

Research Article

# An Examination of Etho-Poetic Reading Scenes in the Works of Jorge Luis Borges and Pascal Quignard

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## Abstract

This paper examines reading scenes in the works of Jorge Luis Borges and Pascal Quignard with the objective of studying the thematization and presentation of the etho-poetic aspects of reading in contemporary literature. An introductory chapter presents an overview of recent reading theories and the concept of the 'reading scene', which originated in writing studies (Campe, Barthes, Stingelin et al.) as well as the notion of 'etho-poetics' (Barthes, Foucault). Thereafter, the analysis turns to two works by Jorge Luis Borges, *La biblioteca de Babel* and *El libro de arena*, and then to Pascal Quignard's *Lectio* and his novella *Le lecteur*. The objective of this paper is to define the different ways in which reading and life are intertwined, examining this relationship at three distinct levels: Firstly, at the level of creating literature out of reading, which represents a crucial element of the poetics of both Borges and Quignard. As will be demonstrated, both authors make extensive reference to Proust's *Sur la lecture*. Secondly, the relationship between reading experiences and life will be examined in the context of the diegetic world. Thirdly, at the level of the reception, metalepsis functions as a means of inciting the concrete reader to consider reading from an etho-poetic perspective. In addition to these parallels, it can be assumed that in the texts of Borges, the transformative potential of the reading act is depicted as commensurate with the social life of the readers. In contrast, Quignard's work illustrates the etho-poetic dimension of reading as an asocial practice, dissociating the reader from the social context.

## Keywords

'Reading Scene', 'Etho-Poetics', 'lire en levant la tête', Writing

## 1. Introduction

Reading is one of the most prominent topoi of literature. As cultural and individual practice it has the power to generate actions and shape our lives. Whether the books are read silently, alone and in solitude or aloud, in society and public, literary reading scenes always point at the entanglement of writing and reading<sup>1</sup>. From this perspective it is secondary if the readers are

fictitious or real. The lives of Don Quixote and Emma Bovary are just as much concerned as the life of Augustinus, seeing Ambrosius reading silently, or the lives of Borges and Quignard, who create new literary texts out of their readings. In

<sup>1</sup> The representation of reading in literature and its consequences for the social attitudes of the readers give rise to different models of reading in literary studies, including *Quichottisme*, *Bovarisisme*, and *Wertherisme*. In the history of literature,

the effects of reading on the life of the reader have been evaluated in two distinct ways. On the one hand, reading has been identified as potentially harmful activity, with examples including the loss of one's sense of reality or addictive reading habits. On the other hand, reading has also been recognized as a beneficial activity, particularly in cases where the potential for subjectification through reading or the joy derived from reading are given priority in examining the effects of reading [1].

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essence, the act of reading is perceivable in literature only when it stimulates writing about it. This concept is referred to in recent literary studies as a ‘reading scene,’ which will be discussed in greater detail at a later point [2, 3].

This paper aims to examine the ethical and poetic potential of reading as depicted in the works of two bibliophilic authors: the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) and the French Pascal Quignard (\*1948). The reading scenes of Borges, as exposed in *La biblioteca de Babel* (1941) and *El libro de arena* (1975), and Quignard’s reading scenes as depicted in his novella *Le lecteur* (1976) and observed in the XXX<sup>th</sup> *Petit traité “Lectio”* (1990), offer us two distinct perspectives on conceptualizing and presenting the ethical effects of reading in literature. A comparison of reading scenes in the works of Borges and Quignard is particularly fruitful, since their reading scenes simultaneously present *and* reflect on the implications of reading for life, problematizing the entanglement of fiction and reality on multiple levels. We assume that the etho-poetic dimension of reading in the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges reveals the transformative power of reading as compatible with social life, while Pascal Quignard’s fragments emphasize the dissociation of the reader from society as a prerequisite for experiencing reading as a life-changing exercise. In the case of the short story *La biblioteca de Babel*, the characters inhabit a single fictional universe in which all individuals read. In contrast, Quignard’s novella *Le lecteur* depicts readers who withdraw into solitude and who eventually dissolve into nothingness. Before delving into the specifics of reading and etho-poetic reading scenes in the works of Borges and Quignard, it is imperative to first establish a clear comprehension of the denotation of these concepts.

## 2. Etho-poetic Reading Scenes

The reading scenes in Augustinus’ *Confessions* counts among the topics that illustrate not only the relation between reading and life, but also symbolize the value of written literature and its silent reading practices. Jorge Luis Borges and Pascal Quignard both refer to that ancient reading scene as crucial for modern literature.

In *Del culto de los libros* (1951), Borges explicitly cites and comments on a longer passage of Ambrosius’ then-new practice of silent reading that impressed Augustinus:

San Agustín fue discípulo de San Ambrosio, obispo de Milán, hacia el año 384; trece años después, en Numidia, redactó sus *Confesiones* y aún lo inquietaba aquel singular espectáculo: un hombre en una habitación, con un libro, leyendo sin articular las palabras.

Aquel hombre pasaba directamente del signo de escritura a la intuición, omitiendo el signo sonoro; el extraño arte que iniciaba, el arte de leer en voz baja, conducir á a consecuencias maravillosas. Conducir á, cumplidos muchos años, al concepto del libro como fin, no como instrumento de un fin. (Este concepto místico, trasladado a la literatura

profana, dar á los singulares destinos de Flaubert y de Mallarmé de Henry James y de James Joyce) [4].

Ambrosius’ reading experiences, described by Augustinus in the Sixth Book of the *Confessions*, demonstrates the book’s self-legitimization and literature as an end in itself, since this reading scene not only inspired Augustinus to write about it, but, read by Borges, it creates further thoughts on modern literature as well as new literary texts. This quotation clearly supports the argument that literature has an aesthetic *and* an ethic value. It demonstrates the profound impact reading has on one’s life, since the reading of the *Confessions* inspired Borges to reflect on and write about it.

