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A Soul Dancing or Plunging: body and presence in literary experiences

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ABSTRACT – A Soul Dancing or Plunging: body and presence in literary experiences – This paper reflects upon the *affective* dimension of the experience of reading fiction and poetry. I argue that the space of the imagination allows the approach of literary texts by means of sensations and emotions. Therefore, I formulate a concept of presence suitable for thinking about literary experiences, in which the reader's body is mobilized by effects triggered by the text when in contact with his imagery.
Keywords: **Presence. Literature. Imagination. Aesthetic Experience. Affects.**

RÉSUMÉ − Une Âme qui Danse ou qui Plonge: corps et présence dans l'expérience littéraire − Cet article propose qu'il y a une dimension affective de la lecture des textes poétiques e fictionnels, e que l'imagination est l'espace où on s'approche des œuvres littéraires par des sensations e des émotions. Je développe ainsi un concept de présence propre à l'expérience littéraire, où le corps du lecteur é mobilisé par des effets déclenchés par le texte en contact avec son imaginaire.
Mots-clés: **Présence. Littérature. Imagination. Expérience Esthétique. Affects.**

RESUMO − Uma Alma que Dança ou Despenca: corpo e presença na experiência literária − Este artigo reflete sobre a dimensão afetiva da leitura de textos poéticos e ficcionais. Proponho que a imaginação é o espaço em que nos aproximamos das obras literárias por meio de sensações e emoções. Para tal, desenvolvo um conceito de presença voltado para a experiência literária, em que o corpo do leitor é mobilizado a partir de efeitos disparados pelo texto em contato com seu imaginário.
Palavras-chave: **Presença. Literatura. Imaginação. Experiência Estética. Afetos.**

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Every reader who has ever been captured by the world of fiction or poetry knows that there is a dimension to that experience – an experience usually contemplated in purely intellectual terms – that can be restricted neither to the apprehension of meaning nor to the pleasure of linguistic form. There is an affective component intrinsic to every literary experience: a way of approaching texts through physical sensations and emotions. In light of this, I develop a reflection on the potentialities of somatic activation by means of the presence effects triggered by literary texts. The main objective of this essay is to propose a concept of presence that unbinds it from the need for an immediate material and sensible stimulus, transposing it, instead, to a dimension where presence is expressed by way of its effects: the imaginary. I argue that poetic and fictional objects activate our imagination, where they interact with our lived experiences and personal memories in their most spontaneous manifestations, and that this interaction produces presence effects.

Using this concept of presence to reflect upon the relation between our bodies and consciousness with the sensible world offers insight into a potency that manifests itself in volatile effects and that ties us to the world of things, even if it does so in a way that is both fugacious and *not traceable*. The focus of this contemplation is, thus, neither a specific literary text (e.g. a novel or poem) nor a literary genre taken as a whole, but instead the possibilities offered by the experience of reading literature in its multitude of forms and readers.

"*And if the body does not do fully as much as the soul?/ And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?*", asks Walt Whitman (2004, p. 228) in the end of the first part of "*I sing the body electric"*. In the 1940s, the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 91) could have answered those questions, suggesting that the "union of the soul and the body is not established through an arbitrary decree that unites two mutually exclusive terms, one a subject and the other an object. It is accomplished at each moment in the movement of existence", taking place before each movement that opens the world to us.

From this perspective, Merleau-Ponty (1964b, p. 12) argues in favor of a "primacy of perception" in the phenomenological investigation of conscious states, which would reveal that the world we perceive is not a simple sum of objects. Indeed, he writes, "we cannot apply the classical distinction of form and matter to perception, nor can we conceive the perceiving subject as a consciousness which 'interprets', 'deciphers', or 'orders' a sensible matter

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according to an ideal law it possesses". Taken as the original modality of consciousness, perception isn't subject to ideas. Perception is, on the contrary, the actual ground of reflective thought.

Like any good phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty starts his investigation of perception searching for its intentionality, that is, for that to which it turns; after all, if all consciousness is consciousness of something, what is this *something* in perceptual consciousness? The obvious answer is the real, sensible world in all its materiality, offering itself as a field of phenomena to be experienced through our senses. Nevertheless, in this case, it would also be necessary to take into account, among the intentional objects of perception, our own bodies – these very bodies that never abandon us. It is precisely because of the experience of one's own body (*corps propre*) while in interaction with the world that Merleau-Ponty overcomes a merely representational concept of intentionality, in other words, a notion of intentionality that presupposes a conscious image of an exterior object.

Merleau-Ponty's goal is to rethink what it means to feel, thus disentangling the notion of feeling from pure sensations or impressions, which are, for him, simple pragmatic impossibilities. For the French thinker, to achieve feeling, pure *quale* must be invested with a living value that consists in the apprehension of their signification for us (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 52-53). At the heart of this hybrid state, which defines, for him, what it is to perceive, lies the ambiguous condition of one's own body. Despite being an object amongst others, our biological bodies resist analysis, in the sense that their functioning cannot be observed as an external process, or from a third party perspective – we can only observe them through our own experiences.

With this shift in perspective, Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 74) proposes that the consciousness of the body "invades" the body itself, and that "the soul spreads across all of its parts, and behavior overflows its central region". Stephen Priest (2003, p. 233) claims that the soul may be understood, in the works of Merleau-Ponty, as the intentional consciousness considered not as a state, but as all of its possibilities, centered in an individual unity. Priest concludes that consciousness and soul are virtually the same thing, if we understand the latter as the subjective space of the former. However, as we

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shall see, the Merleau-Pontyan soul is a potency that moves permanently towards understanding.

The French philosopher argues that the body is experienced as a "psychic fact" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 117), that is, as a mental counterpart of the actual reality – in this case, a series of physiological operations. It certainly sounds strange, however, when it comes to the body, to equate psychic fact and representation or, in other words, to reject the subjective trait of the body-soul's lived experience, claiming that such subjectivity is merely an inward version of the mental image though which we receive external objects in ordinary perception. Reflecting upon this matter, Merleau-Ponty turns to the phenomenon of phantom limbs, i.e., to the sensation, among individuals who have undergone amputations, that their limbs still exist, but in a spectral sense. In this debate, the body as a subjective experience is contrasted with the body as a *hypothetically* exterior object.

