

Thursday, June 25, 2009

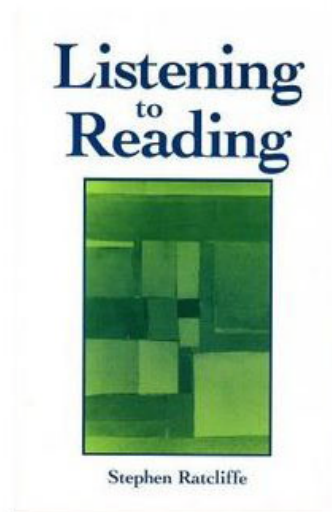
**more on . . . poets on reading . . .**

**Stephen Ratcliffe**  
***Listening to Reading***  
(Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000)

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This post follows on John Olson's essay "Extreme Reading," posted here last week. After the essay went up, Olson himself e-mailed me, reminding me of two books that ought to be read and remembered by all extreme readers. This present post, then, serves both as a kind of supplement to "Extreme Reading," and my shout-out for two books, each by a contemporary poet, that present terrific takes on reading.

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**Stephen Ratcliffe**  
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*Listening to Reading* is a collection of essays on particular books by contemporary poets. There are two kinds of essays. The first type, which Ratcliffe calls “analytic close readings,” are a very familiar type, at least in intent: their purpose is to explain the poetry which is written about. The second kind of essay is remarkably non-traditional: called by Ratcliffe “reading-as-writing-itself,” their purpose is “to perform /demonstrate that writing by doing/enacting it.” As Ratcliffe puts it, this is “writing that in listening to reading engages its subject on, and in, its own terms.”

For those who like extreme reading, and particularly for those (I’m raising my hand here) who enjoy doing that with poetry, Ratcliffe’s book is a primary source. It includes key advice about how to read or engage with a text, and maybe even more serves as an inspiration: all the essays – and especially the performative pieces – serve as object lessons in the wonders a focused and deep reader can bring about.

With regard to advice about how to read, Ratcliffe asserts two main points. The first is embodied in the book’s title: *Listening to Reading*. Ratcliffe insists that words are only fully present when they enter through the ear, that poems have an acoustic dimension (a sound/shape) and meaning does not exist separately from that. If the poem is read silently, it must be read not only with the eyes, but also the ears. We must listen to reading.

The other key piece of advice concerns attention. Attention is all, Ratcliffe says, borrowing in part on this (with direct acknowledgement) from Ezra Pound. Ratcliffe advises:

read[] the poem closely, with the same act of attention – focused at both micro- and wide-angle range – to the surface, tilt, and interior thrust of a particular structure in words that the scientist brings to his study of observable (or supposed) phenomena.

This advice fits right in with any notion of extreme reading, I think. Last week, I used an image of a man peering into a microscope to illustrate Olson’s essay, and Ratcliffe’s insistence on scientist-like attention when reading certainly is consistent with that. But remember, Ratcliffe calls for not just visual, but auditory attention:



Look – no, strike that – LISTEN (sorry to shout, but I do so to emphasize Ratcliffe’s fervor regarding the sound/shape of poems): I can’t say enough about the richness of Ratcliffe’s book. If you like contemporary poetry, and extreme reading, this is a book to read, and read again.

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