The second well-known reading experience depicted in the Eight Book of the *Confessions* shows how Augustinus converted to Christianity as a result of reading and therefore demonstrates even more clearly the possible consequences of reading for the individual life of the readers. Pascal Quignard also revisits this renowned passage in *L’Homme aux trois lettres* (2020) and concludes his commentary on Augustinus’ reading scenes with the following little words: “Augustin se fait baptiser le 25 avril 387 pour avoir vu un homme lire” [5]. The novel presents the experience of seeing somebody reading, and considering reading as a means to change oneself, as an initiatory experience.

Nevertheless, this initiation requires the active engagement of the reader. In his essay *Sur la lecture*, Proust claims that reading is just a gateway to mental life: “La lecture est au seuil de la vie spirituelle; elle peut nous y introduire: elle ne la constitue pas” [6]. He arrives at this conclusion about the nature of reading by way of commentary on Ruskin’s lectures on reading held in 1864. According to Proust, writers and readers engage with the same text from disparate perspectives. For writers, the text represents the culmination of an intellectual endeavor, whereas for the readers, the text serves as point of departure for further exploration and inquiry [6].

### 2.1. The Reading Scene: Writing About Reading

The concept of reading seen as a cultural practice extends beyond the act of reading texts. In his 1976 essay, *Sur la lecture*, Roland Barthes proposes an expansive concept of reading that is not constrained by the limitations of its object. He argues that the act of reading can be applied to a multitude of objects, including faces and cities, movements and gestures, images and scenes. Furthermore, he maintains that the object of reading is constituted phenomenologically, that is to say, through the act of reading itself [7]. This metaphorical use of reading is a well-established approach in the context of cultural studies. However, Julia Bertschik indicates in “Kulturwissenschaftliches Lesen”, that the precondition for this sort of reading is a conception of culture as text. According to Bertschik, its disadvantage lies in the fact that the differences between the practices of perceiving, deciphering, understanding, translating, interpreting and invention become blurred [8]. Although this paper considers reading as an

etho-poetic and thus cultural practice, it will focus exclusively on reading scenes in a narrow sense of reading texts and books. As will be demonstrated in the analysis of the texts of Borges, reading scenes in a textual sense do point at the necessary distinction between reading, perceiving and deciphering.

In recent years, there has been a notable shift in the field of literary studies, with a renewed focus on the act of reading as a pivotal aspect of literary theory. In addition to examining the role of writing, scholars also investigate the function of reading and its presentation and reflection in literature. The edited volumes of Irina Hron-Öberg et al. entitled *Leseszenen. Poetologie – Geschichte – Medialität* (2020) and the recently published volume on *Lesegebärden* (2024) demonstrate the significance of a renewal of reading theory [2, 3]. In this theoretical discussion, the concepts of ‘écriture’ [9] proposed by Roland Barthes and the ‘writing scene’ [10] put forth by Rüdiger Campe play a primordial role.

Building upon Barthes’ and Campe’s concepts regarding writing and reading, Nicolas Pethes presents his article “Leseszenen. Zur Praxeologie intransitiver Lektüren in der Literatur der Epoche des Buches” (2020), which explores the concept of the ‘reading scene’ [11] as an analytical tool for literary studies. According to Pethes, reading scenes are to be analyzed “nicht als Spuren konkreter Leseakte, sondern als Darstellungen und Reflexionen solcher Akte durch ein Ensemble aus Zeichen, Körper und Technologie innerhalb fiktionaler Texte“ [11]. The central question, then, is how the traces of cultural practices in their semiotic, medial, and bodily dimensions can also be detected in textual reading scenes. If we compare reading to writing, the challenge in studying reading lies in the fact, that the mental act of reading, the process of interpretation, or the reconstruction of the read story through the imagination does not leave any immediate traces in the text [11].

Comparable to the ‘writing scene’, ‘reading scenes’ are also subject to framing and raise the question of who or what directs the reading process? To what extent influence the hardly decipherable letters or the fainting ink the reading act? Is the reading act anchored in the haptic or in the visual impressions of the book? Is the more or less adequate lightening in the center of the reader’s attention or is the curiosity of the reader the driving force behind the scene? Does the act of reading elicit psychophysical reactions such as shivering, holding one’s breath, a rapid pulse, tension, anger, joy, grief, or fear, or does it primarily engage the intellect, thereby allowing the readers to disengage from their bodies? The materiality and technology of reading, the composition and accessibility of the signs, the surrounding context of the readers, and the involvement of the body through motivation and psychophysical reactions constitute the individual and historically situated act of reading.

As observed by Davide Giuriato, Martin Stingelin, and Sandro Zanetti in *Schreiben heißt sich selber lesen* (2008), reading and writing scenes involve a focus on practices of self-reference. In such scenes, the self is not primarily under-

stood as a fixed entity, but rather as a construct that is shaped by external influences. These influences can be seen as both causing and shaping the self, presenting it as a dynamic and evolving entity [12]. The approach through reading scenes extends beyond the conventional understanding of reading as intellectual and linguistic process, instead encompassing the social, corporeal, and technical dimensions [13].

From this wide range of potential inquiries, we will focus on the interconnection between reading and deciphering, as well as the motivational aspect of curiosity and the emotional aspect of fear as depicted in the works of Borges. Conversely, Quignard’s texts emphasize the significance of the body in the act of reading and the subject of the transformation of the readers’ self through the process of reading.

