

Readers and Reading in America: Historical and Critical Perspectives

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THE HISTORY OF READING as it is pursued in the United States means different things to different people. To survey the field is to be reminded of the elasticity of the subject; for some who study it, reading has to do with literacy and thus becomes an aspect of social history or the history of education; for others, it pertains to the hermeneutics of interpretation; for still others, the distribution and ownership of printed matter, chiefly books, is the real concern. How it is we understand what reading is about, or means, depends on the nature of our inquiry—whether we are historians of working-class culture, educational institutions, religion and *mentalité*, or the politics of texts. These pos-

As published here, this essay is a much revised version of a paper prepared for a conference held in Paris, January 29–31, 1993 under the sponsorship of the Ministry of National Education and Culture; one section of this conference had to do with the history of reading, my assignment being to report on the state of scholarship in America (an assignment I interpreted generously so as to include scholarship from elsewhere that has been influential in America), as others did for Germany, the Netherlands, Great Britain, etc. The statements prepared for the conference are being published in *Histoire de la lecture*, ed. Roger Chartier and Olivier Corpet (Paris: IMEC and Maison des Sciences de L'Homme, 1994). I am grateful to Roger Chartier and Olivier Corpet for inviting me to participate in the *colloque* and to my fellow presenters (especially J.-Y. Mollier, Hans Erich Bödeker, and Jean Marie Goulemot) for contributions that enlarged my understanding of the subject. The essay that follows is another payment on my longstanding debt to Chartier's scholarship; some of his recent reflections on reading are embodied in 'Popular Culture: A Concept Revisited,' *Intellectual History Newsletter* #15 (1993), 3–13. Carl Kaestle and Joan S. Rubin have provided immediate assistance for this, the American version.

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sibilities give energy and importance to the field even as they work against coherence and effective comparison. I begin, therefore, by noting that the American scholars who study the history of reading do not agree on the boundaries of the subject or on what its history has been.¹

To simplify this messy situation, to cut my way through the tangle of possibilities, I have limited myself to reporting on six aspects of our scholarship. In closing, I want to reflect on the social and cultural consequences of the division of labor and on the relationship between literary theory and the history of the book.

1. *Reading as an aspect of intellectual history.* For a very long time and continuing to the present day, reading has been a synonym for the reception and diffusion of ideas. That is, describing the books that were available was important to intellectual historians concerned with mapping major patterns of thought, these being for the most part patterns within learned culture. Seeking evidence of these ideas in early America, historians have turned to lists of books that were used at colleges like Harvard and Yale or relied on the probate inventories of the Protestant clergy who constitute our first and longest-lasting learned class. Occasionally the key has been the library of an individual—for example, the remarkable collection assembled by James Logan of Philadelphia.²

It was such evidence that enabled Perry Miller to discern the

1. Important critical and bibliographical reflections that supplement my own are two essays by Carl F. Kaestle, 'Studying the History of Literacy' and 'The History of Readers.' Kaestle et al., *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading since 1880* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

2. Samuel Eliot Morison, *Harvard College in the Seventeenth Century*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936); Richard Warch, *School of the Prophets: Yale College, 1701-1740* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1973); Edmund S. Morgan, *The Gentle Puritan: A Life of Ezra Stiles, 1727-1795* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), ch. 3; Frederick B. Tolles, *Meeting House and Counting House: The Quaker Merchants of Colonial Philadelphia 1682-1763* (1948; repr., New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), chs. 7-8 (with many useful references to other scholarship); Frederick E. Brasch, James Logan, 'A Colonial Mathematical Scholar, and the First Copy of Newton's *Principia* to Arrive in the Colony,' *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 86 (1943): 3-12; Edwin Wolf 2nd, *The Library of James Logan of Philadelphia, 1674-1751* (Philadelphia: Library Company of Philadelphia, 1974). Another vein of scholarship, exemplified by Richard Beale Davis's *Intellectual Life in the Colonial South*, 3 vols. (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 1978), employs these kinds of evidence to paint in broad strokes a picture of 'intellectual life.' Here and in all succeeding notes the references are illustrative, not comprehensive.

scholastic rationalism and Ramist logic that, to his initial surprise, loomed so large in the intellectual fabric of Puritanism. Similarly, Henry May's magisterial analysis of the multiple strands of *The Enlightenment in America* relied on the contents of booksellers' stocks. Charting currents of ethical theory in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century America, Norman Fiering drew on private inventories and the contents of college libraries, and his revisionist study of Jonathan Edwards takes account of the 'catalogue' Edwards kept of books he wanted to read.³ The many possibilities for this kind of scholarship extend into the twentieth century, as Cynthia Russett demonstrated in her description of a seminar at Harvard in the 1930s devoted to reading Vilfredo Pareto's *The Mind and Society* in translation.⁴

In the centuries that lead up to our own, learned culture in America depended on books that Europeans wrote and published. How these books made their way to America has interested historians of libraries, book collecting, and the book trades. These forms of scholarship carry us beyond the history of ideas into the social history of culture, as in making evident the structure and role of certain sites—libraries, booksellers, households, salons, clubs, 'circles,' 'connections,' coteries, learned societies, and the like—where imported books were accumulated and exchanged.⁵

3. Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1939); Henry R. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); David Lundberg and Henry May, 'The Enlightened Reader in America,' *American Quarterly* 28 (1976): 262-93; Norman Fiering, *Moral Philosophy at Seventeenth-Century Harvard* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981); idem, *Jonathan Edwards and British Moral Philosophy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981). Edwards noted in the 'Catalogue' (Edwards ms., Beinecke Library, Yale University) which books he was actually able to secure and read. Methodologically, there have been few sequels to Zoltán Haraszti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress: A Study in the Intellectual and Political History of the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), perhaps because the evidence, in this instance Adams's marginal comments in books he owned, survives for relatively few individuals.

4. Cynthia E. Russett, *The Concept of Equilibrium in American Social Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), chs. 7-9.

5. The literature on the history of libraries may provide the best access to this social history. See Michael Harris and Donald G. Davis, Jr., *American Library History: A Bibliography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978). A model study of a bookseller who catered to the learned is Elizabeth Carroll Reilly, 'The Wages of Piety: The Boston Book Trade of Jeremy Condy,' in William L. Joyce et al., *Printing and Society in Early America* (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1983), 83-131.

A well-studied and important example is the circulation of books and periodicals in the 1830s among the persons who became known as Transcendentalists.⁶ From another vantage, this scholarship fills in the stages in the 'communications circuit' that books traverse in passing from writers to readers. The history of reading as a branch of the history of learned culture thus becomes grounded in the social and economic history of the book trades.⁷

All of this work in intellectual history and the social history of learned culture is paralleled or even pioneered in the scholarship on the intellectual and social history of *ancien régime* France: in particular, the work of Daniel Mornet, Daniel Roche, and Robert Darnton.⁸

2. *Reading as an aspect of popular culture.* In recent years historians have turned away from learned culture, where books undoubtedly mattered and where the evidence of reading and literacy seems abundant, to ask what books have meant to the lower social orders, to the working class, to those who were possibly illiterate. Should reading figure in the study of popular culture?

The way we go about answering this question is closely related to studies of the rate of literacy and of the production and consumption of printed matter. We have come to realize that, for early America, studies of literacy based on signature counts underestimate the percentage of persons who could read, but possibly not write. The distinction between the skills of reading and writing

6. Thus Margaret Fuller borrowed 'volumes of Coleridge and Carlyle' from Emerson and lent him German books on Goethe, though she also depended on James Freeman Clarke for a set of Goethe's works. Charles Capper, *Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life*, vol. 1, *The Private Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 201, 238.

7. Studies of book production and distribution in America are summarized in the essays collected in *Needs and Opportunities in the History of the Book: America, 1639-1876*, ed. David D. Hall and John B. Hench (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1987). Ronald J. Zboray carries this form of analysis a step further in *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

8. Daniel Mornet, *Les Origines Intellectuelles de la Révolution Française 1715-1787* (1933; Paris: Colin, 1967); Daniel Roche, 'Encyclopédistes et Académiciens: Essai sur la Diffusion Sociale des Lumières,' in *Livre et Société dans la France du xviii siècle*, II, ed. François Furet (Paris and The Hague: Mouton, 1970), 73-94; idem, *Le Siècle des Lumières en Province: Académies et Académiciens Provinciaux, 1660-1789*, 2 vols. (Paris and The Hague: Mouton, 1978); Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the 'Encyclopedie,' 1775-1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

became important once it was understood that children in early America learned to read before they learned to write and, for the most part, learned to read in their households or at schools informally constituted and attended very briefly. Notwithstanding the limitations of the signature-count method, such studies suggest that by the second half of the eighteenth century, the great majority of adult males in the northern colonies or states were literate in being able both to read and write. Surprisingly, female literacy in New England, the region for which we have the most careful studies, had reached eighty percent or higher by 1790, after rising steadily throughout the century.⁹ My qualitative survey of seventeenth-century materials led me to conclude that more persons (men and women) were able to read, than not, in seventeenth-century New England.¹⁰

With illiteracy thus removed from the story, historians have turned their attention to book production and distribution and, using series of estate inventories made after death, to ownership. On the side of production and distribution, Margaret Spufford's analysis of the London booksellers who, after 1660, specialized in the chapbook and ballad trade has influenced historians like myself who go on to argue that certain 'cheap books,' most especially the

9. See Gloria L. Main, 'An Inquiry into When and Why Women Learned to Write in Colonial New England,' *Journal of Social History* 24 (1991): 578-89; Joel Perlmann and Dennis Shirley, 'When did New England Women Acquire Literacy?' *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 48 (1991): 50-67. These studies alter the figures for women given in Kenneth Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England: An Inquiry into the Social Context of Literacy in the Modern West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1974). See also William J. Gilmore, 'Elementary Literacy on the Eve of the Industrial Revolution: Trends in Rural New England, 1760-1830,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 92 (1982), 87-178; and for other nineteenth-century trends, Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens, *The Rise of Literacy and the Common School in the United States: A Socioeconomic Analysis to 1870* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). The importance of the distinction between reading and writing is demonstrated in Margaret Spufford, 'First Steps in Literacy: The Reading and Writing Experiences of the Humblest Seventeenth-Century Spiritual Autobiographers,' *Social History* 4 (1979): 407-35. There is cause for concern that the percentages in Gilmore and Perlmann's studies that correct Lockridge's have yet to be incorporated into women's history.