A few decades after Merleau-Ponty wrote his *Phenomenology of Perception*, neuroscientists Vilayanur S. Ramachandran and William Hirstein (1998, p. 1604) would define phantom limbs as "an illusion, not a delusion": they either arise into consciousness or emerge in a preconscious way, but the perception of their existence does not withstand reflection, so that even if the patient feels the limb, he knows, rationally, that it is not real. Indeed, in the 1940s, contemporary research on phantom limbs was already enough to lead Merleau-Ponty to determine that the explanation for these phenomena would have to connect physiological and psychic aspects, evoking the problem of consciousness itself: how does something *in itself* (an organic process) become something *for oneself* (a conscious fact)? The hypothesis he gives in response to the problem is, if not perfect, quite beautiful. It is grounded on what he calls "being in the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 89): a pre-objective condition, prior to any stimuli and sensitive data, which would make it possible to conciliate, and also to interweave, psychic and physiological facts, or what exists in itself and what exists for itself.

In order to contemplate the perceptual body, we always place ourselves spontaneously in that body, which acts toward the world; but in order to reflect on the phantom limb, we have to consider not only this act towards the world, but also a kind of preconscious longing for the world, which

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drives the consciousness/soul to move a limb that is nothing more than a bodily memory, a scar or an interrupted organic connection. The persistence of the wholeness of a bodily schema – that is, a preconscious, sensory-motor scheme that guides our practical relationship with the world – leads the amputee to an image *à demi chemin* from their own body, since the phantom limb is not a representation – nor a mental image – but the ambivalent presence of a member. *Being in the world* is thus a way of interweaving physiology and psychic life, which is to say: relate the body as an object to the body-consciousness: "The body is the vehicle of being in the world and, for a living being, having a body means being united with a definite milieu, merging with certain projects, and being perpetually engaged therein" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 84). Consciousness, body and world interpenetrate each other in a new kind of connection: "I am conscious of my body through the world" – and no longer just conscious of the world via perception.

What I propose here is the intuition that literary texts operate, in reading, as the material world does in *real life* – we're now talking about fictional worlds, of course, but worlds nonetheless, thus definable because they demand of our bodies a response to the stimulus of things arranged in it, as per another type of field phenomena. It is precisely this capacity of demanding of our bodies that they respond to their stimuli that fictional worlds borrow from the concrete world. These responses take place in the imagination, understood as the dimension of consciousness in which sensations and emotions do not metamorphose into meaning or understanding, and where stimuli from the outside (whether from the text or from the concrete world) coexist, in an indistinct manner, with unreflected memories – a conscious dimension, in short, not subject to the sieve of reason. In the imagination, when triggered by fictional texts, the body is central and, although my senses are not in direct contact with the world, "my power of imagining is nothing other than the persistence of my world around me" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 186).

Body and Movement

Starting from the reflection on the phenomenon of the phantom limb taken as a kind of yearning *for world* that manifests itself when we are not self-conscious of this yearning – "an illusion, not a delusion" – Merleau-Ponty can then return to the problem of the body *tout court*: if the phantom is the

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response of the habitual body to an action that the present body can no longer perform, the same paradox is present in all of us, since we can only sensorially perceive the world when we are not aware that we are doing it. We can think of the body as the original ambiguity between the intersecting "in itself" and "for itself", that eliminates an artificial separation between subject and object. This course of reasoning suggests not only that the body is a way of being in the world, but also that the world relates to the body in the same way (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 125). The certainty about the existence of the *real* thus shifts from the *thinking self* to the *perceptual body* – and the whole phenomenal field is imbued with the quality of *reality*.

Suzanne Cataldi (2014, p. 163) questions, in this sense, why it is that a philosopher so keen on embodiment did not write about affects – or even about *presence*. The answer lies in his dedication to perception as the primordial moment of human (rational) understanding, which is already clothed in meaning, even if not objective, reflected meaning. Affects, on the other hand, have a fundamental sensory layer, or are simply pure sensations, which Merleau-Ponty (2011, p. 3) cannot accept as the defining moment of perception since he understands them as something like "an undifferentiated, instantaneous, and punctual 'jolt'".

This is also why it seems clear to me that the radicalization of the phenomenological method proposed by the French thinker is not enough to account for affections: these are a step backwards from – but also something that is spread like an aura around – any intentionality. That is too the reason why the works of this philosopher, even if they lead us to intuitions that move us toward a notion of presence, and toward a relation between body and language pertinent to literary experience, are not sufficient to eliminate, as we wish, the subjection of the body to reason. It is Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 224) himself who states, "Each time that I experience a sensation, I experience that it does not concern my own being".

I argue here that sensations and emotions – which I group under the concept of *affects* – can be awakened by, and radiate around, living experiences that extrapolate the perceptual towards language or reflective thinking. According to Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 223), however, this irradiation in itself bears "a seed of dream or depersonalization", or a "sort of stupor", because it "unfolds on the periphery of my being". As we shall see,

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even if he seems to lament this impossibility, the French philosopher does not come to conceive of a full affective experience, in the sense of a viable access to what he defines as the "periphery" of the individual being. For Merleau-Ponty, the body, if not recognized as the surface from which one arrives at understanding, is nothing but an exterior that is inapprehensible and, ultimately, something that is foreign to one as an individual. What I propose here, differently, is that one should not regard the body as *peripheral* or *depersonalized*, but as a space of connection with the sensible world through affects, which consolidate – through their effects and their oscillating, in tension, with the effects of understanding – our *being in the world*, in all its intensity.

Merleau-Ponty (1964b, p. 19), however, remains attached to the paradox of the phenomenological investigation of the sensory, concluding that "left to itself, perception forgets itself and is ignorant of its own accomplishments". He affirms that he does not intend, when pondering about the body and perception, to perform a "useless repetition of life"; instead he turns to reason, without which "life would probably dissipate itself in ignorance of itself or in chaos". It is in this delimitation that the refusal to deal with affects, which ultimately cannot be conquered by philosophical reflection, becomes evident. A phenomenology dealing with them would be *impossible*. Since literature deals in turn with paradox and impossibility, there is no reason why we should decline to dwell on the *unreflected* – nor should we hesitate when faced with the "repetition of life" that literary experience both produces and subverts at every moment, never falling into the *useless*.

