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# Reading (il)legible Pages

JOHN HALL

What is it to read a page? But there are so many pages, so many readings. Is there always a resistance from a page? Is a page always both resistance and lure? Or can you pass through or over it, skimming off its layer of language to re-embody it as speech or ineffable lived experience? I am going to take a special case of resistance, that of illegibility, to help ask the question. It may not be such a special case.

## illegible

I have found it very difficult to get this word ~~illegible~~ ~~ineligible~~ ~~intelligible~~ to behave consistently, to be intelligible as a fixed sign in the space of a page for which it is eligible. There is a seemingly irresolvable jostling for a place with at least these two other words, and a third (fourth) comes in derisively with an elegant clarity that is nowhere legible in its form. There is this jumble of 'i's, 'g's and 'l's that are the same at the beginning and end but confused in the middle. Figure 1 is a kind of graphic representation of a version of this jumbled hearing.

In this example the three words accept the conventional rule of horizontal line and have also been drawn to same length ('stretched to frame'). It is easy to see that there are three 'g's; less easy that there are three final 'e's; very difficult that there are three initial 'i's. Looking at it again I find that *intelligible* wins out over the others. Perhaps this is because I want it to. Figure 2 sticks to the rectilinear grid implied by a lineating page and enabled by the operating



• Fig. 1

matrix of a computer 'page' but slightly separates the words vertically. Is this more or less legible? Is the word sandwiched in the middle now lost? This word is 'illegible' and this word is illegible (to me, who put it there).

The software on the computer I am using finds 'inelegant/ineloquent' perfectly legible as both 'editable text' and as 'image' (see Fig. 3 over page). Any text whether legible or illegible can be read as image. But the overlaid words are illegitimate in the computer's domain of text recognition. This can suggest three overlapping categories: text operating primarily to deliver (optical) character recognition (by humans and machines); text as *legible* 'image' (in speech



• Fig. 2

# inelegant? / ineloquent?

• Fig. 3

marks to allow room in 'image' for tactility, spatiality, mobility . . .); text operating as *image-of-text*.

in/il/ill

There is something else unsettled about these words: an ambiguity of the 'in' (or transformed 'il'). In two of the three words it is a morpheme for negation (just like 'un' in 'unreadable') while in the third it is not 'in' at all but an eroded 'inter' with a spatial force of *between* or *within*. I can't get rid of this prepositional and adverbial force from the other two. Everybody knows that 'illegible' means that you can't read it; but is everybody quite so sure that it doesn't also acknowledge a performative (transformative) of *into* legibility or an uncovering of what is lurking *within* or *between* legibilities, another order of legibility.

There is also the syllabic pun of *il/ill*, suggesting two states of legibility: *ill legibility* and *well legibility*. Searchers for legibility will always find something that they can read, to the extent that filtered or suppressed legibility is often a lure into reading, if a modified and resisted reading, or a reading that finds another circuit or flow. According to Harley<sup>1</sup> reading is, at least at the level of word recognition and at least for literates, 'mandatory'. Confronted with writing you don't choose whether or not to read. If your reading is blocked what do you do?<sup>2</sup>

But you do choose, do you, to open a book? When you do open a book what you see are pages. And on those pages?

## PAGE, BOOK AND TEXT

*Page* is a term in a set of at least three, the other two being *book* and *text*. It is the middle term: a page is in a book; text is in/on a page.<sup>3</sup>

Actually it is not quite as simple as that. *Book* is standing in as a term for any generic form of folded or fixed assemblage of pages, such, for example, as a newspaper.

And although *writing* is still perhaps the primary association with page, 'text' must be supplemented with 'or image/text or image and text'. Images on pages nearly always have words in close proximity. When those words are captions they are expected to be efficient, instrumental, deferential: it is the materiality of the image that counts, not theirs.

## BOOK

A 'book' is a fold containing pages. The minimum number of pages in a book is four (including the covers). Because a book is a fold, for a reading to take place somebody has had to unfold it. A contemporary adult reader expects to do this herself. When a book - as most of them are - is a manifold, then there are many turnings. Each opening is also a closing. Every closed page is, as such, illegible. Most of the pages in the world are closed and therefore, as I write, illegible. I take it that every reader is from time to time overwhelmed by the thought of all these illegible pages.