10. David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), ch. 1. But see E. Jennifer Monaghan, 'Literacy Instruction and Gender in Colonial New England,' in *Reading in America: Literary and Social History*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 53-80.

almanac and psalm book in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were produced and distributed in sufficient quantity to ensure that copies came into almost every household.¹¹ Bibles were also readily available in a variety of formats, some of them quite inexpensive. As for probate inventories, those for early New England indicate that half or more of all households contained books, a figure that compares favorably with English and continental percentages.¹²

Some historians have used this flow of print and the underlying literacy it presumes as the starting point for a description of popular culture, popular religion, or *mentalité*. In effect, these historians apply to the culture of ordinary people some of the expectations of intellectual history, though in the end paying less attention to the intricacies of any single text and more to the thematic structure of certain categories of cheap books, including almanacs, 'wonder' stories, and 'penny godlies'.¹³

But can an adequate history of popular culture be constructed out of what we know about production, distribution, and ownership? One constraint is that inventories and other evidence of consumption do not provide a complete picture of the forms of print that entered households or communities. For example, we lack systematic knowledge of the borrowing of books or the sharing of newspapers and periodicals.¹⁴ May it not be assumed that

11. Margaret Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982); Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, passim. Not until the second half of the eighteenth century did the American book trade begin to distribute significant quantities of chapbooks and ballads of the kind Spufford describes.

12. 'A Note on Book Ownership in Seventeenth-Century New England,' in Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 247-49.

13. Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories*, chs. 7-9; Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, chs. 2-3; C. John Sommerville, *Popular Religion in Restoration England*, University of Florida Social Science Monographs, no. 159 (Gainesville, Fla., 1977), with useful methodological reflections. The product that in France has attracted comparable attention is the *bibliothèque bleue*.

14. In a yet unpublished essay on the eighteenth-century New England minister Ebenezer Parkman, Ross Beales draws on Parkman's extensive diary to demonstrate the frequency of exchanges or loans in which Parkman participated. Borrowing was also crucial to the reading done by Ella Clanton Thomas of Georgia in the middle of the nineteenth century. Amy M. Thomas, 'Who Makes the Text?: The Production and Use of Literature in Antebellum America' (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1992), ch. 2.

these practices served to make more, not less, available? On the other side of the ledger is the awkward fact that a significant fraction of probate inventories—the percentage varied from one locality to the next, but in early New England was as high as forty percent—make no reference to books.¹⁵ Does this situation lead us away from books and toward oral tradition or, at the least, impress on us the imperfect relation between the circulation of books and the popular mind?¹⁶

These questions become even more tantalizing when we explore the history of reading from the early nineteenth century onward. Here, as well, the broader issue is the relation between reading and social history. How are the circumstances of ethnicity, region, religion, and class reflected in patterns of production and consumption?¹⁷ Does the data reveal sharp differences between groups, or point to the presence of a culture common to most Americans?

Let me designate the last of these possibilities the 'liberal' interpretation. It celebrates an ever-mounting tide of production that carried printed matter into all corners of the land. The agents of that expansion included profit-minded entrepreneurs; tract, Bible, and other moral reform societies; political parties; and the civil state, this last in conjunction with free public schooling. On the side of consumption, the longstanding barrier of price gave way as incomes rose, the cost of production dropped sharply, and

15. 'A Note on Book Ownership,' in Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*. See also Joseph Kett and Patricia McClung, 'Book Culture in Post-Revolutionary Virginia,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 94 (1984), 97–138.

16. In previous work I discounted oral tradition and emphasized, instead, the importance of 'print culture.' I did so at a time when the former term was being used to signify a chasm between popular and high culture. As that exaggeration subsides, the term may regain a more limited usefulness (bearing always in mind the permeability of the two modes), as indeed it does in David Vincent's exemplary *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). See also David D. Hall, 'The World of Print and Collective Mentality in Seventeenth-Century New England,' in *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, ed. John Higham and Paul Conkin (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 166–80.

17. Small-scale regional differences within Windsor District of Vermont are mapped in William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988). On a larger scale, the differences north and south of the Mason-Dixon Line in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were considerable.

as these costs were shifted to advertisers. Enumerating the elements of expansion as they unfolded in nineteenth-century England, the literary historian Richard Altick proclaimed the emergence of a 'democracy of print.'¹⁸

Among Americanists, this equation of surging production and consumption with democracy is almost irresistible.¹⁹ Did not de Tocqueville discover that the newspaper had penetrated the furthest reaches of the Michigan frontier and affirm that, compared to the French, Americans were much more avid in producing and reading journalism?²⁰ Even someone of quite different politics, the social critic Raymond Williams, employed a similar framework (though his also incorporated elements of resistance to change) in *The Long Revolution*, where the 'growth of the reading public' in England, and especially the accelerating rate of growth after 1830, is linked to the 'democratic revolution' and a 'cultural revolution,' that is, 'the aspiration to extend the active process of learning, with the skills of literacy and other advanced communication, to all people rather than to limited groups.'²¹ The story culminates in a fresh surge of production around the turn of the century and the emergence of 'mass' culture.

