

## POSTSCRIPT ON SILENT READING

The purpose of this sequel to A. K. Gavrilov's discussion (pp. 56–73) is to call attention to the following passage from Ptolemy, *Περὶ κριτηρίου καὶ ἡγεμονικοῦ*:

πρὸς μὲν γὰρ τὸ κρίναι τι καὶ εὐρεῖν αὐτὸ ἕκαστον ὁ τῆς διανοίας ἐνδιάθετος αὐτάρκης· καὶ οὐδὲν ὁ προφορικός ἐνταῦθα συμβάλλεται· θορυβεῖ δὲ μᾶλλον καὶ περισπᾷ τὰς διασκέψεις, ὅταν ἐνεργῇ, παραπλησίως ταῖς αἰσθητικαῖς κινήσεσι· διόπερ ἐν τε ταῖς ἡρεμίαις καὶ ταῖς ἡσυχίαις μᾶλλον εὐρίσκομεν τὰ ζητούμενα καὶ κατὰ τὰς ἀναγνώσεις αὐτάς, ἂν σφόδρα τις ἐπιστήσωμεν, ἡσυχίαν ἄγομεν· πρὸς δὲ τὸ τοῖς ἐντυγχάνουσι ποιεῖσθαι τὰς τῶν ἐσκεμμένων παραδόσεις ἡ διάλεξις χρησίμη.

The reason [sc. why the only proper purpose of uttered *logos* is to get oneself understood] is that for judging a thing and discovering its nature, the internal *logos* of thought is sufficient: uttered *logos* makes no contribution here—rather, its activity, like the exercise of our senses, disturbs and distracts one's investigations. That is why it tends to be in states of peace and quiet that we discover the objects of our inquiry, and why *we keep quiet when engaged in the readings themselves* [sc. the readings required for research?] *if we are concentrating hard on the texts before us*. What talk is useful for, by contrast, is passing on the results of our inquiries to other people.

(ch. 5.1–2 = pp. 8, 13–21 Lammert)<sup>1</sup>

This text has been available to classical scholars since the *editio princeps* of 1663. Instead of a dramatic representation of a single example of reading—an agonizing one for Theseus and Augustine, a thoroughly enjoyable one for Demosthenes—what we have here, in the sentence I have italicized, is a calm, straightforward statement about reading in general. No problems about the inference from art to life; this is a statement about life.

As such, it refutes at one blow the army of scholars, both before and after Balogh, who have proclaimed 'the extreme rarity of silent reading in antiquity'.<sup>2</sup> Knox has already given us (i) probable proof that letters and similar documents were read silently in the fifth century B.C.<sup>3</sup> and (ii) definite proof that lyric poems were read silently in the first century B.C.<sup>4</sup> Gavrilov has now added, among other things, (iii) a clear and convincing rebuttal of the widespread myth that Augustine in the fourth century A.D. was amazed by Ambrose's silent reading; he was not amazed but upset, and concerned to find a justification for the Bishop's reclusiveness. Set aside that myth and there remains evidence that the ancients often

<sup>1</sup> The text quoted is not quite Lammert's. The comma after ἐνεργῇ is due to the Liverpool–Manchester seminar, whose useful edition with translation and short commentary forms ch. 11 of Pamela Huby and Gordon Neal (edd.) *The Criterion of Truth* (Essays written in honour of George Kerferd), (Liverpool, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> I quote the phrasing of W. B. Stanford, *The Sound of Greek* (Berkeley, 1967), p. 20 n. 4. At p. 2 Stanford writes, 'There is no clear reference at all to silent reading by any Greek, named or unnamed, until after the fourth century A.D.'

<sup>3</sup> B. M. W. Knox, 'Silent Reading in Antiquity', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 9 (1968), 421–35. The qualification 'probable' is to acknowledge that one should be cautious about inferring from art to life. Knox's case is strongest—indeed, it seems to me that it is unassailable—where humour is involved, as in Aristophanes' *Knights*.

<sup>4</sup> The proof is Cicero, *Tusc.* 5.116, for which Knox (p. 427) acknowledges a debt to W. P. Clark, 'Ancient Reading', *Classical Journal* 26 (1931), 698–700. What Cicero says (to show that deafness is not a terrible affliction) is that far greater pleasure comes from reading the poems than from hearing them sung. This could be an ancient anticipation of the point Gavrilov makes, with reference to Goethe, pp. 60–61 above.

read aloud (as do poets and parents today), but no serious evidence that it was rare for them to read silently.<sup>5</sup> Ptolemy in the second century A.D. testifies (iv) that they often did read silently, for the mundane reason that voicing the words is a distraction to thought.

No doubt questions arise about the scope of Ptolemy's 'we': how wide does it spread in geographical space, how far back in time, how far down the social ladder? These are good questions for historians of ancient literacy. But they only arise because Ptolemy's statement is clear proof that long before Augustine met Ambrose it was normal practice among educated people to read to themselves in silence.

To make the point vivid, we may recall the well-known story in Plato's *Phaedo*. Socrates first got to know about Anaxagoras' philosophy by *hearing* someone read from his book (97bc). There are similar scenes in which a book is read aloud to a group of two or more at the beginning of Plato's *Parmenides* (127bd) and *Theaetetus* (142d–143c).<sup>6</sup> The difference between these examples and the *Phaedo* story is that the reading of Anaxagoras' book was evidently incomplete. It fired Socrates with enthusiasm for teleological explanations, but he had to get hold of the book and read it for himself to find out what Anaxagoras could teach him (97d–98b). He read it as fast as he could (98b 5). Would we have heard him do it?