It is easy to feel superior as a reader to some forms of illegibility but only some.

## PAGE

Most pages are now made of paper. When you fold and unfold a book you touch paper. You might even run your finger along the line just ahead of or below your reading.

So a page is a surface to be handled, touched and stroked. Each page is also a space and a view. As a space it is a site where objects are (or could be) placed (composition) and where movement takes place between them ('reading'). The objects are marks. Even an empty page is scanned, perhaps felt. On an empty page there are no legible marks. This does not mean that an empty page is wholly illegible. Its textured surface, its size, its shape, its colour, can be read. Momentum from immediately preceding reading might project onto it an imaginary spectral text. It can behave with the doubleness particular to a screen: screening off and ready for a screening.

<sup>1</sup>When you see a word, you cannot help but read' (Harley 2001: 150).

<sup>2</sup>The antiabsorptive does not so much prevent absorption as shift its lane / of engagement - forcing / a shift in attentional focus' (from 'Artifice of Absorption', Bernstein 1992: 76).

<sup>3</sup>'Writing is not on paper, like a flat projection upon a screen, but it is in the paper, as it were' (Robert Sheppard, in Cobbing and Upton 1998: no page numbers).

There are different kinds of empty pages. Some are there to be filled. Some are places of transition, pause, rest, or an extra fold like a wrapping asserting the value of the filled pages between. Others are blank because that is what is written on them: nothing, white on white.<sup>4</sup>

For a sheet (of paper, especially) to be a page, it must either be written on or available for writing; it must also either be in a book, have come from a book (what severance!), be going to a book, or otherwise mimic in its configuration what is to be found in a book.

There is no such thing as one page since a sheet that becomes a page is double-sided. To talk of a single page is to insist on forgetting *the other side*. The other side might well be an *under* side, or a *back* side. I am not sure what difference it makes to know that this is blank.

#### PAGE AS THREE 'FIELD VECTORS'

Each page, whether filled or not, is a complex force field that is a dynamic of (at least) three vectorial fields. For brevity I'll call them lineating field, framing field, mapping field.

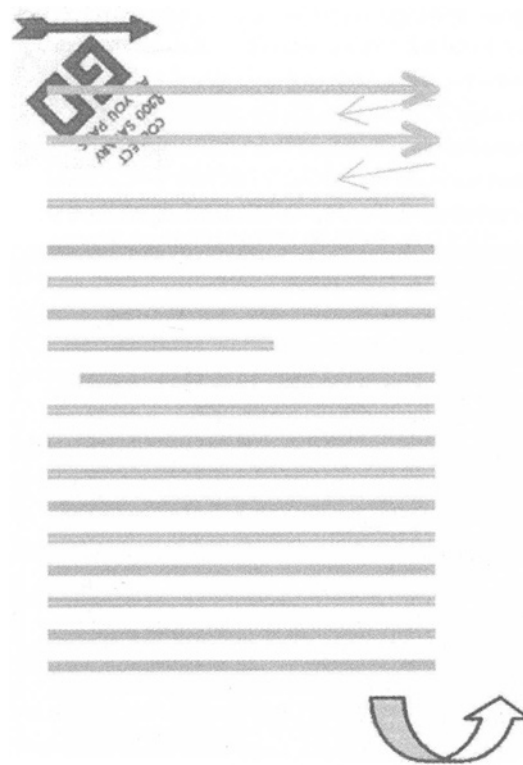
#### *Lineating field*

Within a top-to-bottom, left-to-right, writing system, the page's association with text privileges the top left-hand corner. This is a quite specific privilege like the GO square on the monopoly board (see Fig. 4): it marks a starting-point and a new lap. In this space the privilege of beginning and end of line is played down: all marks are presumed equal unless explicitly signalled otherwise (as headings or footnotes, for example). The space of the page is already a kind of strip-field, with a left edge as a place to re-start and a right to drop and return. Faced with a filled page no reader can do it all at once. The best thing you can do is to try not to stumble as you move from left to right and then down, left to right and then down, with your eyes making their saccadic jumps only slightly ahead, aware of peripheral (illegible) textuality above and below (Harley 2001: 142). The waymarks are the graphic characters belonging

to writing, all of which also face right. To sustain this particular lineating vector the marks will all be clear and recognizable and in all other ways will follow the rules of written language.