A few paragraphs above, I asserted that literary texts should be thought of as worlds organically demanding our body's response. Since texts do not appeal to our senses through direct contact, the fictional world demands of our body an affective reflection that takes place in the space of the imagination: the real of the imaginary can only be, in fact, sensations and emotions, and these lead the reader to get in touch with the *real* world. After all, if the body is our contact surface with sensible objects, and if it undoubtedly responds, in the form of affects, to the stimuli of literary texts, it would be short of absurd to reject the proposition that the material world and the fictional/imaginary world interpenetrate, by means of the body.

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In his working notes on *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty (1968, p. 83-84) introduces a new element, "flesh" (*chair*), which seems to be an effort to meditate on the power of the sensory: "[E]very relation between me and Being, even vision, even speech", he writes, "is a carnal relation, with the flesh of the world". Thus our life, instead of opening itself to the object or to pure Being – reality and its phenomena –, has an "atmosphere" that surrounds it in the sensible world. The leap of faith concerning the sensible, however, is interrupted, inasmuch as the Pontyan flesh is still only "a possibility, a latency" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 133), constituting the capacity to see in the sensible thing, and one's visible corporeality in the one who feels.

Merleau-Ponty denominates as *reversibility* the quality allowing one who feels to simultaneously be a sensible object, and vice versa. Reversibility lies at the heart of the notions of the visible (sensible) and the invisible (its reverse, its background, its impenetrable reality). If the visible is that belonging to the phenomenal field, in other words, that which has a sensible surface that is perceivable (seeable, hearable, etc.), the invisible is that which is on the other side of the folding, never to be reversed. Reversibility is always only imminent (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 147). For the author, the body one sees and the words one hears are given to one as present, but at the same time, they point to the reverse that will never be present: the *soul* of the other; the meaning of the word.

Because of the never-to-be-fulfilled imminence of the unveiling of the *soul* of the other, contact is, in Merleau-Ponty, always a contact of surfaces, in which there seems to be a desire for transcendence that keeps subjects and things moving. In the heart of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy lies "the movement by which a living being transcends its materiality and gives rise to meaningful existence", (Barbaras, 2005, p. 211) so that sensations (and all affects) can only be found in a state that does not offer itself to observation.

With this delimitation of the observable, a gap is created between body and world, and it seems to me evident (though unfortunate) that in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, as Alphonso Lingis (1981, p. 164) pointed out, "what is lacking […] is… sensation", which would be "the original locus of openness upon things, or contact with them". Lingis (1981, p. 161) rightly argues that Merleau-Ponty's work still veers toward a certain idealism (and,

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indirectly, a Cartesian dualism), since, as a sensation becomes the *perception* of a sensation, it loses that which makes it sensuous. In this transmutation, sensation becomes what it *means*, that is, a message. In reality, however, exposure to the field of the sensuous, as recalls Lingis (1981, p. 161), is not solely about reaching its meaning: it is also about being in contact with things "in their resistance and materiality, being sensitive to them, susceptible to being sustained and wounded by them".

Merleau-Ponty does not get to the origin of the opening whereby the flesh of the body comes into contact with the flesh of the world. On the other hand, when reflecting upon the nature of the body, another French philosopher, Jean-Luc Nancy (2008a, p. 29), takes a bold step and argues that "a body 'in' a body […] doesn't 'open' anything: it is at the very opening that the body already is, infinitely, and more than originally so" and that "this crossing takes place right there, without penetration, this melee occurs without mingling", in an opening that also means casting one's body into the sensitive world. The world of bodies, says Nancy (2008a, p. 27), is "the nonimpenetrable world".

The body, however, is for Nancy (2008a, p. 5) a "shattered" certainty: there is nothing more proper nor anything stranger, he writes. The body is "property in itself" – at the same time, it is also the body from which one cannot escape as from "a monster that can't be swallowed", the body that weighs and binds us to the Earth for good or for evil. The greatest challenge in thinking about the body, nonetheless, is to resist transforming it into a representation of something alien to itself and its affectations: "How, then, are we to touch upon the body, rather than signify it or make it signify?" (Nancy, 2008a, p. 9). For Nancy, the body should not be thought of "as anterior or posterior, exterior or interior to the signifying order – but at the limit". This is why, according to Nancy (2008a, p. 23), "sense itself will float, in order to stop or start" at this body-limit, "not as a pure and simple exteriority of sense, or as some unknown, intact, untouchable matter", but as the utter suspension of meaning. The body is "existence itself" – which does not mean the unspeakable – as a prohibition: the body does not demand silence; only reason demands it, for it is only reason that seeks to keep secrets.

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Nancy's observations are crucial when we think of somatic activation, that is, the mobilization of affects triggered when one reads a literary text: the fact that these affects do not convert into logos does not give the body an aporetic character nor does it mean that these affects cannot be shared. It is a perspective on the body inherently rooted in reason that rejects the significance of the body because of its inability to articulate it. The unspeakable (in language) in my experience of reading a particular text is equivalent only to the unpredictable and untraceable, qualities that do not adhere to understanding and interpretation. Yet, in this context, *unspeakable* is not synonymous with non-shareable: that is precisely why approaching literary reading by means of its presence effects should be protected against possible accusations of sterility or worthlessness. Actually, if we think about how literature is taught, especially in K-12 education, we may come to the conclusion that sharing affective responses to literary texts is a worthy tool for the expansion of experiences that do not belong to the spectrum of knowledge but to the existential realm of living experience.

