the things that reading can’t do” (Herrnstein Smith). Never innocently, but with a rich appreciation for the fact that “we must say what reading we are guilty of” (Althusser and Balibar 14), these provocative essays put our critical assumptions into question, which is perhaps the most essential of the many things that reading can do.

### Works Cited

- Althusser, Louis, and Étienne Balibar. *Reading Capital*. Trans. Ben Brewster. London: Verso, 1979.
- Johnson, Barbara. “Nothing Fails Like Success.” *A World of Difference*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987. 11–16.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You.” *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003. 123–51.