Reading Culture, Reading Books

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CLAIREECE Precious Jones was no reader. Seated in the back row of class, unable to see the board, barely hearing the teacher's words, the young black girl sat silently year after year, learning nothing despite her desire, but inching upward grade by grade to junior high. Big and fat, mocked by her peers, withdrawn into herself, she was rewarded for causing no trouble and written off as hopeless. 'Focus on the ones who *can* learn,' the principal of her Harlem school advised. But Precious won notice at age twelve when, a victim of incest, she became pregnant with her father's child and was suspended from school, and again at age sixteen, in a bleak replay of the same events. School officials ignored the criminal and cast out the innocent.

The second time around, the abused teenager got lucky. Enrolled in 'Each One Teach One,' an alternative program for troubled youth, Precious started over, in a basic literacy class led

This essay takes its title from the American Antiquarian Society's 1995 summer seminar in the History of the Book. For shaping my thinking on the subject of reading, I am immensely grateful to Mary Kelley, with whom I co-directed the seminar, and to the remarkable group of participants in the venture. Thanks also are due to Nancy Burkett, Joanne Chaison, Ellen Dunlap, John B. Hench, and Caroline F. Sloat for enabling us to offer the seminar and for sustaining it with their customary efficiency and *éclat* and to James O. Spady, doctoral student at William and Mary, for timely research assistance while I was preparing this piece.

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by a committed young teacher. 'Each of our lives is important,' Ms. Rain told the students. 'Each of us has a story to tell.' With that push, Precious began to record her story in a spiral notebook, inscribing her experience in halting letters and asserting, in the course of writing and reading, her own independent voice. That personal narrative constitutes the text of the current novel *Push*, composed by the New York performance-poet Sapphire from her years as a literacy tutor in Harlem. Echoing the development of Celie, the main character in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, the work traces a triumph of pedagogy and politics: in a setting of equality, backed by teacher and fellow students, Precious gains the language to write her self into critical, self-conscious life. Literacy empowers.[1]

Lynne Sharon Schwartz acquired that lesson early on. At age three and a half, she astonished her parents one morning in World War II–era Brooklyn by reading the label on a container of Diamond Salt. Having learned her letters from an older girl upstairs, she was deemed a 'prodigy' and trotted out by a proud lawyer-father to perform for the relatives, reciting passages from *The New York Times* sight unseen. Thus was launched a passionate life with books that Schwartz, now a novelist and essayist, celebrates in *Ruined by Reading*, a recently published literary memoir. Through recollections of childhood favorites—'Little Boy Blue,' Poe's 'Annabel Lee,' Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess*, among them—she evokes the enchantment of works that once touched her imagination, stirred her dreams, and 'infused' her everyday life. Following in a long chain of girls who have seen themselves as Jo March in *Little Women*, this granddaughter of Jewish immigrants tried to copy out the book in longhand, as if to make it her own, revealing the ambition to authorship, set off by the novel, she would realize as an adult. 'Reading was the ticket that entitled me to my place in the world,' she intuited. Encouraged by parents with middlebrow tastes who revered the written word,

1. Sapphire, *Push* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 39, 98; Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982).

the young girl forged her identity through encounters with books. Alone in her room, free to indulge her love of literature, Schwartz set off on the journey of discovery she now exalts as 'the essence of true reading: learning to live in another's voice, to speak another's language' and, in the process, enlarging the boundaries of possibility for oneself. 'This and only this I did for myself,' she concludes of her childhood reading. 'This was the way to make my life my own.'[2]