Yet the anomalies are many. The new Age of Reading so hopefully proclaimed at the outset of the nineteenth century never encompassed everyone.²² A century later, when Robert and Helen

18. Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 1.

19. The changing structure of print culture has become an element in wider arguments about democratization: see, especially, Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), ch. 5. I have criticized some versions of this scheme in 'The Politics of Writing and Reading in Eighteenth-Century America,' in *Publishing and Readership in Revolutionary France and America*, ed. Carol Armbruster (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), 151-66. In 'Models of Literacy in the American Schools: Social and Historical Conditions and Consequences,' Suzanne de Castell and Alan Luke place the transition from hierarchy to democracy at the end of the nineteenth century. *Literacy, Society, and Schooling: A Reader*, ed. de Castell et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 87-109.

20. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Phillips Bradley, 2 vols. (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), 2: 119-22.

21. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (1961; repr., Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1965), Pt. 2, ch. 2; and ch. 11.

22. As Zboray emphasizes in *A Fictive People*, citing, among other circumstances, the continuing limitations of cost and thus of class.

Lynd surveyed reading practices in Muncie, Indiana, only a fourth of their 'working class' informants reported 'expenditures for books other than school-books by members of their families during the past twelve months.' Even though a remarkable and ever increasing number of periodicals circulated in Muncie, no subscriptions whatsoever were reported among a third of the working-class families, as contrasted with a single nonsubscriber among 'business' families. And but half of all families held borrowers' cards at the public library.²³

The Lynds were interested in other forms of difference, some but not all of which were rooted in class. Working-class families mainly read one set of magazines, business-class families another. Boys preferred magazines that, for the most part, girls ignored, and vice versa. And although the 'ceaseless torrent of printed matter' that deluged Muncie in the mid-1920s seemed laudable, the Lynds regretted the disappearance of certain reading practices of the 1890s, as when Sunday afternoon discussions 'brought together anywhere from two dozen to a hundred people, chiefly men . . . discussing every subject from "Books, What to Read and How to Read Them" to the *Origin of Species*. . . . No longer do a Young Ladies' Reading Circle, a Christian Literary Society (of fifty), a Literary League, a Literary Home Circle, a Literary Fireside Club meet weekly or bi-weekly as in 1890.' Instead, the 'culture' of reading in the 1920s consisted of 'the vicarious entry into other, imagined ways of living' via fiction, a form of reading the Lynds associated with leisure, women, 'constant movie attendance . . . and the prime popularity of comedy and society films.'²⁴

The ambivalence that marks the pages of *Middletown*—did the 'torrent of printed matter' override class differences, or not? Had culture declined or advanced?—is echoed in other reports of popular reading. Observers remark that inexpensive books and periodicals were widely available, reaching, in the case of newspa-

23. Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), 229–31. For data on expenditures on reading by different income groups throughout the twentieth century, see Kaestle et al., *Literacy in the United States*, 166–79.

24. Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 231–37, 240–41.

pers, as many as ninety percent of those surveyed. Yet in the same breath these reports characterize the reading habits of the people as debased. Reporting in 1880 on a New England mill town, the Unitarian minister Jonathan Harrison indicted the 'story papers' that were popular among the younger workers as 'vapid, silly, turgid, and incoherent.' Very nearly the same language turns up in social scientific surveys of the 1930s.²⁵

The liberal celebration of abundance, democratization, and, by implication, a common culture thus shades off into cultural criticism. Reacting to this tone of dismay, some historians would employ it as a datum in an alternative version of the history of reading, a version that narrates the efforts of an educated elite to shape and reshape the culture of ordinary people.²⁶ Another possibility is to map the reading practices among distinctive sectors of society and on the basis of such evidence to argue, for example, that the working class had its own ways of reading, its own culture. Certainly it is the case that unions, radical parties, ethnic communities, and sectarian religious groups have sponsored dissenting literary cultures.²⁷

What we are to make of these differences remains unclear. In

25. Jonathan B. Harrison, *Certain Dangerous Tendencies in American Life* (Boston: Houghton, Osgood and Co., 1880), excerpted in Alan Trachtenberg, ed., *Democratic Vistas 1860-1880* (New York: George Braziller, 1970), 166; Michael Denning, 'Proletarian Literatures: Reflections on Working-Class Reading in the Age of the CIO,' *Lire en Amérique* (Cahiers Charles V, No. 14 [1992]), 90-92.