## 2.2. Ethics of Reading

When viewed as an etho-poetical practice, reading is regarded as a source of inspiration for the transformation of the self. In recent literary and cultural studies, there has been a notable resurgence of interest in this etho-poetical role of reading. In *Façons de lire, manière d’être* (2011), Marielle Mac éexamines the impact of reading on the lives of readers in French literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In her study, she focuses on authors who write about their reading experiences and the influences they had on their lives [14].

From a holistic perspective, as illustrated by the concept of the reading scene, the involvement of the reader’s body is also significant in its turning away from the reading material. In his essay *Écrire la lecture* (1970), Roland Barthes makes reference to Marcel Proust’s famous quotation “lire en levant la tête,” to describe an interruption in the reading process. Barthes does not regard this interruption as a sign of indifference or a lack of interest in the book. Instead, he characterizes it as a spontaneous gesture produced by the flow of thoughts, the associations, and irritations that emerge during the reading process. Barthes posits that these disruptions to the reading process are merely transient and intrinsic to the act of reading itself. The book or text is not abandoned; rather, the readers return to it after diverting their attention elsewhere [15]. According to Barthes, in reading with raising the head, the text is no longer only just decoded. It reveals a supplement of meaning, insofar as the readers are no longer merely deciphering a fixed meaning; rather, they develop meaning through the consideration of their own lives [15]. It can be argued that these moments of disruption are thus an integral aspect of the etho-poetic effects of reading.

Similarly, the motivation for reading, as postulated by Barthes in *Sur la lecture* (1976), can form another aspect of etho-poetic reading scenes [7]. While disgust often results from the duty to read, the desire to read initiates the reader to activity and can lead her or him to writing or to any other form of creation [7]. From a methodological standpoint, this is of paramount importance, as the mental processes of reading can only be made tangible when they are presented as the results

of a transformation. This may be demonstrated, for instance, as bodily or affective reactions or as mimicry stimulated by the reading, as Pethes points out [11]. At the same time, the textual reflection or the creation out of reading that generates for instance literary reading scenes cannot be limited to a mere reaction of the reader to his or her own reading experience, but the reading scene as the result of an action can itself serve as stimulus for new reflections or actions by other readers. From this perspective, reading corresponds to a constant transformation, or, as Quignard puts it, “Métamorphose des métamorphoses. Lectures.” [16].

In light of the potential implications of reading for life, we also draw upon theoretical perspectives that transcend the confines of the textual realm. In addition to Roland Barthes’ insights on reading as presented in *Écrire la lecture* and *Sur la lecture*, we turn to Michel Foucault’s concept of ‘etho-poetical effects of literature’, as outlined in *L’Écriture de soi* [17]. Foucault examines the reading and writing practices of *hupomnênata* developed in Antiquity that reflect on the insights of reading and regard them as source of the aesthetics of existence and the governance of self and others:

Leur usage comme livre de vie, guide de conduite semble être devenu chose courante dans tout un public cultivé. On y consignait des citations, des fragments d’ouvrages, des exemples et des actions dont on avait été témoin ou dont on avait lu le récit, des réflexions ou des raisonnements qu’on avait entendus ou qui étaient venus à l’esprit. Ils constituaient une mémoire matérielle des choses lues, entendues ou pensées; ils les offraient ainsi comme un trésor accumulé à la relecture et à la méditation ultérieures. Ils formaient aussi une matière première pour la rédaction de traités plus systématiques [...] [17].<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to Foucault’s emphasis on the ethical dimension of reading and writing, the bibliophilic and well-read writers Jorge Luis Borges and Pascal Quignard present the ethical dimension in a more subtle way. Instead of presenting moral maxims in their works, they offer their own approaches to the texts they read. The resulting new literary texts can be regarded as evidence of the indivisible intertwining of ethics and aesthetics. This phenomenon will be explored in greater detail in the subsequent sections. Not only that their poetics is based on reading, they also share an interest for the “vértigo erudito” and for the labyrinths of culture as their texts reveal [20, 21].

### 3. Jorge Luis Borges and the Fantastic World of Books

It is widely acknowledged that reading constitutes a significant element in the works of Jorge Luis Borges. The

etho-poetic dimension of reading scenes, however, has not yet been subjected to detailed analysis. *La biblioteca de Babel* and *El libro de Arena* serve as illustrative examples of the diverse reading scenes depicted by Borges. These scenes not only highlight the challenges associated with reading, deciphering, and interpreting the books, which metaphorically represent different modes of existence and approaches to overcoming obstacles, but also portray reading as a socializing act that facilitates the pursuit of a better life. In these stories, harmful lectures are either punished or elicit fear, underscoring the importance of reading as a constructive and empowering force.

#### 3.1. Ways of Reading as Ways of Life: *La Biblioteca de Babel*

*La biblioteca de Babel* (1941) is a fantastic story first published in the collection *Ficciones* (1944) [22]. The short story tells the fictional life and world of a librarian from a first-person perspective. The librarian is characterized by his search for the “catálogo de los catálogos” [22]. From the very beginning of the short story, it is obvious that Borges adapts with humor and cunning well-known metaphors of Western reading history, such as the book of books, to introduce the fictional world in which the library symbolizes the entire universe. With this metaphor of a universe constituted by readable matter, Borges refers to the ancient Western book and reading metaphors that were common especially in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, according to which nature and Creation could be deciphered just like books [22]<sup>3</sup>.