Stephen Carrie Blumberg cared as intensely for books as does Lynne Sharon Schwartz, but not to read them. Beneficiary of a Minnesota family fortune built by a Jewish horse-trader in the mid-nineteenth century, Blumberg as a boy became obsessed with the past, especially the Victorian era, whose artifacts—stained-glass windows, doorknobs, iron gates—he would salvage from run-down houses on the eve of demolition in the 1950s and '60s. From that youthful hobby developed a drive to gather not only antiques but also the literary relics of times gone by. Though he possessed a substantial income from a trust, Blumberg eschewed rare book dealers and amassed his collection not by purchase but by theft. In two decades of breaking and entering into some 268 libraries throughout the U.S. and Canada, he absconded with about 23,600 books, carefully stored and arranged in a house in Ottumwa, Iowa. The total value of the works is estimated at $5.3 million, making Blumberg the 'greatest book thief of the twentieth century'—a distinction craved by a man with a fondness for Americana. Upon his arrest and trial in 1990, the forty-two-year-old Blumberg, who had barely scraped through high school, took pride in the quality of his contraband. 'One day when all of this is gone and forgotten,' Blumberg mused to the writer Nicholas A. Basbanes, who recounts his predations on the nation's libraries in a fascinating survey of 'bibliophiles' and 'bibliomanes' in American life, perhaps he could lecture at the Grolier Club on the 'true

2. Lynne Sharon Schwartz, *Ruined by Reading: A Life in Books* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 18, 111, 119; Barbara Sicherman, 'Reading *Little Women:* The Many Lives of a Text,' in Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar, eds., *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays* (Chapel Hill and London, 1995), 245–66.

hazards' of book collecting. After all, he insisted, he had the mettle of the true aficionado. Never did he contemplate selling his treasures. Valuing a book as 'a silent source of wisdom,' Blumberg considered himself 'a custodian of these things.' For all his pains, not to mention the damage he inflicted on rare book rooms and their curators, Blumberg himself ended up in custody, spending five years in the federal penitentiary in Rochester, Minnesota. Librarians should take note that his release took place this year.[3]

I open with these stories, discovered by happenstance in casual reading over the last couple of months, to illustrate a familiar theme: books hold immense power to shape personal identity and to determine social standing. That message, which undergirds our studies in the history of the book, is everywhere these days. As America races into 'the Electronic Millennium,' we are awash in tributes to a literate era passing from view. In the postmodern mood of nostalgia, upscale mail-order catalogues promise with Victorian certitude that books really do furnish a room, while a $1.5 billion industry of audiobooks churns out abridged versions of current and classic texts reduced to three-hour performances for easy listening in the car or on the treadmill. And a rising chorus of critics sounds the alarm. 'We are at a watershed point,' Sven Birkerts announces in *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*. 'One way of processing information is yielding to another.' Print is linear, logical, cumulative, he argues; it sustains virtues central to our civilization. Through the intellectual calisthenics of serious reading, we concentrate the mind, discipline the body, and flex the mental powers. By contrast, electronic media scatter attention; our eyes skim across the screen, scanning evanescent images soon to dissolve into the ether. Ephemeral encounters, Birkerts warns, yield insubstantial individuals. Summoning up a literary ideal reminiscent of Lynne Sharon Schwartz, for whose work he supplied a jacket blurb, Birkerts discerns a cul-

3. Nicholas A. Basbanes, *A Gentle Madness: Bibliophiles, Bibliomanes, and the Eternal Passion for Books* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 465–519 (quotations, 481, 513, 515).

tural hero in the figure of the solitary reader absorbed in a book. In that private retreat, the individual disengages from the claims of family and work, enters a timeless realm, 'the elsewhere of the book,' and communes with other minds, living 'vicariously' through their imaginative creations. Reading becomes a model for living, forging essential values in the crucible of print. 'Serious reading is above all an agency of self-making,' Birkerts concludes. In the rapid decline of that habit, America drifts into an uncertain future. 'Our entire collective subjective history—the soul of our societal body—is encoded in print. . . . If a person turns from print—finding it too slow, too hard, irrelevant to the excitements of the present—then what happens to that person's sense of culture and continuity?'[4]