26. Robert A. Gross, *Books and Libraries in Thoreau's Concord* (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1988); Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 158-60 and passim. It could also be argued that the many kinds of evidence about readers and the distribution of books reveal the perpetually contested place of learnedness or 'high culture' in our society and the appeal of a middle ground—as in the lecture rooms of the lyceum—where extremes gave way to a complex process of accommodation.

27. Working-class writing and reading in nineteenth-century Britain are described in R. K. Webb, *The British Working Class Reader, 1790-1848: Literacy and Social Tension* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1955) and Martha Vicinus, *The Industrial Muse: A Study of Nineteenth Century British Working Class Literature* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974). See also Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London: Verso, 1987). The 'textual practices' observed within certain religious communities deserve attention of the kind that contemporary Primitive Baptists receive in Brett Sutton, 'Literacy and Dissent,' in *Reading & Libraries: Proceedings of Library History Seminar VIII*, ed. Donald G. Davis, Jr. (Austin, Tex.: Graduate School of Library and Information Science, 1991), 183-98.

Muncie, Indiana, periodicals circulated with increasing frequency among working-class families, and by no stretch of the imagination can these periodicals be represented as embodying an alternative culture. Moreover, in that city a rapidly expanding public library system had displaced the workers' libraries of the 1890s.²⁸ If we can generalize from Muncie, the history of reading patterns in the first half of the twentieth century would seem to demonstrate overlap and increasing homogeneity, with the real loser being learned culture and the real winner the nexus between reading and leisure, or reading and the 'culture of consumption.'

I want to emphasize that these are speculations. No matter what framework of interpretation prevails, we need to acknowledge that books elude, even as they also make manifest, the categories of social history. In the context of his revisionist interpretation of popular culture in early modern France, Roger Chartier has called on historians to dissolve 'exclusive relationships between specific cultural forms and particular social groups' on the grounds, in part, that the consumption of cheap books or 'bestsellers' extends across social lines.²⁹ This argument is pertinent to the history of reading in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A parallel observation is that affirmations of cultural hierarchy within literary culture, as when critics condemn 'trash,' cannot be converted into the terminology of social class.³⁰

3. *Reading as 'represented' in texts.* Under the influence of Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, and their fellow theorists of 'reader response' and 'reception theory,' historians have attempted to construct a description of reading drawn from the assumptions about that practice embedded in printed texts. Within the Protestant culture that I have studied, Anglo-American Puritanism of the seventeenth century, it was common for authors to address their

28. Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 234 and fn. 21, 235.

29. Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 3.

30. That is, contrary to what is suggested in Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, we cannot infer that readers of the dime novel were necessarily lower class, or of the working class, on the basis of genteel condemnations of the genre.

readers in an opening statement, often headed 'To the Reader.' These opening statements instruct the ideal reader on how to understand and put to use the prose that follows. Since for the most part these were religious texts that describe the process of redemption, the substance of these instructions was the traditional (in the sense of dating from the early Middle Ages) advice to model the act of reading on the practice of meditation: to ingest the written word, to 'chew' it, to read slowly and repeatedly. As I and others have also demonstrated, these rules encompassed an understanding of the Bible as sacred, living speech, a logocentric Word that communicated the divine will to humankind. To read the printed Bible was thus, by analogy, to 'hear' the Word. All other godly books could similarly be represented as alive or vital, as could the act of apprehending them, which depended on the 'eye of faith.'

The intermingling of the oral and the printed in the logocentric Word (see 2 Cor. 3:2-3) had its correlate in the very process of learning how to read, a process keyed to reciting aloud the sounds of letters and words. Putting these parts together—representations of reading, writing, and speech on the one hand, and on the other the method of learning how to read and recorded responses to actual books—the historian can arrive at a complex description of what reading signified and possibly of how it was practiced within a particular social and historical setting.³¹

We may and should analyze the intersecting representations of reading and writing that occur throughout the past four or five centuries. Indeed, we may conceptualize a history of reading fashioned out of such representations. Crucial to this history would be the rules that inhere in literary genres. When the 'historical romance' entered English literature after 1660, the genre brought with it the rule that romances were light reading.³² As of the middle of the nineteenth century, certain novels reversed this

31. See, in general, Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, ch. 1.

32. Annabel Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation: Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 160-64. As Patterson points out, the romance also represented itself as yielding a wholly different set of meanings to the serious, elite reader.

rule and identified themselves as requiring 'serious' attention. At the end of the century modernist literature imposed a rule of irony. From Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* to the present day, the sentimental novel has demanded that its readers shed a tear or two . . . or three.³³

Equally crucial to this history would be broader ideological and social patterns that inscribe themselves in the practice of reading. One of these is the category of 'useful' that was present in Anglo-American culture by the middle of the eighteenth century and that became increasingly significant thereafter. Another is the 'republican' mode that Thomas Jefferson wanted to incorporate within a system of public schools. A third would be 'leisure' in the several forms it took as of the second half of the nineteenth century: the leisure of youth imagined in a Winslow Homer watercolor of a young girl lying in the grass on a summer day reading what can only be a novel; the leisure of workers temporarily released from the rhythms of factory production, as in Jonathan Harrison's sketch of readers in a New England mill town; the leisure arising from the sharp separation between work and home. The repertory of possibilities would also have to include ideologies of opposition to literacy or reading as articulated and partially carried out with regard to chattel slaves in the southern states before the Civil War.³⁴

Such a history of reading is within our reach. But let us bear in mind that this history has to do not with 'real' readers but with rules within texts and ideological representations of reading.³⁵ It

33. Louise L. Stevenson, *The Victorian Homefront: American Thought and Culture 1860-1880* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1991), ch. 2; Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Robert Darnton, 'Readers Respond to Rousseau: The Fabrication of Romantic Sensitivity,' ch. 6 in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books 1984). The permeability of genres, or the problems both in theory and in practice of achieving clear definition of them, may partially offset this argument about rules.