Knowledge is, for Nancy, a notion alien to the body, which is neither "stupid" nor "impotent": it demands other categories of "force and thought" (Nancy, 2008a, p. 13). I believe, as he does, that the need to speak about the body – to legitimize this speech – by attributing to the body a quality that is alien to it, is to reaffirm its total submission to the Cartesian *cogito*. Bodies do not know or ignore, writes Nancy (2008a, p. 43): they are "elsewhere" and "from elsewhere" – regions, frontiers, household plots, wide boulevards with promenades, trips through estranging lands – and never from the "nonplace of knowledge". We need not look, in bodies, for "the foundation of an 'obscure', 'preconceptual', 'preontological', or 'immanent' and 'immediate' knowledge": the body should not be a byproduct of theories of knowledge or perception (Nancy, 2008a, p. 43).

The body, as Nancy (2008a, p. 15) puts it, is not some kind of "filled space". It is, on the contrary, an "open" space, a place of existence which is always mobile and multiple. The author pursues this line of argument by stating that since it is the space of existence, the body is, simply put, the soul, or consciousness. Likewise, it does not make sense to speak of body and thought as separated from each other, as if each one could stand on its own, for "they are only their touching each other". This touch, as a kind of brutal

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invasion, "is the limit and the spacing of existence" and can thus be called "joy", "pain" or "sorrow" (Nancy, 2008a, p. 37) – names that approach the limit of their meanings, without being conquered by reason. What bodies offer to thought, for Nancy (2008a, p. 43), is the notion that "there's no mediation"; the body "makes sense", but not a transcendent sense: a "thought" about the body should "be a feeling of its weight [*une pesée*], and, in that, a touching".

Nevertheless, given the relentless tendency of a search for meaning, sometimes "the convulsion of signification completely tears the body from the body", and the body offers itself as a vacuum where "representation is formed or projected". At other times, the body is only an external object, pure intentionality. In these cases, "the body always is structured as a return to sense" and ceases to properly be a body, existing only as a container (Nancy, 2008a, p. 43). The author points out that this imposition of meaning on the body is evident in literature, which often manifests itself as "a play of representations" that moves us not through somatic affectation, but by presenting itself as fictive and remote, and thus protected by reason: a commotion mediated and provided by understanding, which lifts the body off of the world and defines it as "spiritual" (Nancy, 2008, p. 71).

For Nancy (2008a, p. 75), it is therefore important to tell the soul (*âme*) from the spirit (*esprit*) in its relation to the body. While the latter is only a sort of Christian version for the transcendence of signification, the former is "the form of a body and thus body itself (psyche extended)". The soul *animates* the body, gives life to it, and transforms it into what it truly is. In another essay, Nancy (2008b, p. 153) writes about the body precisely as "[a] soul, wrinkled, fat or dry, hairy or callous, rough, supple, cracking, gracious, flatulent, iridescent, pearly, daubed with paint, wrapped in muslin or camouflaged in khaki, multicolored, covered with grease, wounds, warts" – the body is "a soul dancing or plunging". This is why Nancy (2008a, p. 71) regrets that, in literary texts, bodies are often used only as receptacles of meaning, constituting utter allegories.

But what about the reader's body? How not to kidnap it from the reading experience? In a chapter entitled "Private reading" in *A History of Reading*, Alberto Manguel observes that it is a kind of detachment – or even subversion – between extra-pages reality and literary reality that reveals a

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spatial and temporal rupture allowing the body of the reader to assume a leading role. Manguel (1996, p. 158; p. 165) understands the reading done in the silence and privacy of the bedroom as a more intense example of this transgression: "The casual phrase 'taking a book to bed' has always seemed to me laden with sensual anticipation", he writes of this private sphere, "so intimate, that it is […] a world unto itself, where everything is possible".

The freedom granted to the body in the bedroom, where it is liberated from social obligations, also makes it available for other worlds demanding its responses. If we recall Merleau-Ponty's intuition that "being in the world" presupposes a pre-objective relationship between the body and the sensible world – in which the body exists because there is an exterior that demands from it a response – we may conclude that, being excused from everyday demands, the body, in bed, is available, in its entirety, to become present – or to become *a presence* – in the imaginary realm. As Manguel would recollect of his early reading experiences, "in bed, my body needed nothing, immobile under the sheets. […] Life happened because I turned the pages" (Manguel, 1996, p. 154). At the same time, the author reminds us that sometimes the greatest power of literature is evidenced because of an exterior opposite to what the pages bring us, that is, by the building of a world that contrasts with that which surrounds us. Manguel proposes, then, that sometimes the cleavage between "inside" and "outside" forges a dissonance that eliminates the possibility of redundancy and boosts the power of imagination.

Presence and its Effects

Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty's reflection upon perception, as well as from Lingis and Nancy, I propose a dimension of consciousness that is not limited to self-consciousness: a state of openness to the world of things, in which they affect us without us having to think about them. The concept of *presence*, naturally following that of sensation, is a fundamental notion to consider when dealing with the affects arising from a non-direct, or non-material, contact with the world.

Nancy (1993, p. ix) writes that presence is not to be understood in the Platonic sense – as "the firmly standing presence, immobile and impassive" – but rather as a "being given to the world". The quality of event held by

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presence comes from its origin as a birth, "an event that lasts all our lives", something that is "in excess of representation" (Nancy, 1993, p. 3).

Similarly, for Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2003, p. xiv) the idea of presence has the quality of event: it is a production that, paradoxically, does not have a stable final product. At best, the only result of this presence-event is the impact that a present thing can have on our bodies and our senses, and even so this impact is only "initiated or intensified". Presence dwells in a movement of *nows*, in which the dimension of "presence" is spatial – not temporal, as the dimension of meaning. This implies for Gumbrecht (2014, p. ix) that whether things "'touch' us directly or not, they have substance" and therefore they produce an impact on our bodies.

I will focus here on presence as the *impact,* or as the *effect,* of things on our bodies, rather than as a product of tangibility – after all, certain things remain intangible to our hands while holding the potential of 'immediate impact' on our bodies, and thus the power to produce presence. Literary experience is a prime example. Likewise, the idea of substance as necessary to the production of presence interests me insofar as consciousness has access to things absent, distant, or fictive in the form of mental images. These images are here considered as objects present *only* in the mind nonetheless impacting the human body, in the same kind of "events and processes" that Gumbrecht (2003, p. xiii) defines as "production of presence". It is precisely *this* idea of presence, as a sensorial and emotional effect, that allows for the imagination to be presented as the dimension of literary experience in which we access the world in a non-conceptual way.