It would be easy to dismiss such laments as old hash, mixing the technological determinism of McLuhan with ideologies of reading that date back to the Middle Ages, well before the invention of the printing press. To historians of the book, Birkerts's idealized scene—the private person, silently conning a text—recalls the 'scholar-anchorite' of early Christian art, cloistered in his study, lost in thought, remote from all worldly ties. Pictured as a sacred calling, that image crossed the Atlantic with the Puritans to form the pious praxis we now designate 'intensive reading,' the fervent meditation upon religious texts, over and over, in a 'hunger and thirst' for divine grace. By the mid-nineteenth century, this construction had been secularized into a model of character-building that also informs Birkerts's vision. To Victorian apostles of culture, reading constituted a mental and moral discipline, an olympian trial in what James Russell Lowell called 'the gymnastics of the mind.' 'To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit, is a noble exercise,' Henry David Thoreau urged, 'and one that will task the reader more than any exercise which the customs

4. Nicholson Baker, 'Books as Furniture,' *The New Yorker* (June 12, 1995), 84–92; Linton Weeks, 'Essay,' *Book World* (July 14, 1996), 15; Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (New York: Random House, 1994), 20, 27, 81, 87, 117.

of the day esteem. It requires a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object.' It is this regimen of heroic reading Birkerts prescribes for us all.[5]

But that's not all. To this recycling of the genteel tradition, Birkerts adds the lessons of a turbulent youth. The son of Latvian immigrants, he became a lightning rod of family tensions, thanks to his bookish disposition. Derided by the father for idleness—'What are you doing on the couch in the middle of the day? I'll give you something to do'—he sought support from the mother, only to retreat in the end to his room. 'I read when my parents were away; I read late into the night.' Alienated from his origins, he embraced the mainstream, but identified with its defiant young men—Hemingway, Kerouac, Henry Miller, Holden Caulfield. In college and after, he recreated himself in the bohemian image of his books. Far from instilling morals and upholding order, reading spurred individualism and rebellion that, in retrospect, he calls self-making.[6]

'The history of reading and of readers is central to the history of the book,' David D. Hall announced in the inaugural James Russell Wiggins Lecture in the History of the Book in American Culture, launching the American Antiquarian Society's ambitious program in what was then an emergent field. More than a decade later, with the rapid expansion in the ranks that has produced a transatlantic, interdisciplinary body of scholars who have come together in the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading

5. Elizabeth Long, 'Textual Interpretation as Collective Action,' in Jonathan Boyarin, ed., *The Ethnography of Reading* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 181–82; David D. Hall, 'The Uses of Literacy in New England, 1600–1850,' in William L. Joyce, David D. Hall, Richard D. Brown, and John B. Hench, eds., *Printing and Society in Early America* (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1983), 20–25; David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 29–31; Robert A. Gross, 'Much Instruction from Little Reading: Books and Libraries in Thoreau's Concord,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 97 (April 1987): 162–63; Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 1–29 (quotation, 12); Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. Owen Thomas (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 68. See also Louise L. Stevenson, 'Prescription and Reality: Reading Advisers and Reading Practice, 1860–1880,' *Book Research Quarterly* VI (Winter 1990–91): 43–61.

6. Birkerts, *Gutenberg Elegies*, 38, 42–45.

and Publishing, we are still in the early stages of constructing a history of readers and reading. To this end, we face twin challenges. The first is to identify the various representations of reading, such as Sven Birkerts's manifesto, that constitute an ideological history of the subject and to trace their lineages and interconnections over the centuries. The second summons us to reconstruct the cultural practices, the social conventions, and the status differences that framed concrete encounters with the written word. From the interplay between ideological representations and everyday norms issue the experiences of individuals and groups, whose patterns we seek to chart over time.[7]

