

# Silent Reading in Antiquity

*Bernard M. W. Knox*

SINCE the publication of Josef Balogh's article "Voces Paginarum,"<sup>1</sup> it has become standard doctrine<sup>2</sup> that silent reading (and writing) was, if not completely unknown in the ancient world, at least so rare that whenever it was observed, it aroused astonishment, even suspicion.<sup>3</sup> This conclusion seems at first sight reasonable enough; Greek literature, at least up to Thucydides, was intended for public delivery or performance, and from the early part of the fourth century B.C. on to the end of antiquity, rhetoric was the foundation and eloquence the aim of the educational process. The evidence assembled by Balogh (which should be supplemented by that of G. L. Hendrickson)<sup>4</sup> does indeed make it perfectly clear that the normal way to read a literary text (non-literary texts are a different matter and will be dealt with later) was out loud, whether before an audience, in the company of friends or alone. But 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 reading. Are we really to imagine that Aristarchus read aloud all the manuscripts of

<sup>1</sup> *Philologus* 82 (1927) 84-109, 202-240. The original version of the article had already been published in Hungarian in 1921. The most important items of his evidence were assembled in the "Nachträge" to E. Norden, *Die Antike Kunstprosa I*<sup>3</sup> (Leipzig/Berlin 1915).

<sup>2</sup> E. G. Turner, *Athenian Books in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries B.C.* (London 1952) 14 n.4, expresses partial and qualified dissent. Though he finds that "for the Roman period" Balogh has "brought forward convincing evidence for reading aloud," he has himself produced evidence for silent reading in fifth and fourth century Greece, on which see below.

<sup>3</sup> Balogh's aim (p.87) is to prove "dass das Altertum alles, was wir heute stumm für uns lesen, stets laut las."

<sup>4</sup> "Ancient Reading," *CJ* 25 (1929) 182-96. Though published later than Balogh's article, this was read before an audience in 1921 ("most of the illustrative material cited was gathered before the recent publication of Josef Balogh") and is in any case valuable for its more judicial tone and its citations from classical authors (the bulk of Balogh's material is from Christian and mediaeval writers). Eugene S. McCartney, "Notes on Reading and Praying Audibly," *CP* 43 (1948) 184-87 has little to add; his evidence from Borneo, the New Hebrides, Dean Swift, the Babylonian Talmud and the population of Malta in the air-raided shelters is interesting but irrelevant. L. Wohleb, "Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des lauten Lesens," *Philologus* 85 (1929) 111-12, contributes an example of reading out loud from the *Passion of Saints Firmus and Rusticus*.

Homer he used for his edition? That Callimachus read aloud all the works from which he compiled his 120 volumes of *Pinakes*? That Didymus wrote his more than 3,000 volumes and read the countless books on which he based them, pronouncing every syllable out loud? Such doubts, far from being stilled by a second look at Balogh's evidence, grow stronger with every fresh example he offers.

Most of them are Roman, and from late antiquity; he could find very little evidence for Greece. Augustine is his main authority (he is cited eight times in the article), and the famous passage which describes the silent reading of Ambrose and Augustine's reaction to it (first cited in this context by E. Norden) is Exhibit A. Augustine's amazement should however be judged in the light of the facts that he was not only a professor of rhetoric but also an African provincial from a poor family; Ambrose, the son of the *praefectus* of Gaul, had been educated at Rome, and before becoming Bishop of Milan, had been consular prefect of the province of which Milan, then the imperial residence, was the capital. The two men came from different worlds, and there is no reason to suppose that Ambrose's silent reading would have excited such comment in the Italian imperial circles he had deserted to become Bishop.

In any case, Augustine, though he was at a loss to explain Ambrose's practice, was quite capable of adopting it, for at the supreme crisis of his life, when he heard the child's voice and took up the *Epistle to the Romans* to read, he read it, as he tells us, silently (*in silentio*, *Conf.* 8.12). Balogh explains this as the effect of great emotion, which at this fateful moment, robbed him of his voice. (Augustine does not say so, and Balogh has to back up his explanation with a quotation from St Gregory Nasianzenus.) Yet, in another passage cited by Balogh, Augustine's later reading of the fourth *Psalm* at Cassiacum, where he wishes the Manichees could hear him, he is in a similar ecstatic state of religious excitement but has no difficulties with his voice. Moreover he is not just reading; he is also talking to himself in the presence of God (*mecum et mihi coram te*, 9.4.). The phrases he uses make it clear enough, as Balogh admits, that what he wishes the Manichees could hear is not only his reading of the psalm but also his fervid regrets for his past errors. Although not one of these passages from Augustine is as cogent proof as Balogh thinks, his other example of Bible-reading is indeed incontrovertible evidence of solitary reading aloud. But it is one which has little bearing on the question of the reading habits of

educated Greeks and Romans; it is the case of the Ethiopian eunuch reading the prophet Isaiah in *Acts* 8.30.<sup>5</sup>