The answer most classical scholars will give to this question is 'Yes'. Ask them how they know, and those who remember will mention Augustine. That one passage has so shaped the outlook of generations of sober, and normally critical, students of the ancient world that the few who have noticed Ptolemy's contribution have been unable to read what he says.

Thus A. Brinkmann, commenting on the sentence I italicized, contrives to find in it further evidence for the ancients' practice of normally reading aloud: 'Diese Wörter liefern ein weiteres Zeugnis für die neuerdings öfter besprochene Gewohnheit des Altertums, für gewöhnlich laut zu lesen'.<sup>7</sup> Balogh's comment on the sentence comes in the middle of a discussion of monastic reading habits. He says that, when serious reflection is involved, we have to read silently to be able to achieve the most intense concentration: 'Handelt es sich daher um ernstliches Nachdenken, so müssen wir stumm lesen, damit die *intensivste* Denkarbeit ermöglicht werde' (emphasis mine, not Ptolemy's).<sup>8</sup> Unlike Brinkmann, Balogh seems to realize that the passage runs counter to his overall thesis. But the realization is momentary. Having inserted a superlative which is not present in the Greek, thereby insinuating that the case is quite exceptional,<sup>9</sup> he returns immediately to his discussion of the need for peace and quiet in monastic communities of later antiquity and the Middle Ages.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. G. L. Hendrickson, 'Ancient Reading', *The Classical Journal* 25 (1929–30), 186: 'By inference from many passages elsewhere we may conclude, as will appear, that ancient reading was habitually aloud; *but no one else* [sc. apart from Augustine], it would seem, *has had occasion to comment on the strangeness of silent reading*' (italics mine).

<sup>6</sup> It would be unwise to underestimate the *economic* aspect of such events. Exciting new books did not come out in a print-run of several thousand paperback copies for all to buy. Sharing books was a brute necessity—as it still is in many less privileged parts of the world today.

<sup>7</sup> 'Scriptio continua und anderes', *Rheinisches Museum* 67 (1912), 620, n. 1.

<sup>8</sup> J. Balogh, "'Voces paginarum': Beiträge zur Geschichte des Lauten Lesens und Schreibens', *Philologus* 82 (1927), 105 with n. 1, where Brinkmann is credited with bringing the passage to his notice.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. p. 220, where Balogh admits that silent reading and writing are not unheard of, but claims to have shown that they are always the exception.

Such is the treatment meted out to the one plain general statement about how people read that has come down from antiquity for us to read today.<sup>10</sup> If the statement is noticed at all (classicists too seldom look into the writings of Greek and Roman scientists), it is misread (Brinkmann) or mistranslated (Balogh). Let it not be said, then, that I exaggerate when I speak of Augustine's amazement at Ambrose's silent reading as a 'myth'. It has exercised the function of a myth. Despite the efforts of Clark,<sup>11</sup> Knox, Gavrillov, and myself to dispel the illusion, it will probably continue to exercise a powerful influence on the community of classical scholars—and on specialists in other fields (biblical studies, renaissance studies, medieval history, etc.) who rely on us for information about the ancient world.<sup>12</sup>

Let me try again. In *Enneads* I 4, 10 Plotinus (more than a century before Augustine) needs an example to illustrate the idea of an activity which can be pursued without self-reflexive awareness of what one is doing. He chooses reading: 'A reader is not necessarily aware that they are reading, least of all when they are really concentrating . . . Conscious awareness, in fact, is likely to enfeeble the very activities of which there is consciousness' (tr. after Armstrong). Plotinus is profound. But for the profundity he is pursuing here he needs as mundane an example as he can find. His example, like Ptolemy's, is reading—silent reading. Reading aloud would not suit his point at all.<sup>13</sup>

The same goes for a confession that Augustine makes to demonstrate a philosophical claim about attention and the will:

For it happens even when reading—it has happened to me very often—that I have read through a page or a letter and did not know what I was reading, and so had to read it again.

(*De Trinitate* XI viii 15; tr. McKenna)

Well, would we have heard Socrates reading the book of Anaxagoras? Maybe, maybe not. He was reading solely for the content, after all, in haste to find the teleological explanations he had been led to expect. For all anyone can say to the contrary, he skimmed through in silence,<sup>14</sup> with such concentration that no-one heard anything but a sigh of disappointment as he came to the end.

Robinson College, Cambridge

M. F. BURNYEAT

<sup>10</sup> It deserves emphasis that the statement, besides being plain and straightforward in itself, comes from a work so boringly plain and straightforward that the most recent discussion sums it up as 'bland': A. A. Long, 'Ptolemy on the Criterion: an Epistemology for the Practising Scientist', in *The Criterion of Truth*, op. cit., p. 153. The tone and context of Ptolemy's remark ensure that modern scholars should treat it as the plainest of plain statements of fact.

<sup>11</sup> N. 4 above.

<sup>12</sup> For a sobering illustration, see Frank D. Gilliard, 'More Silent Reading in Antiquity: *Non omne verbum sonat*', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112/3 (1993), 689–96. He has to rebut the myth because Balogh has had more effect than Knox.

<sup>13</sup> Pace the comment ad loc. by Rudolf Beutler and Willy Theiler, *Plotinus Schriften* Bd. V (Hamburg, 1960): 'Der Lesende: es ist offenbar noch an den Lautlesenden, Vorlesenden gedacht'. How could anyone but a zombie read *aloud* without being consciously aware and in control of their activity? The brusque confidence of this scholarly comment shows how powerful the myth can be.

<sup>14</sup> I forbear from pressing the phrase ἀναγινώσκων ὁρῶ at 98b 8.