Gumbrecht (2003) emphasizes the fundamental importance of the quality of intensity in the production of presence: moments of presence are moments of extreme energy – they teach us nothing, they do not convey messages. The author defines as *epiphany* the sensation that we cannot cling to the effects of presence, that we are unable to grasp them in their ephemerality. In addition to being non-apprehensible, epiphany, as an affect-event, is also unpredictable in two important respects: the moment when it occurs, and its form that "undoes itself while it emerges" (Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 111; p. 113).

Gumbrecht himself (2003, p. 106), therefore, remarks that in a culture of meaning such as ours – and of which literary experience is an obvious example – phenomena of presence always come by means of effects, which

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carry within themselves the intensity of the ephemeral. Nevertheless, in *Production of Presence*, the author still harbors the notion that there is a need for immediate materiality for the effects of presence to occur. This need, however, reduces the possibilities offered by reading, as he states that "[…] the meaning-dimension will always be dominant when we are reading a text – but literary texts have ways of also bringing the presence-dimension of the typography, of the rhythm of language, and even of the smell of paper into play" (Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 109).

Just as the ephemeral intensity brought up by Gumbrecht points to another form of power held by literary texts, his allusion to the material dimension of literature evokes another possible perspective, resonant with Roland Barthes' idea of the *pleasure* or *jouissance* of the text. The French semiologist is, for his part, interested in the materiality of language: for him, it is from the latter that the intensity of the pleasure of the text rises. Barthes exalts reading as a space subject to contradiction; however, we are not in the domain of the sensation paradox as conceived by Merleau-Ponty and that I transposed to literary experience, as a universe of infinite and *impossible* possibilities in the space of the imagination. In Barthes (1998, p. 14), the contradiction is found within language: he speaks of a "cohabitation of languages", and not of cohabitation, within the space where fiction and imagination interpenetrate, of opposites or parallels. Barthes's "pleasure of reading" does not reside in the space of presence understood as the infiltration of reality through sensation; at best, reality will be tangible by means of the materiality of words, not by what it evokes through the free mnemonic association or – even less so – through mimetic representation, which is the central target of his criticism. What interests him is not "the winnowing out of truths, but the layering of significance" – that is, of meaning – "insofar as it is sensually produced" (Barthes, 1998, p. 12; p. 61).

The pleasure of reading comes, for Barthes, from ruptures in language. When the author presupposes two edges, in the *cutting* through which the *jouissance* of the reader unfolds, he is speaking of a cutting not between the material world and the imaginary world (as inhabited by the fictional), but between two edges of language: "an obedient, conformist, plagiarizing edge", which refers to the conventional language of "good usage"; and a "mobile" and

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plastic edge, which assumes unsuspected forms, and where we are able to glimpse "the death of language" (Barthes, 1998, p. 6).

The ideas of pleasure and of bliss (*jouissance*) might lead the reader of Barthes to think of an activation of the sensible body through language. But the body here is not exactly the sensitive, as it does not suffice in its own sensitivity. It is instead a *producer of ideas*, triggered by the materiality of the text: "The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas – for my body does not have the same ideas as I do" (Barthes, 1998, p. 17). The unspeakable is extolled as, precisely, that which is not shareable because it is not expressible in language: the *jouissance* is the unspeakable, the "*inter-dicte*" (Barthes, 1998, p. 21).

In any case, Barthes, while rejecting the possibility that the concrete, real world may be represented by literary texts, cannot but admit that representation – the transposition of the real, external world into the text – is necessary, even if it is only a shadow of this text. Yet how can one reject the possibility that this shadow may produce effects of presence? In an essay named "The Reality Effect", published a few years prior to *The Pleasure*, Barthes had explored the significance of the presence of a barometer in a scene described by Flaubert, using it to rightly defend that superfluous details, which have neither a function in structural analyzes nor an aesthetic role, have the task of denoting the concrete real, and that they arise as "a resistance to meaning" (Barthes, 1989, p. 146). Similarly, Barthes (1998, p. 24) makes room for a glimpse of a possible reader's liberation from the linguistic surface when he says that the text produces its "best pleasure" when it prompts the reader to listen to "something else". It is, however, its "intransitivity" that, for Barthes, produces such an effect: the abyss of language leads to the impossibility of dialogue, which then leads the body-idea to other whereabouts.

Turning now to Gumbrecht, and leaving behind not only the materiality of the text but also the materiality of the book as an object, we find a different possibility of access to the sensitive, when triggered by *meaningful* texts, through the idea of *Stimmung*. Here, the *concrete encounter* with the world allows for more subtle ways, such as the sensation provided by the mood or atmosphere that surrounds us. Reading by *Stimmung* means "paying attention to the textual dimension of the forms that envelop us and our bodies as a

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physical reality – something that can catalyze inner feelings without matters of representation necessarily being involved" (Gumbrecht, 2012, p. 5). *Stimmung* effects could be thought of as sort of somatically produced correlates of the effects of presence as impacts produced by the sensorial perception on our bodies.

Now, we no longer depend on scents, types or rhythms traceable to the material surface of the work to penetrate the dimension of presence, which is also manifest from its non-material facet: all elements of the text can contribute to the production of atmospheres, and this means that works rich in *Stimmung* need not be primarily descriptive. Gumbrecht makes it clear that he is moving towards something offered by texts that lies beyond their concrete surface, that is, the possibility of making past, absent or alien atmospheres and climates present again, by means of a way of reading that concentrates on "discovering sources of energy" and "giving oneself over to them affectively and bodily" (Gumbrecht, 2012, p. 5). The role of the imagination in the process of *presentification* offered, on the one hand, by the moods induced by the texture of the text and, on the other, by the reading of the plot, is mentioned by the author only *en passant*, in a precise comment: "The literary elaboration of atmospheres and moods, which structures one need not recognize, makes it possible to be transported, via imagination, into situations in which physical sensations and psychic constitution become inseparable" (Gumbrecht, 2012, p. 75).