With Horace, however, we are in the mainstream of classical culture at its most sophisticated. Balogh cites *Sat.* 1.6.122-3—*aut ego lecto aut scripto quod me tacitum iuuet*—with the comment (p.90), “Horace puts special emphasis on the fact that ‘he takes pleasure in silent reading’.” The passage is more difficult and obscure than Balogh seems to realize. His explanation suggests that though he prints *iuuet* he is really paraphrasing the *iuvat* which is reported in some manuscripts but printed by none of the modern editors. This would give the sense, ‘after reading or writing, which I like to do in silence . . .’; but even so, Balogh’s case would not be as strong as he claims. Horace would in that case be distinguishing his own habit of silent reading and writing from that of, for example, Cicero, who in a very similar description (*Ad Fam.* 9.20) of his daily routine says, *aut scribo aut lego, veniunt etiam qui me audiunt quasi doctum hominem . . .* I cannot see that Horace would be putting any special emphasis on the fact; the tone of the passage shows no consciousness that his procedure might cause astonishment or need explanation—in fact it is a parenthetical detail in a description of his relaxed and very private daily routine. However, Balogh seems to agree with all the modern editors that Horace wrote *iuuet*, and with this reading the lines mean something quite different (and even less helpful for his thesis). With *iuvat*, the *quod* can refer directly to the antecedents implied in *lecto aut scripto*, as I have translated it and as Balogh’s paraphrase seems to take it (though it could also refer to an understood antecedent in the accusative, which would give the sense: ‘after reading or writing something which pleases me in silence’). But with *iuuet* it cannot refer directly to the participles, for the force of the subjunctive in the relative clause is to characterize the antecedent as a member of a class or type. This makes no sense at all if the antecedent is *scribere aut legere*, and the phrase must be understood as Bentley paraphrases it, *cum iam tunc aut legerim aut scripserim quid, quod me tacitum iuuet*—‘the sort of thing that pleases me in silence’. With this reading Balogh’s thesis leaps from the frying pan into the fire, for we are now presented with a whole class of writings of such a kind that Horace likes to read (and write) them silently. What they can possibly be I have not the faintest idea, and the best solution of the difficulties

<sup>5</sup> Even less to the point is the citation from the Talmud on pp.103-04.

raised by Balogh's insistence on understanding *tacitum* literally is to return to the interpretation of the word offered by all commentators and translators before and after Balogh: 'in quiet moments' (Fairclough), 'von niemand gestört' (Müller).<sup>6</sup> Whatever the lines mean, they are in any case dubious evidence for the abnormality of silent reading. The situation Horace describes is worlds apart from the terms of the rubric under which Balogh places it (p.88): "cases in which the reader for special reasons was forced (*gezwungen*) to depart from the general custom and read silently, in which one circumstance or another hindered him (*behindert*) from proceeding with his reading out loud."

The remaining passages which deal with the reading of literary texts come from strange sources; they are, as Balogh says, a 'bunte Reihe'. Among their authors are St Gregory Nasianzenus, Paulus Diaconus, Johannes Cassianus, St Athanasius, St Benedict, Petrarch and Grimmelshausen. I cannot for the life of me believe that they can tell us anything about the reading habits of Euripides and Callimachus, of Horace and Vergil. Only two passages merit discussion. A *carmen Priapeum* (Buecheler 68) presents us with a Priapus statue which has learned Homer from hearing the owner of the orchard read it (*dominum totiens audire legentem*). All this proves is that a certain ancient Roman, alone in an orchard, read his Homer out loud—but so, on many happy occasions, have I. More important is a passage from Lucian. In the diatribe against the uneducated book-collector he describes his manner of reading his books (*Adv. ind. 2*): "you read some of them moving smartly along (*πάνυ ἐπιτρέχων*), your eye keeping ahead of your mouth (*φθάνοντος τοῦ ὀφθαλμοῦ τὸ στόμα*)." Wieland, in his note on this passage (which is Balogh's point of departure), drew the conclusion that "the ancients, at least the Greeks, used to read all books that had any value out loud . . . it was a rule that a good book must be read out loud." It is hard to see just how this conclusion (in