There is, as it were, a gate at top left and another at bottom right. This page is something you pass through. But then you start again even though in some respects it is a new field. A 'real page-turner' is a book which suppresses the sense of re-starting, of repetition. Though the lines are visually in parallel, procedurally they are in series and the series is hardly interrupted by the turn of the page.

How welcome the gaps and indents are, when they come - those spaces inscribed not with letter forms or even punctuation marks but with empty characters placed there by way of space bar, return key, tab key, or by lifting the pen momentarily off the surface.



<sup>4</sup> The blank and the black pages in *Tristram Shandy* are both highly legible - one to be filled, the other a graphic version of 'Alas, poor Yorick'. Images of these can be seen on the Glasgow University Library website. The image of the blank page (147) shows that it is not blank at all. The text of p. 148 shows through, to my eye just below legibility (Sterne 2000).

• Fig. 4

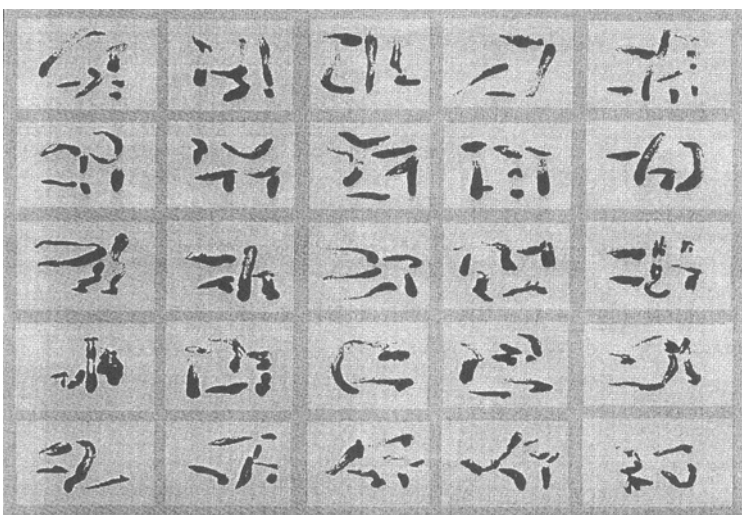
Lack of graphic clarity in this kind of page will stall or crash a reading, provoke obsessive decipherment or just encourage you to skip. This is page in a relay of pages. Everything moves forward. You can always go back to get a better run at it, use the momentum to guess your way through.

Andrew Powers is one writer who has recently exploited relative contrast to pick out a secondary text and leave the faint tones of the original text difficult to read (Lama Lobsang Darjy and Powers 2003). Tom Phillips has of course taken varied and extreme approaches to the same principle in his continuing work on *A Humument* and its related texts (Phillips 1992, 1997). Forced Entertainment have used selective obliteration in their textual version of 'Speak Bitterness' (Forced Entertainment 1995: np).

#### PAGE AS FRAME

The page's framed character, usually reinforced with a margin, organizes the space quite differently, playing up its relationship with pictorial space and with conventions of composition that are to do with containment, rather than with passage, with a mirroring back of held foveal vision rather than with the mobility of a traveller's searching gaze, with scanning rather than forwarding, with marks that form visual constellations rather than with linguistic

• Fig. 5. Bob Cobbing and Lawrence Upton (1998) *Word Score Utterance Choreography in Verbal and Visual Poetry* (no page numbers)



tracks. Sequence of engagement is relatively open and it is quite possible to look at writing without reading it – in fact to recognize that writing is just a particular way of making marks on paper. It may be enough for marks to look like writing.

The term 'constellation' is intended to suggest that not all marks in the framed page are equal – blocks, graphic edges, swirls, implied centres, patterning, all these will establish a viewing or reading hierarchy that is not the same as in a lineated sequence.