34. Janet D. Cornelius, *'When I Can Read My Title Clear': Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1991). J. -Y. Mollier provides evidence for Catholicism in his study of schoolbook publishing in nineteenth-century France. See his contribution to *Histoire de la Lecture*.

35. Kathryn Shevelov makes this distinction in *Women and Print Culture: The Construction of Femininity in the Early Periodical* (London: Routledge, 1989), fn. 12, 201: 'I must particularly emphasize this point in regard to readers. Although the textual representations of

is another matter to determine whether actual readers read actual books in keeping with these rules or ideologies.³⁶ A further difficulty is the 'ahistorical propensity' of reception theory. An American literary critic whose phrase I have just quoted has recently observed that reader-oriented criticism has 'divorced' its analysis from 'consideration of [how] interpretive, ideological, and material contexts governed the forms of reader activity . . . for specific historical audiences.' How and why it has done so — by privileging an ideal reader (the critic's own stance) or else a particular interpretation (invariably modernist/ideological) of a given text — need not be indicated in detail in this essay.³⁷ Suffice it to say that while some of us who pursue the history of reading can find common ground with literary historians concerned with the hermeneutics of interpretation, this common ground excludes the data on the production and consumption of books that is central to any social history of reading and to the history of the book.

As I indicated in previous sections of this essay, a social history of reading engages with questions of difference. So does the hermeneutics of interpretation in this respect: the rules within texts can differentiate good reading from bad, the 'serious' from the facile. The hierarchy implied by these distinctions, a hierarchy that privileges learnedness and complexity, leads to a further question: was the skill of reading similarly differentiated, a matter of

readers undoubtedly bear upon actual reading practices, as they were intended to do . . . my focus on representation necessarily is a focus on readers as the periodicals constructed them — that is, on intended or inscribed readers.'

36. Some historians of reading, myself included, have been attracted to personal narratives of reading that occur in letters, diaries, and the like. These narratives need to be understood in light of the rules (as I have termed them) that inhere in genres. Otherwise, we may grant readers a misleading autonomy and particularity.

37. James L. Machor, ed., *Readers in History: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Contexts of Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); the quotations are from Machor's 'Introduction: Readers/Texts/Contexts,' viii–ix, and the entire introduction is relevant. Welcome though they are, the repeated invocations of 'historically specific' by the editor and his contributors should be contrasted with the practical failure to employ the work done by historians on the history of reading, including, for example, any of the work of Roger Chartier, not to mention much of what has been written about reading in America. For another point of view on reader-response theory, see Jonathan Rose, 'Rereading the English Common Reader: A Preface to a History of Audiences,' *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53 (1992), 47–70.

varying levels of ability? A commonsense response is yes. It may also be common sense to assume that these levels of ability coincide with differences of education, income, occupation, and region as these are revealed in social history. Yet another possibility is that the material form of printed texts, that is, their *mis-en-page* or typography, embodies a hierarchy of high and low (learned and unlearned). According to this argument, the form of cheap books would dictate (or anticipate) a limited capacity to read.³⁸

My own preference is otherwise. If it is common sense to acknowledge that differences of ability figure in the history of reading, it also seems evident that readers in past times, as in the present, moved easily from one hermeneutical framework to another. Pious readers of the Bible in the seventeenth century readily understood secular texts, and the mill workers who devoured story papers could surely comprehend other genres. Granting always that learned culture had its distinctive modes of reading, actual readers do not seem constrained or dominated by any single set of rules or ideology, perhaps because of the 'complicated, polysemic' quality of all texts themselves.³⁹ A history of reading as I have sketched it in this section would therefore have to acknowledge that readers negotiated between competing, and perhaps conflicting, interpretive strategies, and that these possibilities for negotiation are as prominent as the boundary lines we may want to mark off between levels.

4. *Gender and reading: the 'resisting' reader.* Do women read differently from men? This is a question that has interested feminist literary critics seeking to challenge 'patriarchal' read-

38. Roger Chartier, 'Du livre au lire,' in *Pratiques de la Lecture*, ed. Roger Chartier (Marseille: Rivages, 1985), 80-85. Carl Kaestle and William Trolinger, comparing fiction in the *Saturday Evening Post* and the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1920, argue that complexity of argument and inference may have been a constraint that stratified the reading public. See Kaestle et al., *Literacy in the United States*, ch. 7.