<sup>6</sup> This is generally held to be the meaning of *tacitum* at another passage where Balogh takes it literally: Hor. *Sat.* 1.3.64ff, *ut forte legentem aut tacitum impellat*. Balogh admits that the phrase could perfectly well mean 'er las oder sann schweigsam nach' (and so it is taken by its most recent translator, Niall Rudd, *The Satires of Horace* [Cambridge 1966] 3—'reading or in silent thought'), but he prefers of course to take *tacitum* and *legentem* as antithetical. The support he produces for this (citations from Johannes Cassianus and Petrarch) is literally far-fetched; closer to hand is the pseudo-Acronian scholium (on 66) which explains: *ut legentem aut cogitantem*. The ultimate provenance of this note cannot of course be determined, but Keller puts it as far back as his *T'* which he assigns to the seventh century—and this makes it much better evidence than Petrarch.

itself quite sound) is extracted from the words of Lucian. This passage is in fact much more difficult to understand than a first reading would suggest. Of its three interpreters, Balogh and Hendrickson explicitly, and Wieland implicitly, take it for granted that Lucian is finding fault with the uneducated man's method of reading. This is indeed what one would expect to find in a diatribe which subjects so many aspects of its target's life to such blistering invective. Yet in Lucian's presentation of the indictment the description of his reading sounds more like a concession than an accusation. He has just compared the ignorant owner of fine volumes to a blind man unable to enjoy the beauty of his boy lovers. "You, though (*σὺ δὲ*)," he goes on, "do see your books with open eyes—you see all too much of them, by Zeus—and you read some of them moving smartly along, your eye keeping ahead of your mouth." But this cannot be the point of his criticism, for he goes on, "But this is not enough to satisfy me (*οὐδέπω δὲ τοῦτό μοι ἱκανόν*)."

The real indictment follows—ignorance of the merits or faults of what is written in the book, failure to understand the meaning of the whole and the arrangement of the words, incapacity to judge whether the writer has expressed himself accurately in accordance with the rules of good diction or has used words that are false, illegitimate or counterfeit. This impressive list of failings cannot be attributed solely to a faulty method of reading; they are due to a lack of any education whatsoever, and in fact the object of Lucian's satire is portrayed as a pretentious ignoramus, who, among other things, cannot even pronounce Greek properly (*βαρβάρους μὲν τὴν φωνὴν ὥσπερ σύ*, 4).

If this analysis is correct, the generalizations of Wieland, Balogh and Hendrickson are off to a bad start, but at least they are so far in agreement. But from this point they diverge; they have three different explanations of what is wrong with the uneducated man's method of reading. Wieland's is only implied, but seems clear enough; an over-translation is a sure clue to interpretation and he translates *πάνυ ἐπιτρέχων κτλ.* with 'aber so schnell dass die Augen usw'. Lucian does not say so, but Wieland obviously thought the man was reading too fast; this is confirmed by the rest of his remark, which runs: "all poets and especially all writers of talent and taste had to be read aloud if half of their beauty was not to be lost to the reader." It seems likely too that Wieland thought the man was reading silently. Hendrickson certainly thought so, for he cites the passage (p.192) as evidence that "reading silently" was not only unusual, "it was accounted an imperfect and

defective method of reading.” Balogh, who offers no explanation when he first quotes the passage, does so much later (p.228) in his discussion of the psychology of ancient reading. Facility in reading, he says (he is of course speaking of reading aloud), depended on long practice, and “only this practice made it possible for the twofold physical function of reading, the work of the eyes and the mouth, to unite in an unbroken whole, otherwise—to use Lucian’s phrase—the eyes would run ahead of the mouth.” Balogh evidently takes it that our man is reading aloud, but very imperfectly; in the case of a skilful reader “the two actions follow the one the other so quickly that the time-difference is no longer perceptible” (p.229). Balogh submits no evidence for this formulation of the ancient ideal of reading aloud, except an obscure phrase—*librum ab oculo legit*—which comes from the lips of no less an authority on matters cultural than Trimalchio (Petron. *Sat.* 75), the same who read about the twelve labors of Hercules in his Homer and has a cup with reliefs which show Daedalus shutting Niobe up in the wooden horse.

The passage from Quintilian (*Inst.* 1.1.32ff) which Balogh cites to support his case has the opposite effect. Early training in reading, says Quintilian, should for a long time be kept slow, until by practice the student attains speed without error (*emendata velocitas*—a phrase which raises doubts about Wieland’s interpretation of Lucian). “For looking to the right (which is what everybody recommends) and looking ahead is a matter not only of precept but also of practice, since you have to look at what follows while you pronounce what precedes...”<sup>7</sup> But this obviously describes the skill of the fully-trained reader; all Quintilian is warning against is teaching it at too early a stage. And his words describe exactly what Lucian’s uneducated man is doing; *prospicere in dextrum . . . providere . . . ut aliud voce aliud oculis agatur*, all this is the same process as that defined in *πάνυ ἐπιτρέχων, φθάνοντος τοῦ ὀφθαλμοῦ τὸ στόμα*.