In the page as a frame it may not be at all clear what is signal and what is noise. When the framed page is a formal determinant within textual genres, the page is then not just where writing happens; it belongs to writing.

At this point let me remind you that I am suggesting that all three vectors are at work within any page, with their relative force varying in readerly expectation and textual realization. Lineated reading has now such a strong history that many pages are divided into grids of visual frames, to be read from top left as in the set of ideograph-like figures made by cris cheek using his tongue and various dyes (see Fig. 5).

#### PAGE AS MAP

And thirdly, mapping: the rectangular plane of the page provides axes and coordinates for mapping position, movement, orientation, time. As a map the page is a space allowing for the remembering or anticipation of specific locations, or journeys and connections other than the lineated or constellated ones: a graphic or textual item with its own specific coordinates. As an illustration, when you are looking for a particular phrase or sentence in a book you have read, don't you recall that it is, for example, on the left (the verso), about two-thirds of the way down? Perhaps *searching* always treats pages as maps.

A page as a map doubles as a record and as a notation. Shape and position of graphic marks on the page are indexical, have a motivated analogical relationship with something else: a

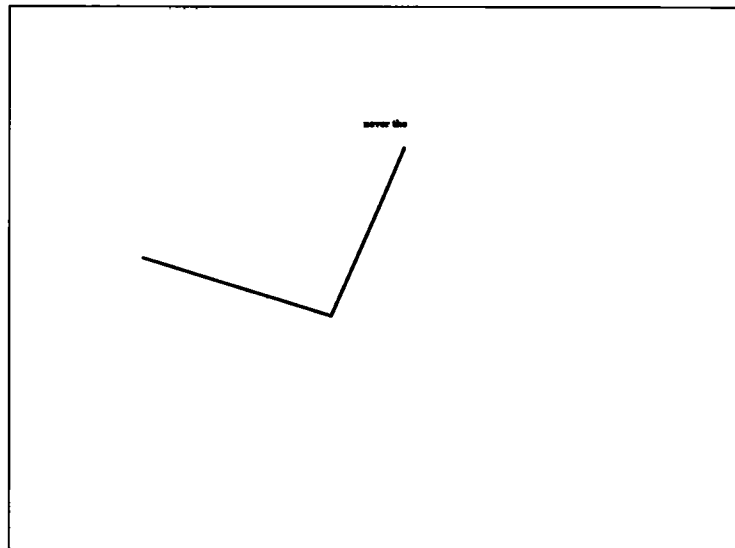
metrical line, for example, an indicator of the relation of breath to reading (for example, Charles Olson), an indicator of direction of a walk (Richard Long or Hamish Fulton), or movement through an enclosed site (Fig. 6), 'notation' for improvised performance (Bob Cobbing 1999), directionality of thought or historical overlay (Susan Howe). Any form of indentation from left margin or wrapping of line before the right marks the space of the page as cartographic.

The strictly lineated page is a prose page. There are variants, such as the list-page or table-page. In a prose page, tempo is carried within syntax and morphology - with lexicon, typeface and line-spacing playing parts too - not as markers but as features of variable resistance internal to the process of reading. The length of the line is also significant but this is a decision of page-width and margin and is probably made by the publisher.

A mapped page may even be concerned in mapping morphological and syntactic features, breaking and shaping words and grammar to re-reveal their parts, perhaps to transform the part they can play in 'speech'. It will use spatial configuration to map tempo or to complicate time in a trapped angle between the time of concatenation and the space of composition. In a mapped page there is more than one syntax at work, more than one morphological set. Forms of lettrism can treat each individual character as a morpheme within a grammar that may not ever be fully actualized.

#### TEXT

The three vectors are different ways of talking about anticipations and realizations of different logics for patterns of marking. *Marking* on pages is usually done with ink and provides the *figure* to the page's *ground*. And in this context I am talking specifically about those kinds of marks that are available as the graphic means for writing, and, also, those marks that sufficiently resemble writing to suggest through their presence that writing



• Fig. 6. Caroline Bergvall, *Eclat* (1996: 44)

may be the topic if not the means of the marks (see Fig. 7).

Let's rehearse something about the recursivity involved in alphabetic writing whose destination is a page.