If the notion of presence proposed by Gumbrecht only seems to explicitly reflect the production of effects of presence in literary reading beyond its material aspects with the introduction of the idea of reading by *Stimmung*, there are, on the other hand, conceptualizations of presence in cognitive sciences and philosophy of the mind which go beyond sensory perception, or blur its boundaries. Cognitive psychology, for example, suggests the concept of embodied recognition as partial explanation for the production of sensory effects without the need for concrete external stimuli. The adherents of this theory, however, tend to restrict the effects of presence in reading to experiences experienced vicariously by the reader from the actions and perceptions of literary characters.

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Presence as Vicarious Experience

Several recent studies question the independence of the cortical systems responsible for language, and those responsible for actions, from each other. Pulvermüller (2005, p. 576) analyzed the brain responses of volunteers while they were reading words, referring to actions related to different parts of the body that sounded alike, such as licking, picking and kicking. He found that the sensorimotor cortex was activated, and that reading triggers regions of the brain that are otherwise activated by the described actions, albeit much more mildly.

Bergen (2012, p. 14) extends a similar notion to what he calls "simulation", which he defines as the "creation of mental experiences of perception and action in the absence of their external manifestation", as an attenuated resonance of brain patterns that had been active in previous experiences. Porro et al. (1996, p 7688) speak of "motor imagery", defined as the mental rehearsal of motor acts, whether simple or complex, which are not accompanied by overt body movements. Researchers understand that these motor images can occur either internally, when the subject feels that he is performing movements, or externally, when he is watching them.

In his proposal of an "embodied theory of language comprehension", Rolf Zwaan (2004, p. 38) states that reading or listening to sentences activates experiential representations of words (lexical, grammatical, phonological) in the *comprehender*, as well as representations associated with their referents, whether perceptual, emotional or motor. The understanding of a text would thus be the "vicarious experience of the described events through the integration and sequencing of traces from actual experience cued by the linguistic input". His argument is based on tests showing that words activate regions of the brain close to those activated in the perception or actions involving the referents of words.

Anezka Kuzmicova's proposition (2012, p. 24) is more radical. She draws upon the theory of sensorimotor simulation to propose that presence in literary reading arises – countering Porro et al. – from a first person resonance rather than from "mere visualizing from the perspective of a passive, third-person observer". Presence is, in this context, understood as a fundamental ingredient for the reader's immersion in the work; producing presence would

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be "coproducing immersion". Presence is thus understood almost literally: readers feel present in the work by means of a preconscious sensorimotor mimetic process.

Kuzmicova (2012, p. 25) defines presence in the context of reading as a "higher degree of spatial vividness, arousing in the reader a sense of having physically entered a tangible", which is "achieved when certain forms of human bodily movement are rendered in the narrative". Restricting the idea of presence to the direct physical component of spatial immersion, the author reduces the figure of the reader to a kind of preconscious theatrical actor directed by the text, and attenuates his role as the subject of experiences lived in imagination and memory. However, although the author circumscribes the possibility of producing presence to texts that offer "spatial vividness", this vibrancy is interestingly defined as "an assumed intensity of the fragmentary, instantaneous, and mostly extremely short-lived spatial imagery prompted by a narrative passage" (Kuzmicova , 2012, p. 26). It is also worth mentioning the broad spectrum that Kuzmicova asserts to imagination as a reading realm: "Imagery encompasses […] exteroception (sight, smell, taste, touch, hearing), but also proprioception (e.g. pain) and, crucially, the senses of bodily movement", such as limb and organ position, and notions of effort, speed, and balance.

This essay is part of a broader meditation on a theory of imagination as a kind of distanced perception, that is, as a dimension where presence effects are produced by free association, albeit not immediately. As such, the idea that effects brought about by language to the brain are only paler versions of the effects of actual perception or action corroborates my proposal: it is precisely because of the quality of concrete proximity that imaginative effects on the body occur. Yet, restricting simulation prompted by less concrete discourses to embodiment by sensorimotor resonance reduces the relation between reading and the body to a causal one. As we strive to conjure up an image – for example, that of a dog – we produce an image more or less *controlled* by consciousness. But situations or ideas that we read in literary texts *explode* in our imagination, appearing in our consciousnesses only as flashes, which work in a similar way to involuntary memories: they are more effects than simulations.

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We do not control how the images of a specific room are formed in our consciousness from, for example, the sparse description of the living room that serves as scenery to Machado de Assis's story "Midnight Mass" – the "table in the middle of the room", "the chair next to the settee", the "pictures hanging on the wall" that are "getting old", one of which "represented Cleopatra", both of them "vulgar" (Assis, 2014, loc. 2777, 2833-53). Nor do we control how the description of an *idea* can become the *image* of a scene, a face, a song, a smell, or a tactile sensation. More than that: even a carefully detailed description of a space or scene – I think, here, of works like *Chronicle of the Murdered House*, by Lucio Cardoso – will have in different readers diverse image effects. The way texts go off in uncontrolled images is also what gives significance to imagination. After all, what role would it have if language itself, when processed by the brain, were to trigger unmistakable presence effects in the form of exact echoes of the sensations or activities described? Without the free and subjective character of imagination, all of us readers would conjure the same images from the same texts. This is also why the reflection concerning the concept of presence in literature is much more productive with regard to investigations on the potentiality of literature as a whole and on the ways of approaching literary reading, rather than in researches on specific literary works: presence effects triggered by a particular text will never happen in the same way in different readers.

Presence as Access to Understanding

Among the thinkers who have been meditating on the notion of presence within the fields of philosophy of mind and embodied cognition, Alva Noë has possibly produced the work of greater breath in the last decade. Although his reflections focus mainly on the notion of presence as applied to palpable or tangible things, a dialogue with his *Varieties of Presence* will prove productive with regard to pointing out the limits of a notion of presence restricted to perception and especially to the connection between presence and understanding. For Noë (2012, p. 3), feeling and understanding are interrelated: presence and concept exist along a kind of continuum, or, as he prefers to put it, presence and sense simply deal with different styles of access to the world.