The conclusion that seems to follow is that Lucian’s book-collector is reading aloud and reading quite correctly. Be that as it may, one thing does emerge clearly from the discussion, and this is the point: Lucian’s short and apparently simple sentence has given rise to two

<sup>7</sup> *Nam prospicere in dextrum, quod omnes praecipiant, et providere, non rationis modo sed usus quoque est, quoniam sequentia intuenti priora dicenda sunt . . .*

opposite views of his attitude towards his victim and four<sup>8</sup> different conceptions of just how the man is reading. And this rules it out as a reliable basis for generalizations about ancient reading habits—except for one, on which all are agreed and which did not need to be proved, that ancient reading of literary texts was usually vocal.<sup>9</sup>

One more piece of evidence remains to be discussed before the subject of literary reading is dropped; it was contributed not by Balogh but by W. P. Clark, who drew attention to it in 1931 in an article which has languished unnoticed ever since.<sup>10</sup> It is an extraordinary passage. Cicero (*Tusc.* 5.116) is discussing compensations for the loss of hearing, as he had for loss of sight in the preceding section. “If it happens that they [*i.e.* the deaf] take pleasure in songs (*cantus*),<sup>11</sup> they must first reflect that before songs were invented, many wise men lived happily, and next that much greater pleasure can be experienced in reading them than in hearing them (*deinde multo maiorem percipi posse legendis his quam audiendis voluptatem*).” Even though Cicero is still a rhetorician even when he is writing philosophy, and even though deaf men reading constitute a rather special category, Cicero could not possibly have written the concluding phrase if silent reading of poetic texts had been impossible or even a nine-day wonder—in fact the words imply that he had read them silently himself.<sup>12</sup>

None the less, Wieland’s statement (even though it may not follow from the evidence) is true, and no one would quarrel with his further claim that for the ancient world “all poets and especially all writers of talent and taste had to be read aloud if the reader was not to lose half

<sup>8</sup> A fifth should perhaps be considered: that Lucian’s man is at some indeterminate stage, halfway between loud and silent reading. Hendrickson (in another connection) justly remarks (p.193): “there are many gradations between vocal and silent reading, descending from distinct oral utterance to indistinct murmurs, to whispers, to mere lip motions, and so on through unconscious muscular movements of the tongue, throat or larynx, to pure eye-reading unattended by any enunciatory effort.” The current controversy over the beginnings of literacy in early Greece has had to reckon with the concept of different stages of literacy; cf. Sterling Dow, “Minoan Writing,” *AJA* 58 (1954) 109–10.

<sup>9</sup> An important passage which bears on this point seems to have been overlooked: Hor. *Ep.* 1.20—the address to his book. He foresees its eventual fate: it will lose its youth, grow dirty as it is thumbed by the hands of the vulgar and either become *silent* food for unlettered bookworms (*aut tineas pasces taciturnus inertis*), or be shipped off to some provincial town. *Taciturnus* here clearly means ‘unread’.

<sup>10</sup> “Ancient Reading,” *CJ* 26 (1931) 698–700.

<sup>11</sup> Clark’s impression that *cantus* “seems to include all harmonious sounds, both prose and poetry” cannot be right; the statement is an answer to the objection “*at vocem citharœdi non audiunt*.”

<sup>12</sup> It may be objected that Cicero was thinking of reading aloud as opposed to hearing the poems with the music; but this would not be any consolation to the deaf.

their beauty.” But Balogh’s extension of it, that silent reading of literary texts was an ‘Abnormität’ and would occur only when the reader was ‘gezwungen’ or ‘behindert’ can, on his evidence, obtain no better verdict than a dour Scottish ‘not proven’.<sup>13</sup>

But this is by no means the whole of his case. He also claims that silent reading of non-literary texts—letters, wills, memoranda, inscriptions—was also rare and abnormal; in fact he comes close to suggesting that for the overwhelming majority of ancient mankind (the only exception he allows is Julius Caesar), silent reading of such texts, even of letters in the presence of others, was impossible. Logically, of course, he needs to make this claim to buttress the other, for obviously if people could read letters and wills silently, there is no reason why they should not have extended this more efficient, faster method to literary texts (especially if they were scholars or voluminous readers). But here too his claim defies common sense and his evidence is inadequate.