In *La biblioteca de Babel*, Borges presents even more diverse modes of reading that serve as metaphors for human ways of living, experiencing and gaining insight into the mysteries of life. While the library is presented as infinite, its inhabitants are mortal [22]. In addition to the common characteristic that they all read, they are distinguished by the ways in which they read and interact with the books: The narrator mentions the ordinary man, the ‘imperfect librarian’, but there are also mystics to whom goodness is revealed in the form of a circular book, official searchers for the book that justifies all human action, or those who are affected by an hygienic and ascetic frenzy that leads them to remove all useless books from the library [22]. In Proust’s words, all these readers seek the truth outside themselves, assuming that it is somehow contained in a jealously guarded book [6]. The presented ways of dealing with books and the forms of reading associated with them represent the importance of reading in each individual’s life.

In many of the reading scenes presented in *La biblioteca de Babel*, a discrepant or frustrated reading experience dominates. Most of the times it is centered on the inaccessibility of the signs. For example, the narrator comments on the enig-

<sup>2</sup> It would be erroneous to assume that ‘etho-poetical’ is antithetical to the aesthetic. On the contrary, the poetic aspects pertain not only to reading and writing as techniques of *l’art de vivre*, but also to the act of writing about reading [18]. Riendeau makes a case for the idea that ethics can be found on the reverse of aesthetics, as postulated by the philosopher Paul Audi. Audi introduces the neologism *esth/âhique* to describe this relationship [19].

<sup>3</sup> For different metaphors of reading see the article “Metaphern des Lesens” by Monika Schmitz-Emans in Rolf Parr/Alexander Honold (eds.): *Grundthemen der Literaturwissenschaft: Lesen* ed. by Rolf Parr and Alexander Honold [23].

matic relationship between the peritextual and textual elements of the books: “También hay letras en el dorso de cada libro; esas letras no indican o prefiguran lo que dirán las páginas” [22]. Unsuccessful interpretations or a lack of understanding are explained by “la naturaleza informe y caótica de casi todos los libros”, and books are generally characterized as “mero laberinto de letras”, with an “impenetrable” or “confuso” nature [22]. These obstacles, which refer to the process of deciphering the signs, lead the readers of the library to two opposing insights: The first reaction points to the history of contradictory interpretations and thus to the practice of searching for the most appropriate meaning of a text. The second, more radical reaction leads to the insight, “que los libros nada significan en sí” [22]. As a consequence, it is not the books that carry meaning, but the readers who construct it in the process of reading. And it is not a single meaning that can be extracted from a book, but, according to the ambiguity of the words, a multiplicity of meaning. The etho-poetic dimension of the narrative can be observed in the portrayal of disparate approaches for surmounting unforeseen challenges, which are presented neither biased nor prescriptive, and in some instances, they are even presented in the form of questions.

At the end of the story, the narrator unexpectedly addresses the concrete reader, embedded in an explanation about the ambiguity of words. The multiple meanings of a single word grow even when one considers all the different languages and possible contexts in all the books in the library: “Tú, que me lees, ¿estás seguro de entender mi lenguaje?” [22]. With this metaleptic address to the concrete reader, Borges interrupts the effect of immersion and destabilizes the reader’s understanding of her/himself and the world by presenting the boundaries between fiction and reality as permeable [24]. This technique of opening up fiction to real life is reinforced when the fictional first-person narrator mentions one of the books he manages: It is called “Axaxas mlö” which is an allusion to the existing short story *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis tertius* (1940) by Borges [25]<sup>4</sup>. Borges is famous for his ludic approach to the real or fictional status of the events, actions, objects and characters depicted. What is even more curious at this point is that the self-references to his own works are not limited to already published texts. The narrator’s last sentence in *La biblioteca de Babel* is accompanied by a footnote referring to a comment by Letizia Álvarez de Toledo on the usefulness of the entire library:

Letizia Álvarez de Toledo ha observado que la vasta Biblioteca es inútil; en rigor, bastaría *un solo volumen*, de formato común, impreso en cuerpo nueve o en cuerpo diez, que constara de un número infinito de hojas infinitamente delgadas. (Cavaliere a principios del siglo XVII, dijo que todo cuerpo sólido es la superposición de un número infinito de planos). El manejo de ese *vademecum* sedoso no será cómodo: cada hoja aparente se desdoblará en otras

anđogás; la inconcebible hoja central no tendrá revés [22].

And such a monstrous, mysterious, endless book is the uncanny protagonist of *El libro de arena* (1975). While in *La biblioteca de Babel* Borges thematizes a kind of public and life-fulfilling reading with all its different obstacles, in *El libro de arena* he turns to the private reading, again to curiosity as a motivational factor to reading and the emotion of fear.

### 3.2. The Fear of the Book: *El Libro de Arena*

The first-person narrator of *El libro de arena* is also a librarian, but this time already retired. His curiosity leads him to buy an ever-changing book from a stranger who appears at the librarian’s door one night. The story tells of the nocturnal purchase of the book, its mysterious nature, its effects on the new owner, and finally how the librarian gets rid of it again. The first reading scene in the narrower sense mentions an unknown and therefore inaccessible sign system, which leads the librarian to concentrate on the visual and haptic impressions of the book. The difference between reading and seeing is expressed in the librarian’s attitude. First, he recognizes the signs as unfamiliar and therefore unreadable to him. Then he perceives the faint typography, then the typographic division of the text into two columns, followed by the arbitrary numbering of the pages in Arabic numerals, and finally he discovers an illustration:

Llevaba una pequeña ilustración, como es de uso en los diccionarios: un ancla dibujada a la pluma, como por la torpe mano de un niño.

[...] Me fijé en el lugar y cerré el volumen. Inmediatamente lo abrí. En vano busqué la figura del ancla, hoja tras hoja [26].

The materiality of the book, whose characters and figures change with each interruption of the reading act, introduces the motif of a unique and unrepeatable reading experience, which is brought to the surface and becomes visible and tangible on the material. As already sketched in *La biblioteca de Babel*, the second reading scene represents the vain attempt to read the first and the last pages of the book. It is the stranger who prompts the narrator to search for the first and last pages:

Me pidió que buscara la primer hoja.