39. The phrase is Janice Radway's: *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 209, where it is applied to reading. That popular or mass-produced books retain this quality is demonstrated by Radway and argued for nineteenth-century materials by David Grimsted, 'Books and Culture: Canned, Canonized, and Neglected,' in Hall and Hench, *Needs and Opportunities*, 187-232.

ings of high literature and, more broadly, the patriarchy *in* high literature and the culture that produced it. This ideological criticism becomes a call for 'resistance,' the alternative being domination by the realm of the masculine.⁴⁰ To any historian of popular culture, this polarity of domination or resistance has a wider resonance, for these are very nearly the contrasting terms (the usual expressions are domination and autonomy) that theorists of popular culture, most especially Roger Chartier, have sought to rework.

In the case of women's reading, an adequately historical description has taken second place to ideological criticism. Only recently have a few literary critics realized that women in other periods of time were not engaged in the same politics of gender that they themselves find compelling. Jane Tompkins has insisted that a famous, and famously problematic novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, be read in keeping with the moral and aesthetic conventions that Harriet Beecher Stowe shared with other Protestant evangelical women of the mid-nineteenth century.⁴¹ Yet a vein of ahistorical analysis persists in feminist literary criticism devoted to describing women readers. James Machor, whom I have previously quoted on the limitations of reader-response theory, has noted that 'the description of the reading experience' in Judith Fetterley's *The Resisting Reader* is itself 'a historically specific interpretive strategy: the modernist assumption . . . that the essence of American fiction is its continual fascination with the male quest for a return to origins.'⁴² Fetterley is among the feminist theorists who have argued that, for women, the experience of reading books written by women is different from the experience of reading books by male authors—books in the latter instance that must be 'resisted.' The historian Barbara Sicherman has pointed out, however, that

40. See in general *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocínio P. Schweickart (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

41. Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), ch. 5.

42. Machor, 'Historical Hermeneutics and Antebellum Fiction: Gender, Response Theory, and Interpretive Contexts,' in Machor, *Readers in History*, 57.

women young and old in the Progressive period included 'boys' books' in the near-omnivorous reading in which they indulged. She goes on to argue that these women gained a strong sense of self from what they read regardless of the author's gender; reading helped them fashion an interior space. To anticipate my fifth point, Sicherman understands reading as 'appropriation' rather than as 'resistance.'⁴³

The literary historian Cathy N. Davidson tells a different story. She links two phenomena, the increasing production and consumption of novels in America after 1790 and a presumed surge in female literacy, in arguing that women formed the primary constituency for this genre. Drawing on what is termed 'ideological criticism,' Davidson makes the further argument that the early novels, some of them written by women, could be read 'subversively,' that is, in a manner contradictory to the moral rule that novel reading was immoral. For actual women readers, the practice thus came to signify subversion and their own cultural independence.⁴⁴ The historical evidence on which Davidson relies may be more problematic than she allows, beginning with the fact that female literacy was already at a high level in the northern states a half century before novels became widely available.⁴⁵ There is the further problem that men read novels and that the official proscription of them was, like many such proscriptions, in contradiction with other values within high culture. It remains to be pointed out that a category designated 'women' is an oversimplification that pays little heed to social and cultural contexts, be these economic, religious, regional, racial, or the like.

5. *The reader as appropriator.* It is a truism of the new reading

43. Barbara Sicherman, 'Sense and Sensibility: A Case Study of Women's Reading in Late-Victorian America,' in *Reading in America*, ed. Davidson, 201-25; and 'Reading and Ambition: M. Carey Thomas and Female Heroism,' *American Quarterly* 65 (1993): 73-103. Comparing male and female patrons of the New York Society Library in the mid-nineteenth century, Zboray finds no significant difference; and specifically, that each group checked out the same quantity of fiction. *A Fictive People*, ch. 11.

44. Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

45. See above, note 9.

history that readers remake the text. In the hands of someone like Roger Chartier, this premise has rendered problematic any and all arguments concerning popular culture as the mere passive reflection of a dominant culture. Similarly, it has rendered problematic the equation of texts and social levels. Coupled with an awareness of the polysemy of all texts, this perspective has allowed historians of working class culture to reclaim the 'dime novel' as embodying the politics of 'artisanal republicanism.'⁴⁶ And it has enabled historians like myself to rethink the place of cheap books in the fashioning of popular religion.

The most compelling study that proceeds from both of these premises is Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Radway analyzes yet another standardized product, the romance, that began to be manufactured in great quantities in the 1970s and to find millions of readers among women. Bringing together an ethnography of actual readers with an interpretation of the texts to which they were attracted, Radway argues that these women are able to discriminate among the romances they consume. In the end hers is an argument about function—of how readers situated within the contradictions of a culture of consumption overlaid with an older culture of the work ethic, and situated also within complicated representations of men, women, and romance, use the conventions of plot and characterization to satisfy certain emotional and social needs.