The Suetonius passage (*Aug.* 39) which describes the court of review for the *equites* contributes nothing at all to his argument. “The mildest form of reprimand,” Suetonius tells us, “was to hand them tablets publicly which they were to read silently and at once, on the spot (*quos taciti et ibidem statim legerent*).” The tablets presumably (though Suetonius does not say so) contained a record of misdemeanors known to the court. Obviously they could have been required to read the tablets aloud, but this was *lenissimum genus admonitionis*—they were to be spared public exposure; the court of review contented itself with a demonstration that the individual concerned had not escaped its watchful eye. The word *taciti*, far from justifying the conclusion that silent reading of such a memorandum was abnormal, specifies the *lenitas* of the reprimand.

Balogh’s next example raises serious doubts about his method. It consists of two passages from Horace (*Sat.* 2.5.51–55 and 66–69). The first is the advice of Tiresias to Ulysses about what to do when offered a look at his will by the old man you hope to inherit from: refuse, remember to push it away from you, but not so that you cannot see, with a quick sidelong glance, whether you are sole heir or must share the legacy with others. Ulysses is to read the all-important second line of the first tablet quickly, furtively and, obviously, silently; the fur-

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Hendrickson, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 193: “silent reading was unusual but in what degree exceptional or possible the evidence as yet collected does not permit us to say.”

tiveness and the speed are both mentioned—*limis rapias, veloci percurre oculo*—but not the silence. Tiresias then delivers a prophecy so obscure that Ulysses has to ask for an explanation; the prophecy, which Tiresias now delivers in plain language, refers to some incident well-known in Horace's day, the details of which are far from clear to us. Nasica, evidently expecting to inherit from his son-in-law, will be urged to read the will and after many refusals will at last accept it, read it silently (*tacitus leget*) and find that nothing is left to him and his but lamentations. These are two different situations. In the first, the legacy-hunter maintains his pretence of indifference but still manages to satisfy his curiosity; in the second, Nasica will in the end accept the will from his son-in-law and this must mean that he consents to read it—there is no question of his pretending not to. We know no more of the Nasica-Coranus affair than Horace tells us; interpretation must base itself on the text alone. In the dramatic structure of the satire the prophecy can have only one conceivable function: it must be a warning to Ulysses, a salutary example of what will follow from failure to observe the advice Tiresias gives him in lines 51ff.<sup>14</sup> If Nasica had managed to get an undetected look at the will earlier he would not have been so disappointed later. Be that as it may, the two situations are clearly different: refusal and undetected reading in the one, acceptance and undisguised reading in the other; the mask of indifference maintained in the first and dropped in the second. Balogh seems to think that both passages refer to the same actual case,<sup>15</sup> and uses the first to 'explain' the second; "das '*limis oculis* [*sic*] *rapere* und das '*veloci oculo percurrere*' vereinigen sich schliesslich in der Aktion des '*tacite legere*'." He goes on (p.91) to make confusion worse confounded. 'First the swindler allows himself to be begged [*i.e.* to read the will], next he takes the tablets in his hands, yet still pretends indifference, and only later, at an opportune moment, literally 'seizes' the meaning

<sup>14</sup> Rudd, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.6) 304 n.18, doubts this. "Most editors think that its purpose was to instil caution. But if Ulysses was to avoid the fate of Nasica he should have been told where Nasica went wrong. This is not at all clear. Certainly in his reluctance to read the will (67) Nasica complied with one of Tiresias' own maxims. (51-2)" Where Nasica went wrong was his failure, during his repeated refusals to read the will, to catch a glimpse of the all-important second line of the first page. The alternative to understanding the second passage as a warning is to suspect, with Rudd, that "strictly speaking, there is no relevance, and that the tale was included simply because it was too piquant and too topical to be omitted."

<sup>15</sup> So at least it would appear from the remarks which follow his citation of 51-55: "Offensichtlich spielt Horaz auf einen dem Leser vielleicht bekannten Fall an, denn er kommt auf dieses Rezept noch einmal zurück. Der Erbschaftsjäger, Nasica . . ."

of the writing (*rapit*), with a lightening-swift glance for which he has so trained himself that he sees only what is essential.”