Apoyé la mano izquierda sobre la portada y abrí con el dedo pulgar casi pegado al índice. Todo fue inútil: siempre se interponían varias hojas entre la portada y la mano. Era como si brotaron del libro.

Ahora busque el final.

También fracasé [26];

This impossibility of finding the beginning and the end of the book leads the librarian to call it *Book of Sand*, since “ni el libro ni la arena tienen ni principio ni fin” [26]. Even more eerie are the effects of the book on the social life of its new owner. The beginner’s curiosity and joy at possessing such a rare book give way to an exaggerated suspicion of losing his treasure. A total withdrawal from social life and sleepless

<sup>4</sup> In *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis tertius* the combination of the letters ‘axaxas mlö’ figures as example of the fictitious language ‘Tlön’ and means ‘it mooned’ [25].

nights dominate the following days, until the narrator decides to part with the book. But even this separation faces obstacles: The idea of burning the book is rejected for fear that an endless book will provoke an endless fire that will eventually suffocate the entire planet. So the retired librarian decides to hide this strange book in the basement of the National Library. Nevertheless, the contact and the resulting experiences with this book left a deep impression on the protagonist, since his former mental balance remains disturbed, as the last sentence of the short story suggests: “Siento un poco de alivio, pero no quiero ni pasar por la calle México” [26]. The knowledge of the book’s existence—even though the protagonist has never read it and no longer has it in his possession—creates an uneasiness in the reader’s fictional real life.

The protagonist’s decision to hide the frightening book in the National Library reveals a significant difference between the reading scenes depicted in *La biblioteca de Babel* and *El libro de arena*: While reading in the first short story is presented through different ways of dealing with books that metaphorically correspond to different ways of life, in the second short story the diegetic real life and the universe of books are presented as clearly distinguishable. The retired librarian in *El libro de arena*, having noticed the negative effects of the mere possession of an unreadable book, is left to decide whether to continue to care for it or to take it away. The story reveals a clear rejection of books that promote a break with mental balance or friendships and that would lead to a dissociation from society. What is emphasized is the beneficial value of reading, while its harmfulness is clearly refused. Thus, *El libro de arena* deals with an idea, that Marcel Proust also reflects on in *Sur la lecture*:

Tant que la lecture est pour nous l’initiatrice dont les clefs magiques nous ouvrent au fond de nous-mêmes la porte des demeures où nous n’aurions pas su pénétrer, son rôle dans notre vie est salutaire. Il devient dangereux au contraire quand, au lieu de nous éveiller à la vie personnelle de l’esprit, la lecture tend à se substituer à elle, quand la vérité ne nous apparaît plus comme un idéal que nous ne pouvons réaliser que par le progrès intime de notre pensée et par l’effort de notre cœur, mais comme une chose matérielle, déposé entre les feuillets des livres comme un miel tout préparé par les autres et que nous n’avons qu’à prendre la peine d’atteindre sur les rayons des bibliothèques et de déguster ensuite passivement dans un parfait repos de corps et d’esprit [7].

Readings is considered to be the most beneficial, compared to a magic key that opens unknown parts of the self and awakens one’s intellectual—or spiritual—life, while the transformation of the reader into someone who passively enjoys his books in perfect physical and mental tranquility, reducing truth to something given to be found somewhere between the pages of a book, is considered to be the most dangerous. The protagonist in *El libro de arena* seems to have escaped from this fascinating and dangerous attraction of books only at the last moment. Pascal Quignard also refers to

this ambiguous relationship of the reader and his disengagement from society when he discusses silent reading scenes and the possible effects of reading for life.

## 4. Pascal Quignard’s Reading Fragments

The act of reading is a central aspect of the poetics of Pascal Quignard’s works, akin to the poetics of Jorge Luis Borges. However, Quignard’s style is not oriented towards well-composed fantastic narrations. Rather, it relies on a poetics of fragments, of unsystematic non-linearity, of re-writing and continuation of what he has read. As a result, it is very difficult to assign his works to specific genres such as novella, novel, treatise, or essay [18]. The following analyses of Quignard’s novella *Le Lecteur* (1976) and his XXX<sup>th</sup> ‘small treatise’ *Lectio*, published in *Petits traités V* (1990), will demonstrate how Quignard’s reflections on reading relate to the role of language, the importance of the reader’s body (even when absent), and the relationship between the reading act and the concrete life. Both texts exhibit a loose thematic structure and a proclivity for the fragment as a formal characteristic [27]<sup>5</sup>. The structure of his books, with their numerous blank spaces, appears to encourage a reading practice *en levant la tâte*, thereby underscoring the role of the body in the reading process.

### 4.1. Reading as Ethical and Linguistic Act: *Lectio*

In contrast to Borges, who explores different ways of reading as metaphors to illustrate the diversity of lifestyles in *La biblioteca de Babel*, Pascal Quignard’s essay *Lectio* explores the cultural history of reading and its associated practices. A number of his *Petits traités* engage with the topic of reading. *Lectio* is considered to represent the pinnacle of his ideas on this subject. However, given the fragmentary nature of his essays, rather than providing a comprehensive cultural history of the Western reader, Quignard presents an array of scenes in a somewhat disparate manner [19]. He commences his little treatise entitled *Lectio*, with an account of the ancient Egyptian rituals and the function of reading associated with them: “Dans l’Égypte ancienne les dieux eux-mêmes devaient se laver sept fois lorsqu’ils voulaient lire les livres conservés dans les enceintes des temples” [28]. The depicted preparations for the reading describe a ritual, that underlines the mythological and spiritual dimension of reading and its cultural importance. Surprisingly, the subsequent passage diverges from the initial focus on mythological reading scenes, instead describing human affection by deceased friends and destroyed objects. This shift in focus alludes to Quignard’s exploration of the intertwining of death and reading.