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Yet Noë's styles of access to the world do not operate on the side of lived experience (*Erlebnis*) to be transmuted into thought experience (*Erfahrung*) – in fact, this distinction does not exist in his book. If this transmutation, as I understand it, eliminates the impact of the presence, for the author "perceptual experience is always, at best, a work in progress", rather than a matter of feeling or pure sensation (Noë, 2012, p. 4).

In a radicalization of Merleau-Pontyan thoughts on perception, Noë (2012, p. 2) extends their heuristic character to presence: we exist, in all dimensions, to apprehend the world, and the world opens to us "only insofar we are able to bring it into focus". Since focus here is to be understood as the focus of reflective consciousness (which is subordinated to understanding), in all affective or sensory experiences the world would be closed to us. It opens only in experiences that are circumscribed and evidenced by consciousness *qua* consciousness.

Moreover, when Noë thinks of presence and meaning only in terms of "access styles", he assumes that there is a sort of agency in presence, which then becomes an act and no longer an event. Consciousness and experience – he uses the two terms interchangeably – are things you *do* and not things that *occur to you*, nor relationships of which you are part. In this sense, perception is a form of action, at best, a "transaction" (Noë, 2012, p. 3).

Both Noë and I start from the desire for a direct relationship with the world, but while he understands this relationship as a sort of attaining, I understand it as a connection. In a certain sense, the philosopher espouses a more optimistic view than I do, for he affirms that we are "at home in the world"– a relation he sees as existing between an *in here* and an *out there*, not between an *inside* (of consciousness) and an *outside* (in the world). Optimism, however, is here a form of pragmatic resignation in the face of a meaning culture which gives little scope to (although it cannot altogether suppress) moments of intense presence. I maintain that presence effects actually strike us by pulling us into a connection with a cosmological totality: yet, for him, "presence as access is as real as presence gets, and that's real enough". Not surprisingly, Noë (2012, p. 33) understands that Heidegger repudiates "presence in favor of absence" by insisting that there can be no "unthought" presence and taking for granted an "over-intelectualized conception of the intellect".

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Differently, for Nöe (2012, p. 19-20) everything is intellect, and understanding extends from conceptual knowledge to "sensorimotor knowledge", making the things of the world available to presence. This supposition allows him to conclude that "perceptual presence is availability" and not simply visibility He means to refuse to impose a representational bias on perception, by claiming that it is not necessary, for instance, to trigger the idea of a tomato to see the entirety of it from a single visible perspective; the rest of the tomato is always implicitly available (Noë, 2012, p. 32).

What does not strike me as obvious is the option to articulate this form of preconscious skill in a gradual continuity to understanding and, ultimately, interpretation. Using the example of the tomato: the moment we realize, by activating self-awareness, that we are not seeing a tomato, just part of it, the experience of the fruit changes brutally. With this, the world's way of apprehension suffers not a *style* adjustment, but a displacement of the individual in relation to the same world – a paradox that Merleau-Ponty himself had already noticed. In the same way, the relation between perceptual presence and understanding that Noë defends does not open space for what we understand as moments of sensorial intensity (even without being able to rationalize them), because for him there are no "novel experiences" insofar as "the conditions of novelty are, in effect, conditions of invisibility. To experience something, you must have already made its acquaintance" (Noë, 2012, p. 20).

Imagination – in this case, the act of bringing an object to mind – is for Noë only a mode of presence as is perception, both of them regulated by the notion of availability. If I think of a distant friend, the entirety of this friend – absent from perception – is only the hidden face of himself. Between the presence of my friend who is on the other side of the world and the presence of the part of the tomato in front of me that is not within the reach of my gaze, there is a difference only of "degree" and not of "kind" (Noë, 2012, p. 27). Once again, Noë's effort is devoted mainly to refusing the need to engage the idea of representation to affirm the relationship between a person and an imagined object. Imagination, while focusing on a real, yet absent, thing of the world, will be a quasi-presence (of an existing object).

Two questions, however, remain: 1) what is the status of this image when it arises to imagination without my intending it?; and 2) what is the status of

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the image referring to something that no longer exists, something whose existence is unknown or something that does not actually exist – a past, fictional or merely possible object? In the first case, Noë seems to ignore, in general, the possibility of a presence without active access (as in involuntary memories). Concerning the images referring to things that do not exist or do not still exist, or do not exist anymore, he considers that one can only speak about a very tenuous presence, because the object appears as "too far". The example the author chooses is Moses: because there is a very big chance that he is only a matter of myth, we cannot apprehend him as we do a distant friend. The act of speaking or thinking about Moses is thus affected by the enormous probability that he did not exist, which would repress the possibility of his manifesting as present, for there would be only "little more than the illusion of access" – and "no access, no presence". For the author, when we imagine something that does not exist, we simply do not imagine it. There is only the "illusion of thinking of something" (Noë, 2012, p. 112).

For the purposes of the investigation of this essay, the great limitation in the notion of presence in Noë is, therefore, that it sticks only to what can be focused in reflective consciousness, that is, to that which is circumscribable to thought experience. Thus, it is the opposite of what I propose: presence as what resists rationalization. His is a pragmatic presence, and so it matters only as an act and not as an effect. By reducing presence to access, the author charges this access with some degree of action, ignoring the effects of presence brought by involuntary mental images and hesitating in case of events (defined by their unpredictability). "You do not have the feeling of presence when you merely imagine the couch", he writes (Noë, 2012, p. 89), spurning the possibility of a presence that is such precisely because of its affective effects. That is, the possibility that mere objects are able to awaken memories or emotions from the involuntary activation of metonymic associations, which would give shape and life to the imaginary, affecting our bodies in the same way as objects available to perception do. To speak of affective effects of presence would always be for him to psychologize presence, and would amount to making it something impalpable and distant from the things of the world.