This is a preposterous conflation of two different situations. The first phrase is applicable to both, the second is only fully applicable to Nasica, the third is only at home in the first, the words “only later, at an opportune moment” have no basis in either text and make sense only if understood of Nasica, the next phrase uses the word ‘*rapit*’ which appears only in the first text and the rest of the sentence has no warrant in either. Of this contaminated narrative Balogh complacently remarks: “this is a not unfamiliar stage-scene; for ancient man its strangest, most distinguishing element is precisely the one that does not surprise the modern reader at all, namely that the scene is silent.” On the contrary, there are two different scenes. In the first, where the reading of the will *must* be silent, no attention is drawn to the fact; the only proper inference from this is that for Horace and his readers there was nothing the least surprising in the silent reading of a tablet so quick and furtive as to pass unnoticed. In the second the word *tacitus* is used, but there is no necessity for silence and indeed no reason for it; once Nasica accepts the will he cannot pretend indifference any more. The only way to make sense of it seems to be, as before, to ignore Balogh’s insistence on taking it literally and understand it as ‘by himself, in peace’. And I cannot help thinking that Balogh himself had some confused inkling of such an interpretation, for it seems the only possible explanation of his interpolation of the phrase “nur später, in einem günstigen Augenblick” into his weird amalgam of the two Horatian passages.

The folk-tale of the apple inscribed with words which, read aloud by Cydippe, bound her by oath to marry Acontius is cited by Balogh from Aristaenetus (Hercher 140–42). But this text is not as cogent a proof as he would like, for, as he is frank to admit, Cydippe, in Aristaenetus’ version, reads the inscription aloud because her maid-servant asks her what it says (*λέγε μοι φιλτάτη, τί τὸ περίγραμμα τοῦτο;*). What is decisive, however, says Balogh (p.100), is the fact that “Acontius has built his whole deception on the natural assumption that the girl must unconditionally, according to the law of custom, read the oath aloud (*müsse nach dem Gesetz der Gewohnheit den Schwur unbedingt laut lesen*).” If Aristaenetus had been aware of this law he would not have bothered to make the handmaid ask Cydippe what the inscription said, and Acontius is so far from trusting in the

unconditionality of the law of custom that he rolls his apple not in front of Cydippe but at the feet of her servant (*λάθρα διεκύλισας πρὸ τῶν τῆς θεραπαινίδος ποδῶν*). In Ovid, too, (*Her.* 21) the servant picks up the apple and asks Cydippe to read the inscription: *'perlege' dixit* (v. 109). Naturally enough Ovid's Cydippe writes to Acontius that she read his letter *'sine murmure'*; once bitten, twice shy. Ovid was not the man to pass up an occasion for a rhetorical conceit, and in fact later in this epistle he pursues it to the limits of absurdity. "If my oath is valid," writes Cydippe, "deceive other girls—use letters instead of an apple. Deprive the rich of their wealth, make great kings swear they will give you their kingdoms . . ." (vv.145ff). Balogh does not use this passage to prove that the rich and royal of the ancient world were incapable of reading letters in silence (though as we shall see this is what he believed): perhaps he did not notice it, perhaps even he was appalled. These lines are a solemn warning against drawing broad historical inferences from a master-rhetorician's exploitation of a folk-tale motif.<sup>16</sup>

Balogh's prize example is a historical incident, which involves a letter. Plutarch (*Brut.* 5) tells the story of the tense Senate meeting at the crisis of the Catilinarian conspiracy. Caesar and Cato were engaged in debate when a letter was brought in and handed to Caesar; he read it in silence (*σιωπῆ*). Cato immediately accused him of receiving communications from the enemy and the Senate burst into an uproar. Caesar, who was standing next to Cato, handed him the letter; Cato read it and found that it was a love-letter addressed to Caesar by Cato's own sister Servilia.

The conclusions Balogh draws from this story are astonishing. The first (pp.92-93) is that "one read even personal letters aloud in assemblies; if one did not—as we learn in this case—it caused an enormous

<sup>16</sup> Balogh's interpretation of *Ov. Met.* 9.568ff (the letter sent by Byblis to Caunus and his angry reply) will not stand up against the objections of E. Norden (printed in n.22), especially his reference to *pavidum blandita* 569, which makes little sense unless the messenger was informed of the contents of the letter. But there is an even more serious objection. Balogh (not, as we have seen, for the first time) has constructed his own narrative to bolster his thesis. He states that Byblis ordered the messenger to choose the right moment to hand Caunus her letter ("hat er ja den Befehl usw." p.101) and then explains the reason: Caunus would of course unsuspectingly (*nichtsahnend*) read the letter aloud (p.102), consequently the messenger must be sure to choose a moment when Caunus was alone. But of this order to the messenger there is not a word in Ovid; all he says is "*apta minister tempora nactus adit*" 572-73. Byblis later (vv.611-12) wonders whether perhaps her brother's angry reaction was the fault of the messenger—"non adiit apte nec legit idonea, credo, tempora"—but this is no firm basis for assuming that she gave him any such instructions.