The compound of elements—monkish asceticism, genteel moralism, beat iconoclasm—from which Birkerts crystallized his representation of reading marks but one genealogical line. Against his stark narrative of the lone individual and the book, we can set convivial images of family, sociability, and collective endeavor that recur in another strain of thought. If Birkerts articulates a perspective commonly associated with, though not limited to, men of education and privilege, the second represents a world of female readers, whose path to identity and selfhood is hard-won. As it happens, we know far more about women's reading culture than men's. Over the last two decades, thanks to a dedicated band of researchers—Cathy Davidson and Linda Kerber for the eighteenth century, Mary Kelley and Barbara Sicherman for the nineteenth, Janice Radway and Elizabeth Long for the twentieth, to name the best known—we can glimpse the main lines of a history across two centuries: the levels of literacy, the common genres

7. David D. Hall, 'On Native Ground: From the History of Printing to the History of the Book,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 93 (October 1983): 23. This formulation of the intellectual challenges involved in the history of reading and readers draws upon the influential work of Roger Chartier. See 'Communities of Readers,' in Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994), 1–23, and 'Popular Appropriation: The Readers and Their Books,' in Chartier, *Forms and Meanings: Texts, Performances, and Audiences from Codex to Computer* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 83–97. However, I differ from Chartier in distinguishing the personal experience of reading from its representation in ideology and its construction as cultural practice.

and texts, the social institutions, the ideological constraints, the patterns of experience.[8] For men, by contrast, we have a record rich in opinion and spare in practice; as always, males find it easy to give advice.[9] If we are to assay the history of readers and reading in America—the achievements and limits, the leading themes, the need for new approaches—as I propose to do briefly here, we must look to women's lives. For a rare change in U.S. historiography, reading history is women's history.

And with good reason. The history of reading raises fundamental issues about culture and power that bear with exceptional force upon women's lives. 'The book always aims at installing an order,' writes Roger Chartier. As artifact and text, it prescribes codes for interpretation; it embodies claims to public authority; it demands a place in the halls of commerce and the hierarchy of

8. Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect & Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1980); Mary Kelley, 'Reading Women/Women Reading: The Making of Learned Women in Antebellum America,' *Journal of American History* 83 (September 1996): 140–60; Barbara Sicherman, 'Sense and Sensibility: A Case Study of Women's Reading in Late-Victorian Culture,' in Cathy N. Davidson, ed., *Reading in America: Literature & Social History* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 201–25; Barbara Sicherman, 'Reading and Ambition: M. Carey Thomas and Female Heroism,' *American Quarterly* 45 (March 1993): 73–103; Sicherman, 'Reading *Little Women*'; Elizabeth Long, 'Women, Reading, and Cultural Authority: Some Implications of the Audience Perspective in Cultural Studies,' *American Quarterly* 38 (Fall 1986): 591–612; Long, 'Textual Interpretation as Collective Action'; Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

9. Richard D. Brown has investigated both men's and women's reading, as indicated in diaries and letters from the late seventeenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries, with a view to discovering how ordinary and elite Americans gained access to information. His concerns are twofold: to reconstruct the social structure of communications over time and to chart the changing significance of print-based knowledge in everyday social life. Though Brown does discuss the gendered pattern of reading (see note 20 below), he has only a passing interest in the issues of identity and selfhood that preoccupy women scholars. Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700–1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). For other inquiries into men's reading in the mid-nineteenth century, see my discussion of a much-studied individual, Edward Jenner Carpenter, a cabinetmaker's apprentice in Greenfield, Mass., during the mid-1840s, whose diary has been variously interpreted. See 'The History of the Book: Research Trends and Source Materials,' *The Book*, Number 31 (November 1993): 3–7, and Christopher Clark, 'The Diary of an Apprentice Carpenter: Edward Jenner Carpenter's "Journal" 1844–45,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 98 (October 1988): 303–94.

genres. Against such presumptions stands 'the reader's liberty,' ever-ready to 'distort and reformulate,' circumvent and subvert the 'significations' deployed to contain it. 'This dialectic between imposition and appropriation' is the driving force of book history, and it may serve equally well to track women's struggles with patriarchy.[10]

