"The Sight of the Soul":
Reading and the (Non-)Metaphor of Visual Perception

Is it possible to empiricize reading? To understand the processes of literary analysis and conceptualization as a scientific process? These questions are called forth by a single phrase used in Sir Philip Sidney's 1579 Defense of Poesy: "the sight of the soul." He describes how the poet is able to produce a picture which has a particular power to "strike," "pierce", or "possess" the "sight of the soul." His description of the "perfect picture" suggests that his defense rests upon both the power of words to evoke images and the power of images to reach, in some way, the soul. His poetics introduce and then attempt to bridge the discontinuity between things that are conceptual and things that are material, while appealing to the Renaissance's growing interest in the empiricization of experience and the process of knowledge acquisition.

Sidney's metaphorical association between reading and vision have persisted since classical antiquity. But I suggest that visual perception is not only an apt metaphor for what goes on during reading, but that the process of reading itself is a perceptual process. The metaphor of vision and reading are more literal than we would expect: and this literal correspondence of reading and sight makes reading itself a process which we can discuss in quantifiable terms, as we would discuss natural processes in scientific terms.