furere.” But Plutarch does not give the slightest hint that the uproar was caused by Caesar’s silent reading or that this was the basis for Cato’s accusation. Caesar was already suspected of involvement in the conspiracy, and (as we learn from Plutarch elsewhere) he had on this very occasion just pleaded for the lives of the arrested conspirators against Cato, who had demanded a death sentence. All this is more than enough to explain Cato’s suspicion and the Senate’s reaction. In fact, in Plutarch’s other account of the incident (*Cat. Min.* 24)—which Balogh does not mention—the detail that Caesar read the letter in silence is omitted; evidently it was not necessary for an understanding of the story.

Balogh’s second inference from this text is stranger still. He believes Cato “might well have read the letter aloud before the Senate (dürfte . . . laut gelesen haben),” and in a later passage of his article (pp.101–02) he states his belief without qualification: “we have only to think of Servilia’s love-letter which Cato involuntarily (unwillkürlich) read before the whole Senate.” In other words, Cato, like Balogh’s Cydippe (but unlike Caesar) could not read silently at all.

This is surely too much for anyone to swallow. Even if he could not read the letter silently, he could have stopped when he realized what it was<sup>17</sup>—Plutarch calls it a ‘lascivious letter’ (ἀκόλαστον, *Brut.* 5). But there is no longer any reason why anyone should try to believe it, for E. G. Turner has drawn attention to a passage which proves beyond a shadow of doubt that in fourth-century Athens silent reading of a letter in the presence of others was taken completely for granted.<sup>18</sup> (And if in fourth-century Athens, why not in Republican Rome?) In the *Sappho* of Antiphanes (Kock 196, Athenaeus 10.450c) a riddle is proposed. “What is it that is female in nature and has children under the folds of its 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?” A second speaker suggests a wrong answer (which has, however, satiric political point and is probably the reason the scene was written in the first place), and then Sappho gives the correct solution. The answer is ἐπιστολή, a letter; it is a feminine noun, and its children are the letters of the alphabet. “Though voiceless, they speak to those far away, those they wish to,

<sup>17</sup> As Cydippe does in Aristaenetus: τὸν ἐρωτικὸν δόλον ἀπέρριψεν αἰδουμένη, καὶ ἡμίφωνον καταλέλοιπε λέξιν τὴν ἐπ’ ἐσχάτῳ κειμένην . . .

<sup>18</sup> *Op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 14 n.4. It was, he says, “recalled by Professor Webster.”

but for anyone who happens to be standing near the man who is reading (*ἀναγινώσκοντος*)<sup>19</sup> they are inaudible.” This piece of evidence could hardly be bettered, for it is the essential characteristic of a riddle that the answer to the puzzle it presents must be immediately and universally recognized as right—it must be based on common fundamental assumptions.

But there is more evidence still, this time for fifth-century Athens:<sup>20</sup> two passages in which silent reading is not just assumed, it actually takes place on stage before the audience in the theater of Dionysus. In neither case does the dramatist draw the slightest attention to what is happening, and this may account for the fact that these instances escaped the notice not only of Balogh but, as far as I can ascertain, of everyone else who has concerned himself with this problem.

The first is Euripides' *Hippolytus* 856ff. Theseus notices the letter which is tied to the hand of his dead wife. After some speculation about its contents (all very wide of the mark) he proceeds to open it. “Come, let me unwind the wrappings in which it is sealed and see what this letter wishes to say to me” (864–65). The chorus now proceeds to sing five lines of lyric apprehension, followed by three lines of apotropaic prayer, and then Theseus bursts out in a cry of grief and anger: “Evil upon evil, unbearable, unspeakable.” Clearly he has read the letter and read it silently—the audience watched him do so.

The second passage shows silent reading not of a letter but of an oracle. In the prologue of Aristophanes' *Knights*, Nicias comes out of the house of Demos at line 115, carrying the oracle which Paphlagon guarded most carefully, but which Nicias has managed to steal from him as he lay snoring. “Bring it here, let me read it,” says Demosthenes (*ἴν' ἀναγνῶ*) and then, like Theseus, “come now, let me see what is in it.” He cries out in astonishment as he reads; indeed, he is so affected by the contents of the oracle that he demands more drink. For five more lines he continues to express amazement and demand more wine while the anxious Nicias presses him with demands for information. Finally, at line 127, he begins to explain, and it is clear from what

<sup>19</sup> Here, for once, *ἀναγινώσκω* clearly means ‘read silently’.