There is a surface ready. This will act as ground.

Assuming four lines of text, the first line is marked by  
 its space through marking, marking, marking, marking, marking  
 Mark of sound, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking  
 the presence of writing, marking, marking, marking, marking

To the end of the line, about four lines high, over, marking  
 lines to finish and marking, marking, marking, marking, marking  
 marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking  
 marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking

Denoted for, partly and off, marking, marking, marking, marking  
 to go at the top, the marking, marking, marking, marking, marking  
 marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking  
 marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking

Mark of marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking  
 marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking  
 marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking  
 marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking

Mark of marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking  
 marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking  
 marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking  
 marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking

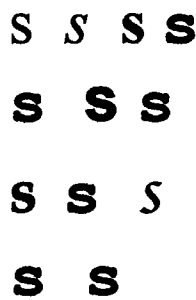
Mark of marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking  
 marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking  
 marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking  
 marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking, marking

• Fig 7. A map of prosodic form: it is most certainly a poem that has been rendered 'illegible'

It may not yet be a page. It may be a sheet. It may be a screen. This surface must be fit for the purpose of legible marking - not too absorbent or too resistant, too rough, too crumpled, too dark, too bright. There will be the means - equipment and materials - for applying marks to that surface. Each mark will contrast with the surface to which it is applied and will stand out from that surface as figure to ground. Too much or too little contrast - both of these disturb reading.

The precise shaping of each mark is already itself marked with a history of association - in other words these tiny 'meaningless' elements that are used to set language in motion are already written all over with 'meaning'.

These marks of writing, these letters, punctuation marks, numbers and other related symbols, that can currently be shaped by hand (usually using an implement) or relayed through a keystroke, relate to the soundedness of spoken language. This is not at all exact. For one thing their grapheme-phoneme relationship is not in all respects fixed. And for another, the correspondence relies not on actual sounds and fixed character forms but instead assumes zones of differentiation within systemic sets of visual signs belonging to graphology and of sound signs belonging to phonology. Here is a range of drawings of the letter 's' currently available in the top part of the font set of Microsoft Word.



As a form of marking, writing lies anywhere on a continuum between being a species of line drawing and a species of stamping - in other words applying the already drawn. It is never a case of drawing what you see or hear. It is always a matter of re-drawing drawings that have set purposes in a given writing system and of doing so in a context where different modes and styles of drawing operate too as registers of affect and differential social exchange ('In your best handwriting . . .').

The word 'drawing' catches very well the cursive movement of a hand over paper. It will not do for the punctiveness of cuneiform or the soft percussiveness of computer keyboard writing.

This latter is of course a form of clip-art. The drawings are already in memory. Choose the style (font) and select with a stroke. You will not see that I hit the keys in anger from an impression on paper. You will not witness my tentativeness, verging on the illegible. If I want you to see my anger I shall need to represent it as a deliberate supplement. I shall choose tentativeness as sign, perhaps by doing no more than damping the contrast between figure and ground. Gesture of a hand mark is brought back in as a simulation.

These graphic marks are crucially members of combinatorial sets. They are added together, usually in horizontal lines, to make syllables and words, using conventions of spacing or of joins that preserve as well as possible their differential status ('rn' not 'm', for example). Legibility counts on the integrity of the letter form - its size, shape, density, contrast with ground, spacing, stylistic consistency with other letters in the set.

Using unfamiliar or ineligible combinations (consonantal strings without vowels, for example) will block sounding and frustrate word recognition.

Writing has come to rely on punctuation - crucially on word spacing - but also on parsing markers - switches at clausal or sentence joins. Punctuation marks are enablers of reading but do not have the status of graphemes. To produce an illegible page, strip out all punctuation including word spaces. Alternatively treat punctuation marks as belonging to their own exclusive combinatorial set (for example Bergvall 1996).