<sup>5</sup> For Quignard, a fragmentary writing style has the advantage of enabling the narrator’s attitude to be renewed while simultaneously allowing distressing attacks to be expressed [27].

Similarly to Roland Barthes, in *Lectio* Quignard also presents a historical overview of writing, sign systems, and writing materials, incorporating fragments of canonical texts from world literature. The text makes use of allusions and direct quotations from a variety of sources, including classical Greek and Latin philosophical and historical texts, of religious writings, modern philosophy and literature, and even forgotten works such as the *Essais de morale* by 17<sup>th</sup>-century Jansenist Pierre Nicole, who should have inspired him to write the *Petits traités* [28]. He also reflects on the meditations on reading of this moralist author [19]. A variety of quotations, paraphrasis and metaphrasis demonstrate the extensive reading list of Pascal Quignard. The *tertium comparationis* between the various cited works of European and Western literature, as well as works from Africa, the Orient, Japan and China, is the emphasis placed on the act of reading. With regard to the role of the body, there is one recurring allusion to Cao Xuequin's classical work, *The Story of the Stone* also known as *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, from which Quignard borrows an idea about the benefit of reading for the reader:

Cao Xuequin dans les premières pages du *Rêve dans le pavillon rouge* affirme que la lecture, comme elle repose de la vie et consume peu d'énergie, prolonge pour ainsi dire de sa propre durée la durée de l'existence. Il ajoute que ce fragment de langue extirpé de toute vie orale que le lecteur tient entre ses mains épargne les malheurs ordinaires à la langue vivante, qui est aussitôt portée à se prolonger en défis, en malentendus et en meurtres plus ou moins sursis. Il dit que la lecture repose les jambes en les tenant immobilisés [28].

In presenting his thoughts on an idea exposed in Cao Xuequin's novel, Quignard underscores the beneficial effects of reading in both a physical and moral sense. The minimal physical exertion required for reading conserves energy, while the engagement with literature in solitude circumvents misunderstandings with fellows that could potentially lead to lethal outcomes.

In contrast to the expectations prompted by the text's designation as a brief treatise, Quignard presents his meditations in a relatively unstructured and associative manner, eschewing any discernible systematic approach. This results in contradictory fragments and the impression, that contradictory and antithetical ideas about reading are a crucial element of Quignard's poetics. The aforementioned opening of *Lectio*, which couples reading with death at the outset and ascribes life-extending functions to it at the conclusion, illustrates this assumption.

Another recurring theme is Quignard's commentary on the linguistic possibilities for describing an attentive reading process:

La langue dit d'un lecteur attentif qu'il est «plongé» dans sa lecture. Puis qu'il est «absorbé». Elle dit aussi de façon terrible: «se réfugier dans sa lecture».

Plonger dit l'immersion première, et le bain du baptême.

Absorber signifie manger, éponger, digérer, dominer.

Se réfugier dit la peur [28].

In examining these three functions of reading, Quignard simultaneously elucidates the linguistic potential to articulate some mental aspects of the act of reading and the ramifications that reading may have on the personal life of the reader. Similarly to Proust's portrayal of his immersive reading experience during his childhood in *Sur la lecture*, the act of 'plunging into reading' represents a significant rite of passage that transcends the boundaries of mere leisure. This initial immersive reading signifies an extension of one's life through identification with the heroes and heroines in the book. It entails the mobilization of one's own emotions in support of the protagonists' fortunes and the curiosity, which seeks to gain knowledge about the lives of others. In both Quignard and Proust, this kind of reading is likened to a mental initiation, and thus appears to be oriented primarily towards the intellectual capabilities of the reader.

However, as Quignard proposes, the function of reading is multifaceted and can also manifest as an 'absorption' that effectively intensifies the process of immersion, incorporating a reference to the physical body. The fragmentary nature of Quignard's text leaves the explanation of the notion 'absorber' as 'eating, absorbing, digesting, dominating' open to interpretation. The question thus arises as to whether it is the reader who assimilates the ideas presented in the text, or whether it is the text itself that dominates and transforms the mind, heart, and body of the reader. The comparison of reading with eating and digesting underscores the text's 'nutritional' value and the process of assimilation of the presented thoughts. The ambiguity of the explanation, though, allows for an alternative interpretation in which the reader's self is absorbed, digested, wiped out and dominated by the material being read.

Furthermore, the final explanation regarding reading as "se réfugier dans la lecture" meaning "fear" also raises a question, as the brevity of the explanation leaves the object of this fear unspecified. Does the concept of reading as a refuge refer to the act of escaping from one's immediate potentially frightening circumstances? Is it a means of finding solace in the midst of adverse experiences or a coping mechanism for navigating life's challenges? What is the object of the mentioned fear in the reading act? Is it the lived experience or rather the fact of searching for answers to the obstacles of life in dead letters?

Although *Lectio* still owes the answer, it is noteworthy that Quignard consistently emphasizes the corporeal engagement of the reader in the act of reading, regardless of the context. The introduction of the affective impact of reading represents one such element. Another is the thematization of the voice. In particular, in his descriptions of reading aloud, Quignard not only addresses the role of the body in the reading process, but also considers the relationship between reading and writing:

Le *scriptum* se fait *liber* et un *liber* se fait *lectura*. Mais la *lectio* (qui est l'énonciation du livre, le lecteur tenant entre

ses mains un livre) est une actualité physique, une concrétisation, un échange et une solidarité violente, plus ou moins aisée, qui suscite une signification qui ne préexiste pas dans le « texte » ou dans la page imaginaire. C'est une tension entre un objet duquel un corps s'est retranché et un objet auquel un corps vient ajouter son existence, la singularité de son désir, les moyens de sa pensée, et les sédiments de sa mémoire [28].