6. *Was there a 'reading revolution'?* This concept, made famous by Rolf Engelsing, concerns a major transformation that separates the modern period (the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) from the old regime.⁴⁷ Three American historians have implied or asserted the existence of such a revolution: myself, in an early essay;⁴⁸ Cathy N. Davidson in her study of women and fiction; and William J. Gilmore in a study of Windsor District, Vermont, using as

46. Denning, *Mechanic Accents*.

47. Rolf Engelsing, *Der Bürger als Leser: Lesergeschichte in Deutschland 1500–1800* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1974).

48. David D. Hall, 'The Uses of Literacy in New England: 1600–1850,' in Joyce et al. *Printing and Society in Early America*, 1–47.

data the probate inventories that include books.⁴⁹ Davidson's is a limited case because the word 'revolution' that is in the title of her book refers obliquely to the American Revolution and directly to the presumed greater role of women as readers; it should be noted, moreover, that she does not accept Engelsing's unflattering characterization of 'extensive' reading. Gilmore's study demonstrates the 'commercialization' of rural life, a quickening of the flow of goods that by the 1830s had pushed books and newspapers into more frequent circulation. Yet his evidence from the probate inventories is perplexing for it shows, as do other studies of book holdings in this time period, that most household libraries were tiny in size, did not change over time, and usually contained the Bible. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. What should be pointed out in the American context and no doubt in the European is that the assertion of a reading revolution is also (or perhaps primarily) an assertion about other forms of change in society and culture—for example, a transition from the religious to the secular, or from self-sufficiency to the 'commercial,' or from scarcity to abundance in material goods. That is, the problem of determining whether or not a reading revolution occurred leads immediately into a wider set of problems each involving complex tasks of conceptualization.⁵⁰

I myself have alluded to a change in the mode of reading, from the devotional mode of seventeenth-century Protestants to what contemporaries in the nineteenth century regarded as superficial reading. This argument did not take account of a point I make in *this* essay: in any given period of time, readers had available more than one representation or ideology of reading, texts, and writing; and the proper history of reading should thus be arranged around the multiple possibilities and perhaps the conflicts that existed within a particular frame of time rather than exclusively around

49. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life*. For other studies, see Kaestle et al., *Literacy in the United States*, 52–55.

50. Could we consider it a form of reading revolution that the coming of the railroad made possible the integration of local centers of literary production into a national network, as Zboray demonstrates in *A Fictive People*?

the transition from one mode to another. As we increasingly realize, the nineteenth century had its intensive readers and the seventeenth century its extensive. The conceptual question left unaddressed is whether and how changes in the system of book production and distribution, especially the changes associated with new technologies and business practices emerging in the nineteenth century, affected the practices of readers.

It is tempting to suggest an alternative reading revolution. For what follows I am indebted to the British social historian David Vincent's *Literacy and Popular Culture*. Vincent calls attention to the role of state-sponsored elementary schools and the mode of literacy or reading for which they became instruments. In England, such age-graded schools became the norm after 1870; in America the effective date varies from one region to another, but in the northern states we may say that this system was emerging by 1860. These schools had a standardized curriculum keyed to age and teachers who employed uniform methods of instruction using textbooks specially developed for the classroom. With the appearance of this bureaucracy, the place where the skill of reading was imparted shifted from household to school. Accordingly, reading and literacy developed apart from work life and the rhythms of family culture. The mode of reading instituted by these schools can be understood as flowing from and serving to create a social identity that suppressed the particulars of class, region, religion, and ethnicity in favor of a generalized public culture. Students in these 'common' schools acquired the uniform language (spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary) of the center: the civil state, the classless cadre of teachers. (Whether or how differences of social identity reappeared in this setting deserves further attention.) The Bible was displaced as, to a very large extent, were whole books in favor of 'readers.' In the elements of this system lie, I venture to assert, a reading revolution that may also be discerned in the burgeoning production of schoolbooks in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Let me call attention to another dimension of change in the

nineteenth century. As rural society yielded to industrialism, the division of labor proceeded apace and with it an ever-sharpening distinction between work and leisure that, for persons in the middle class, coincided with the difference between men and women. Certain categories of books became coded as designed for leisure; and in the course of time, since leisure was what some women had, these same books, and even reading itself, were increasingly associated with their gender. It is in and through the division of labor and the categories of work and leisure that I would incorporate much of modern social history into the history of reading, taking note, for example, that women became preponderantly the founders of public libraries, reading circles or clubs, and the teachers in elementary schools.

As I look back on scholarship in America, I am struck by how it divides into two streams: one encompasses those of us who, practicing the history of the book as it has emerged out of the intersection of the histories of printing and publishing with the social history of culture, attempt to construct patterns of actual consumption by groups we conveniently name 'readers'; and another encompassing those in literary studies who are primarily concerned with authorship and the hermeneutics of interpretation. For the first of these groups, studies of reading have become linked to a reappraisal of popular and mass culture and to underlining the many possibilities for 'appropriation.' Literary critics take a different path, for they tend to view reading and writing as practices that reveal the presence of domination, subversion and resistance. Can we hope that some day these critics will interest themselves in the social history of production and consumption, and, conversely, that social historians will acknowledge the power of texts?

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