<sup>20</sup> Turner (*ibidem*) offers as evidence for silent letter-reading in fifth-century Athens Eur. *IT* 762, *αὐτῇ φράσει σιγῶσα τὰγγεγραμμένα*. F. D. Harvey, “Literacy in the Athenian Democracy,” *REG* 79 (1966) 632 n.14, objects that “*σιγῶσα* in the Euripides passage . . . surely refers to the fact that the written letters are silent, not the reader . . .” The line could, however, in view of *ἄφωνα . . . λαλεῖ* in the Antiphanes passage, be taken as Turner suggests. Since the line is ambiguous, it is perhaps better not to cite it as evidence.

he says that he has read right through to the end. At 128 he finally begins to tell Nicias what he has read. This is all the more striking evidence for quick and skilful silent reading because, while he is reading, Demosthenes is giving orders for more wine, making exclamations of amazement and indulging in a rhetorical address to Paphlagon.<sup>21</sup>

These three passages, from Antiphanes, Euripides and Aristophanes, clearly demonstrate for fifth and fourth century Athens that silent reading of letters and oracles (and consequently of any short document) was taken completely for granted. But two of them do even more. They demonstrate the unreliability of the evidence collected in Part II of Balogh's article, which consists of what he calls (p.202) 'akustische Belege' in which, "deuten ein Wort, eine Wendung oder manchmal nur auch der Sinn auf die als selbstverständlich vorausgesetzte akustische Wirkung eines Textes." These are expressions such as the *voces paginarum* of his title, *pagina loquitur* etc., examples of which, as he says, are innumerable (though here again his authors are of very recent vintage<sup>22</sup>—they range from Possidius, Optatus of Mileve, Augustine, Pontius, Luxorius, Cassiodorus, Salvianus, Phocas, Tertullian and Jerome through Bernard of Morlaix and Francis of Assisi to Ronsard).<sup>23</sup> Balogh takes such expressions literally and constructs on this basis a descriptive psychology of ancient reading. The possibility that some of them, at least, are purely metaphorical is not even discussed.<sup>24</sup> It should have been. The Antiphanes riddle speaks of letters of the alphabet, which, though voiceless, raise a ringing shout (*βοήν ἰστησι γεγωνόν*) over the wave of the ocean and all the mainland. But, it turns out, they are shouting only to the addressee of the letter which contains them, for those standing by him as he reads cannot hear a thing. Phaedra's letter to Theseus is just as vocal; as Theseus tells us, in terms as 'akustisch' as any to be found in the Fathers of the Church, mediaeval saints or French Renaissance

<sup>21</sup> This passage effectively cancels out Balogh's one piece of evidence from fifth-century Greece (one of his 'akustische Belege', p.207): *Hdt.* 1.48 (Croesus and the oracles), *ἕκαστα ἀναπτύσσων ἐπώρα τῶν συγγραμμάτων—ὁ δὲ ὡς τὸ ἐκ Δελφῶν ἤκουσε . . .*

<sup>22</sup> Hendrickson, who discusses the same phenomenon, has much more respectable sources: Plato, Polybius, Longinus, Plutarch, Horace, Varro, Persius, Quintilian *et al.*

<sup>23</sup> He even includes Ambrose (*sonus litterarum*) without realizing apparently that this example, instead of strengthening his case, raises doubt about his method.

<sup>24</sup> Hendrickson, on the other hand, concludes his discussion of *ἀκούειν* and *audire* with a caution (p.191) against "pressing examples where metaphor or figurative vividness of speech may rather explain the usage." He questions the validity of Balogh's use of Augustine's *paginarum vocibus* and aptly quotes Keats' "when I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold."

poets, it sings (*μέλος*), speaks (*φθεγγόμενον*) and shouts aloud (*βοᾶ βοᾶ*). Of course it does nothing of the sort; the audience has watched Theseus read the letter, and he did so in silence.

“Can it be proved,” Balogh asks at the end of his introduction (p.87), “that the ancient world always read out loud everything which we today read silently to ourselves?” He answers his own question a few lines later by asking another: “What is the explanation of these strange phenomena . . .?” But he was counting chickens which did not hatch. The evidence so far assembled (once properly understood) answers his first question with a resounding “No!” Ancient books were normally read aloud, but there is nothing to show that silent reading of books was anything extraordinary except the famous passage from Augustine’s *Confessions*, and that is countered by the phrase of Cicero which makes sense only if understood as a reference to silent reading of lyric poets. As for letters and similar documents, Balogh’s evidence is inadequate to start with and his case is blown sky-high by evidence he did not notice.

CENTER FOR HELLENIC STUDIES

*July, 1968*