Where there is writing - or something that looks like writing - there is always something to read. Resistance in one layer might re-route reading to another.<sup>5</sup>

#### LEGIBILITY OF TEXT

In alphabetic writing systems, basic legibility relies on grapheme-phoneme transfer: that individual graphemes can be recognized and discriminated from within a written-language set *and* recognized as indices of phonemes that are thereby activated *as though* they belong to the sound shapes of spoken language.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Lacan's reply to M. Valabrega, when he has just said: 'In consequence it is the forgetting of the dream that is the obstacle', 'It isn't the obstacle, it's part of the text' (Lacan 1991: 126); or Gertrude Stein (cited in Perloff 1998: 264): 'it is wonderful how handwriting which is illegible can be read, oh yes it can'.

Below or to the side of this base, there can be: recognition and discrimination of graphemes with no or limited transfer; recognition that there *are* graphemes on the page (see Fig. 5, above) but without knowledge of the system.

At a higher level, the grapheme-phoneme transfer has to be effective enough for the sequenced combinations in the graphological modality to activate transfer onto a parallel modality of phonological combinations, leading to the articulation of syllables. This doesn't mean that you have 'understood' - you may be effecting this transfer in a language that you know just well enough to sound in your head but not well enough to be at ease with its lexicon and grammatical construction. There may not, in other words, have been a phoneme-morpheme or grapheme-morpheme transfer. You could at this level produce a homophonic translation but not a literal one.

Fluent legibility (reader *and* text) produces further and further transfers into semantic exchange and, most importantly, into pragmatic engagement with the text's world and the world of the text.

#### TEXTUAL TRANSACTIONS

I have been treating legibility and illegibility as sets of conditions affecting transactions of readers with marks on pages, where the marks either belong to or gesture towards writing.

A will to read has to be in play for the terms to have any sense at all. Obviously a given text can be seen to meet conditions of legibility without being legible to *me* because I don't know the language, the writing system, am unfamiliar with the handwriting of a person, place or time, or am simply not practised at coping with a wide range of letter forms. Parties to the transactions of reading are not equal. An easier solution would be to describe legibility as a condition of a text rather than a condition of relationship with a text. But there's no legibility - and therefore no illegibility - without readers.

Legibility could be the term for the textual condition where the graphic marks are

performing their linguistic function without in any way drawing attention to themselves. They simply (!) carry a reader's desire into the text as though this were a wholly paraphrasable domain. They provide a signal whose 'noise' is not even noticed by a reader absorbed in narrative or argument or some instrumental transaction that is the context of the message. The 'message' is the text and the graphic marks are the channel or perhaps operating code, no more visible than the computer languages that provide a deep structure for the 'user-friendly' interface.

There are variations to these neutral conditions. One is that the code can be degraded, be very noisy, and you struggle to listen to the signal through all the noise. Another is that the signal is so noisy you shut it out, you don't bother. Another is that you find yourself treating the noise as the signal.<sup>6</sup> And here we may have differences between illegibility, the representation of illegibility and a readerly code-switch, that looks for readability in a different part of the message (Hayles 2002: 50-1). Finally - and I have Jakobson's definition of the poetic in mind here (Jakobson 1960) - the elements of the code might themselves *become* the message through phatic display, hyper-legibility.

In all but the condition of neutral or 'ideal' legibility, a reader's desire encounters friction at the very moment of activation, is obstructed, distracted or refracted by any questionable status of the mark-page relationship. Consciousness of legibility is already a kind of il/legibility, is a material reminder of the material processes of reading and cannot ever mark an absence of any meaning-affect-effect. You can always walk away but already something has happened. A mark that belongs to writing is always a mark or trace of utterance as well as an instance of a writing system. As sign of utterance it will always provoke some form of psycho-graphological reading, however casual. A sign has been left and this already implies a someone; perversely this someone may have tried to obscure the very sign they have left; there may have been later

<sup>6</sup> N. Katherine Hayles discussing Roland Barthes' *S/Z* in Hayles (1990: 188): 'Barthes concludes that "literatures are in fact arts of noise" and declares that this "defect in communication" is "what the reader consumes".'





of remappings and reinterpretations of the human body through its cybernetic engagement with texts (Hayles 2002: 51)? Or acts of avoidance - holdings or foldings back within acts of writing from what is too appalling to be written? There are so many pages, so many illegibilities.

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