In *Lectio*, Quignard asserts the significance of the reader's corporeal involvement in the reading process and its capacity to alter the text's meaning. In the act of reading aloud, it becomes most evident that "Toute lecture est une chimère, un mixte de soi et d'autre, une activité de scènes à demi souvenues et de vieux sons guettés" [28]. With this thought, Quignard refers back to Proust's reflections on reading in *Sur la lecture*, where he defines silent reading as "l'impulsion d'un autre esprit, mais reçue au sein de la solitude" [6].

In the context of silent reading scenes, as exemplified in *Le lecteur*, this relationship with others is in a state of potentiality, being transferred to an interstitial experience resulting from reading *en levant la tête*, as indicated by Proust and Barthes: "Le livre a disparu. Le monde n'est pas de retour" [16]. The interstitial space, created by the interruption of reading, does not belong to the fictional world nor to the concrete reality of the reader. Rather, it is a space that enables the readers to renew their conceptions of the world as well as of the self. In addition to the subject of reading with raised head, the question of the nature of a reader is a central theme in *Le lecteur*, in which Quignard presents at least three distinct types of readers.

## 4.2. Multiple Readers and Their Disappearance: *Le Lecteur*

The novella of *Le lecteur* consists of loosely related fragments, which are divided into five chapters. It narrates the history of reading, language use, and the disappearance of the reader. The identity of the reader remains elusive, as the first-person narrator—who himself is a reader—repeatedly emphasizes. This is because any attempt to define the reader would situate him within the context of the reading scene in question:

L'identifier, je crois, ce serait ou bien le restituer à la violence de cette scène, ou bien ouvrir ce livre. Ce qui le nommerait d'un nom plus véritable qu'un nom – son nom – ne vient jamais à signifier [16].

Additionally, at the outset of the second chapter, the first-person narrator eschews the portrayal of the reading protagonist through the inclusion of physical or biographical details [16]. In *Le lecteur*, Pascal Quignard presents a *mise en abîme* of readers and the reading act. This is evident in the significant play with the personal pronouns, which change between the narrator's *je*, the hero's *il*, the address of the concrete readers *vous*, and an inclusive *nous* that refers to all of them [27]. The first-person narrator seeks to ascertain the

reason for and manner of the reader's disappearance, while simultaneously presenting a selection of his own readings and offering commentary on them. In addition to referencing to the reading hero, the third-person singular also alludes to the abstract reader as a cultural phenomenon. This third-person protagonist engages in silent reading, isolated from the others, and explores a diverse range of books, undergoing a transformation through the act of reading [29]. The reading hero is opposed to the implicit reader, who in turn is characterized as a critical and skeptical individual who questions the veracity of the first-person narrator's account of the disappeared hero: "Il suffit qu'on voie votre visage: il respire une défiance sans bornes" [16]. Similarly to Borges, in *La biblioteca de Babel*, Quignard addresses the concrete readers directly or via the implicit reader, prompting them to engage in self-reflection [29]. This creates an interstitial space between the fictional world and the concrete realms.

In disparate reading scenes, Quignard elucidates the etho-poetical functions of reading, delineating the potential for an expansion of the reading subject to encompass life itself:

Mais pourquoi supposer indéfiniment que c'est dans la lecture que s'accomplirait la lecture ?

Si nous renversions d'un seul coup l'hypothèse, si je vous disais brusquement: « C'est dehors ! », sur quoi débouche la lecture, alors sa défection ne devrait pas nécessairement coïncider à cette extase ou mort que dit Hughes, et dont il prétendait que c'est à elle seule, ultime, que le fait d'ouvrir, un jour, un livre, au hasard, dût logiquement aboutir [16].

In opposition to the notion that reading is a form of escapism that separates from life, the narrator introduces the idea that the act of reading has the potential to extend beyond the realm of literature and into the fabric of one's lived experience. In her literary study, *Façons de lire, manière d'être*, Marielle Macés argues that this is not a far-fetched thought. While the act of reading does not necessarily result in imitation, every reading process inevitably transforms the reader's life. This is because, during the act of reading, the reader engages in a different syntax, rhythm, and thus a different way of life [14]. In order to incite the concrete reader to consider this possibility, the narrator initially presents this idea as a hypothesis that can be questioned. This is followed by an exclamation that highlights the affective potential of the presented idea, which is embedded in a commentary on his own reading of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century author Hughes de Saint-Victoire to whom he already referred to in previous fragments. Ultimately, the answer to this question is left to the concrete readers, who may therefore experience an expansion of the reading experience into their daily life through the activation of their own personal responses.

A second recurring topic in *Le lecteur* is the claim, that reading initiates a transformative process through which the reader undergoes a metamorphosis via a stimulation to write a book. Consequently, the roles of reader and writer become interchangeable. This topic is also addressed by Borges in the

dedication to the readers of *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923), where he comments on the distinction between the reader and the writer, stating, “es trivial y fortuita la circunstancia de que seas tú el lector de estos ejercicios y yo su redactor” [30]. In the poem “La dicha” published in *La cifra* (1981), Borges abords the topic in a slightly different manner, indicating, “El que lee mis palabras está inventándolas” [31]. The dissolution of the distinction between the reader and the writer not only evokes Roland Barthes’ concept of writing as exhibited in *La mort de l’auteur*, but culminates in the famous lines of Borges in *La forma de la espada* “yo soy los otros, cualquier hombre es todos los hombres, Shakespeare es de algún modo el miserable John Vincent Moon” [32]. Quignard also revisits this idea at the outset of *Le lecteur*, characterizing the vanished reader as follows:

Il écrivit peu. Il lut beaucoup. Mille vies mortes, qui étaient soit anciennes soit fictives, s’étaient tôt substituées à sa vie. Comme tout être qui lit il possédait la riche pierre qui rappelle au jour l’ombre des morts encore que nul, pourtant, n’ait l’assurance que par un coup contraire elle ne plonge qui la possède en leur monde impossible. Pourquoi, dans ce cas, n’aurait-il pas disparu là où ces vies passées sont disparues ? Il fut tout ce qu’il lut. En 1492, en 1519, en 1531, criant: «Terre!» aux rivages d’Amérique, du Mexique, du Pérou, c’était lui [16].

