

Introduction to paper
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Embodying Literature

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Introduction

We sit quietly in a comfortable chair. Our hand occasionally turns a page, whose brittle sound we scarcely hear. We might scratch our forehead or cross our legs, but we barely move, so deeply absorbed in our book. Our bodies disappear.

This is the common wisdom—that our bodies remain inactive and are thus inconspicuous to us when we become immersed in reading. It's part of the story about being transported to another world and another body, or series of bodies, crafted of words. I want to suggest that this notion of the quiet, well-behaved body that doesn't intrude into one's reading is, itself, a fiction. And not because I am using the notion of body in a physiological sense to refer to the focusing of the eyes or the deciphering of phonological and graphic inscriptions. I am not even referring to the bodily arousal that one experiences in connection with familiar emotions, such as those elicited when we respond with sadness to the death of a long-suffering character, with joy to the reunion of a fictional family, or even to those emotions evoked from the crafting of the work, like admiration for a complex narrative or pleasure with rhythmical phrasing. This is not to say that this discussion of bodies will eschew talk of emotion--far from it--but that it comes in through the back door, as related to my central concern.

Hypothesis

The principle interest here is to develop a hypothesis about a way in which readers use their bodily processes—specifically, those of the somato-viscero-motor systems, for what I call a *reinterpretation*. A reinterpretation occurs when the reader becomes aware of some component of these systems and reinterprets it as a property of something that does not originate in the body. This non-bodily something might be an object in the external world, like a sculpture, a landscape, or a fiction, that a person experiences through perception or memory. For purposes here, this non-bodily thing is the work of literature, which includes both the fictional reality--the world of characters, actions, and landscapes created by written signs--as well as the physical qualities of the material object that supports the inscription. This reinterpreting operation permits



the reader to project these bodily systems into the non-bodily object. As a result of the reinterpretation process, the reader creates and experiences the reality of the fictional world and its material construction by using the very substance of the reader's own body.

I explore this hypothesis by way of contrasting it with a more familiar bodily response, which I call a *simulation*. This consists of the reader's imitation of the bodily actions a character performs or the bodily-expressed emotions a character feels. As both reinterpretations and simulations are, at best, underestimated in reading, I discuss their mutual importance, as well as the distinctive qualities of the reinterpretation. I begin fleshing out the reinterpretation hypothesis, so to speak, by examining a paragraph from an intriguing short story by Italo Calvino, *The Form of Space* (1968), which might prove to elicit bodily feelings from the reader of this essay, and by following this with a description of how the passage might be experienced as a simulation. Although I thus delay my exposition of the reinterpretation concept, I do so in order to develop the very unfamiliar concept of a reinterpretation by way of contrasting it with the more familiar simulation.