Noë (2012, p. 43) does not account for the kind of presence that is not directly sensorial or at least possibly sensorial, in the same way that he ignores the presence spontaneously awakened by what is neither *here* nor *there*. As he

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puts it, "false presence isn't a species of presence, and the apparent visual experience of a nonexistent object isn't a species of perceptual awareness". The experience of Moses' presence, to return to the example suggested by the author, would thus naturally be a false presence and therefore would not guarantee us access to the things of the world, if not conceptually. The mental image of the figure of a bearded man who rises to consciousness, or that of a sea opening, and also the emotion that could, volatilely, move me simply by hearing the name "Moses"– even if I do not believe he ever existed, but because I read books, saw movies and pictorial images, heard sermons –, all of these effects of presence should be shelved in the drawer of illusions and dismissed as misplaced possibilities of connection with the *real* world.

By proposing the idea of presence as a style of access to the world, Noë gives it a rather pragmatic sense, as well epistemological-teleological. The incursion of the author is interesting as a denial of a representational relationship with the world, within the scope of perception. Noë, however, extends to aesthetic experience the same approach he uses with regard to the perceptual world, drawing the notion of understanding precisely to the side of sense (as opposed to the side of the senses). I, on the other hand, see aesthetic experience in a distinct way – precisely because, for me, between presence and concept there is not a gradation, but a rupture – and total presence (in the sense of a cosmological connection with the world), achieved through its effects, may be elusive, but never illusory. For Noë (2012, p. 126-127, author's emphasis), however, the "pleasure of aesthetic experience [...] is the pleasure of 'getting it'. It is the pleasure of understanding, of seeing connections, of *comfortably* knowing one way's about". He goes on to explain that every aesthetic experience aims at discovering a "meaning or purposiveness" that "was there all along, but hidden in plain sight". The role of art criticism, therefore, would be for him, to cultivate "the understanding, the development and so the procurement of the *conceptual* tools that enable us to pick up what is there before us". I also understand it differently to mean that it is also up to literary criticism to open spaces for sharing affects, by recognizing that not everything offered to the public in a work of art is conceptually apprehensible.

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Presence on the Outskirts of Representation

In the first volume of *In Search of Lost Time*, Marcel Proust (2002, p. 45) decomposes the effect that a madeleine dampened in tea brings to his narrator into a moment of pure sensation – "a delicious pleasure" that "isolated" him, a "powerful joy" – and another in which images already appear, as a memory already fulfilled. The second moment comes, once again, suddenly – but now it arrives as something that exists beyond the realm of sensation. With this clearer image, the narrator can finally converse. Some understand that the main quality of that first overwhelming moment is only that of engendering the second one, and that the second moment fulfills the first, and enables one to meditate on it.

Walter Benjamin (1994, p. 214-215), on the other hand, sees in the predominance of smell in Proust's work a kind of primacy, or at least an exclusive value, of the spontaneity of involuntary memories. There is, for Benjamin, a "great tenacity" in the strength with which odors seem to become attached to memory, when compared to visual images – images that, even in the *mémoire involuntaire*, still appear isolated, even if enigmatic. The "innermost overtones", or the "bottommost stractum", of Proust's literature, however, Benjamin tells us, can only be penetrated the same way one gain access to the most spontaneous moments of recollection, which appear "as a whole, amorphously and formlessly, indefinitely and weightily". A weight that, for Benjamin, Proust lodges in the "entire muscular activity of the intelligible body" of the sentences he composes, which carry the effort of putting into words all that was captured by the senses. Proust's readers are thus constantly shaken by jolts, in which images emerge from the text, "fastened on their objects as insects fasten on leaves, blossoms, branches, betraying nothing of their existence until a leap, a beating of wings, a vault, show the startled observer hat some incalculable individual life has imperceptibly crept into an alien world" (Benjamin, 2007, p. 208).

I consider here that when it comes to reading a novel or a poem, presence emerges like those images that, in all their weight, startle Benjamin when he is reading Proust. I propose, then, that imagination is, in literary experience, a dimension where things of the world are *presentified* to consciousness and, with that, potentially catalyze presence effects. I think of sensory-motor images that arise in one's mind, spontaneously or triggered by external stimuli: there is

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a quasi-tangibility to these images – we can almost capture them, but, contradictorily, when they are indeed captured, it is in the form of concepts. In other words, it is precisely when they escape interpretation that mental images exert their impact on our bodies: when they produce presence effects on the senses and on the memory, thus triggering affects.

As for the external stimuli that may bring about those images – which in turn trigger presence effects –, they are often intangible, as is the case of literary texts (in their immaterial facet). If we consider, in their elusiveness, moments of intensity produced by presence effects as instants of epiphany or as that which exceed any possibility of being conformed in meaning, and if it is this excess that, as I intuit, provokes in the reader the feeling of being *in* the world, there is a need for a notion of presence that fits into some conditions. Thus, I conclude this essay by defining presence in literary experience as something that: 1) is not reduced to tangibility or pure perception by the body; 2) extends from the sensory dimension to the dimension of emotions; 3) occurs not on a continuum that leads to the interpretation of the lived experience, but on the contrary inhabits the surplus that resists it; and 4) in face of the previous three conditions, allows effects, often intense and ephemeral, to touch the body within the territory of imagination.

Underlying this conception of presence lies the fact that its effects are only evidenced by the oscillation, or tension, between them and meaning effects. In a paradox that is only apparent, even the more intense presence instants can only be lived as such in their opposition to meaning effects. Without these, that is, without the notion brought by the very rationalization concerning effects and affects that escape reason, what stands as the surplus of life would be just a pre-conscious moment, without subjective signification. It is in this sense that the idea of *nostalgia for presence* is so important and that this nostalgia prompts an eternal desire to feel these intense moments again and again.

Gumbrecht (2003) defines aesthetic experience as the tension between meaning effects and presence effects. In reading, of course, meaning effects are central. This could not be otherwise, since it is precisely through meaning produced by sets of words and phrases – that the presence effects upon which I reflect here are produced. In a literary reading, a double triggering is observed: images arise from the discursive surface, and these images produce presence effects. With this production, those images, fed by their presence effects,

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return to the domain of the logos to compose the trajectory of meaning of the text as it is read. Some of those effects, however, by virtue of their intensity and their volatility, produce surpluses of life that do are not transferable into meaning and are not communicable – they exist as presence events, and as events they set us within the world.

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