This scene reveals not only the temporal transformation of the readers life through an identificatory reading practice, but suggests that this effect is not limited to fiction and can also result out of reading history, as the annual figures indicate.

Another form of emphasizing the role of reading and books in the concrete lives of the readers is the topic of the destruction of books, which represents political or religious censorship. This act of violence provokes the narrator to inquire, “Pourquoi un livre brûle-t-il ‘à la place’ de son lecteur” [16]. The burning of books, he argues, addresses less the authors, but a potential readership, which gives rise to the aforementioned question regarding the rationale behind the burning of books instead of their readers. As with the preceding hypothesis concerning the prolongation of the reading process into one’s lifetime, the answer to this question is left to the individual reader, albeit with a clear connection to the fictional realms. The subsequent fragment, comprising a single phrase, explicitly elucidates this connection: “Répondre à cette question lèverait le secret de sa disparition” [16].

In another section of the text, the narrator considers that the desire to read and to commence a new book carries with it the risk of becoming absorbed in the various transformations which result from imaginary voyages or identification with the characters [16]. The search for the missing reader turns out to be a search for the self, particularly in the sections where the distinction between the fictional and the concrete readers is obscured. As Riendeau notes in his analysis of *La barque silencieuse*, Quignard’s reflections on the self evoke the works of Paul Ricoeur, who distinguishes between two concepts of identity: the *mânet é* which denotes an identity that

persists in time, and the *ips ât é* which represents a potential [19]. Considering the constant transformation of and the difficulties in defining the reader, the preference for the *ips ât é* can be observed also in *Le lecteur*, where it is not limited to the protagonist, but extends to the concrete reader as well. In the final third of the narrative, the first-person narrator repeatedly questions the identity of this absent hero, asking, “Est-ce vous?” [16].

## 5. Conclusion

The reading scenes of the works of Borges and Quignard shed light on the cultural history of reading by alluding to mythological and religious reading models as well as to analytical and literary ones. The comparison of exemplary reading scenes emphasizes the cultural diversity of reading and dealing with books. The etho-poetical dimension of reading can be regarded as one common aspect that occurs on three different levels. Firstly, the fact, that the works of Borges and Quignard are highly inspired by their own acts of reading underscores the aspect that the ethics of reading changes the life of the reader insofar as it leads the reader to act and, in these specific cases, to produce new literature. As has been demonstrated, the works of the Argentine and the French author reveal a reading of Proust’s *Sur la lecture*. In the works of both authors, the relationship between reading and life is not only reflected from a literary and cultural perspective, but the texts themselves document the intertwining of reading and life. This gets evident considering, that the texts are the manifest results of a poetological work of their author’s readings.

Secondly, both authors make reading a central theme and feature reading protagonists in their texts. This allows them to present a variety of different reading modes, and consequently, different ethical perspectives. In *La biblioteca de Babel*, Borges employs the metaphor of reading to explore various modes of existence, including a lifelong pursuit of a particular book and the potential truths, as well as mystical and hygienic obsessions. Furthermore, he also depicts the challenges of interpretation and frustrations associated with failed reading acts due to unknown sign systems or illogical relations for instance between the title of a book and its contents. In *El libro de arena* he focuses on the materiality of an ever-changing book and the negative influence of its enigmatic character on the reader’s life, leading him to withdraw from society.

In Quignard’s *Le lecteur*, the author juxtaposes different attitudes to reading, ranging from identification to questioning to skepticism. As in the little treatise *Lectio*, the reading scenes in the novella refer to the body of the reader in a thematic and formal dimension, since the fragmented structure of Quignard’s text allows for a reading that counts with interruptions. In contrast to the fantastical bibliophilic universe in the texts of Borges, which facilitates an immersive reading experience, the fragmented structure of Quignard’s texts, with their blanks and the topic of an absent reader as protagonist in

*Le lecteur*, emphasizes the aspects of reading that extend beyond the text itself. This is particularly evident in the text's tendency to incite not only the protagonist, but also the concrete readers to engage their mental and bodily capacities in the act of reading *en levant la tête*.

The represented etho-poetic effects, thus thirdly, transcend the fictional world and are conceived as an open invitation to the concrete readers, as evidenced by the explicit addresses of the narrators to the readers in the works of both authors. In contrast to Borges, who depicts the reader as an active participant in a reading universe, Quignard portrays the reader as an isolated and asocial figure. Moreover, the readers depicted in Quignard's work tend to dissipate or vanish due to their constant transformation. In any case, the etho-poetic reading scenes demonstrate that the ethical and aesthetic components are inextricably linked in literature. It can be argued that this represents a significant driving force to renewal of not only literary genres, but also literary theory. As postulated by Quignard in *Lectio*, texts on reading touch on Gustave Flaubert's concept of composing a work of literature about nothing, devoid of external attachments: "Or, le rien du livre, c'est la lecture. Le 'presque pas sujet', c'est le lecteur" [28].

## Author Contributions

Rita Rieger is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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