Certainly, issues of authority and order run through the turning points of book history. Jealous guardians of tradition discerned the threat when America embarked upon the 'reading revolution' of the period 1790–1840. As scarcity gave way to abundance in print culture, affording diversity and choice, conservatives decried the rising 'AGE OF SUPERFICIAL LEARNING' and reiterated old warnings against loose reading. 'It is not he that reads most, but he that meditates most,' advised one religious newspaper, 'that will prove the *choicest*, *sweetest*, and *strongest Christian*.' But such preachments could not stem the democratization of reading.[11] The inroads of commerce, unsettling the authority of learning, generated a radical critique of mass culture in the twentieth century. In this analysis, a crucial concern was the quality of public life. In *Middletown*, Robert and Helen Lynd offered a gloomy report on the reading habits of Muncie, Indiana's citizens during the 1920s. A generation before, they claimed, townspeople had sustained a vigorous culture, joining together in reading circles and public lectures. But with the coming of consumer capitalism, local initiative atrophied; instead of meeting to discuss solid books, men and women lived 'vicariously' through mass-produced fantasies. No matter that middle-class women kept up the old clubs, albeit in attenuated fashion, nor that the popular wave was ro-

10. Robert Darnton, 'First Steps toward a History of Reading,' in *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 154–87; David D. Hall, 'Readers and Reading in America: Historical and Critical Perspectives,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 103 (October 1994): 337–58; Chartier, *Order of Books*, 9.

11. Hall, 'Uses of Literacy,' 38–47; Brown, *Knowledge Is Power*, 268–96; Samuel Miller, *A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century* (New York: T. & J. Swords, 1803), 426–28; *Home and Foreign Record*, August 1851, quoted in David Nord, 'Religious Reading and Readers in Antebellum America,' *Journal of the Early Republic* 15 (Summer 1995): 255.

mantic fiction. Preferring to deplore, rather than comprehend, the taste for sensational novels, critical intellectuals, like England's Richard Hoggart in the 1950s, warned that the capitalist invasion of once 'dense and concrete' communities imposed 'a new and stronger form of subjection.' No longer degraded economically, working people were being robbed culturally. 'This subjection promises to be stronger than the old,' Hoggart added, 'because the chains of cultural subordination are both easier to wear and harder to strike away than those of economic subordination.'[12]

The image of chains is telling. In the old order these critics justified, women endured the 'chains of subordination,' but to patriarchy as much as to capitalism. That traditional relation of the sexes limited female access to education, barred entry into learned professions, and sought to define the legitimate contents and uses of women's reading. Under such circumstances, the 'dialectic between imposition and appropriation' dramatizes the stakes of culture and power. In women's reading resides an exemplary test case of the order of books.

To survey this intellectual landscape is, seemingly, to return to familiar terrain. Historians of women's reading treat the subject in terms similar to Birkerts and Lynne Sharon Schwartz. In this telling, women brought forceful minds and determined wills to the engagement with print. Choosing texts, making meanings, female readers 'exercised an agency' that claimed in books a realm of 'substantial personal autonomy.' They sharpened intellects, deepened sympathies, widened horizons, envisioned new possibilities. 'Reading provided space—physical, temporal, and psychological—that permitted women to exempt themselves from traditional gender expectations, whether imposed by formal soci-

12. Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1929), 229–42 (quotation, 238); Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments* (rpt., New York: Oxford University Press, 1970; orig. pub., London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), 88, 201.

ety or by family obligations,' writes Barbara Sicherman. 'The freedom of imagination women found in books encouraged new self-definitions. . . . ' Indeed, textual encounters enabled the 'construction of female identity' and supplied 'the fabric of which to fashion a self.' The resemblances to 'true reading,' as described by Schwartz and Birkerts, stop here. Unlike those formulations, recent scholarship removes reading from the closet and restores it to the parlor, the dormitory, and the club. In this transit from private to public, reading becomes 'a social and collective as well as individual endeavor.' As social practice, it organized family cultures, shaped intimate friendships, and mobilized projects for political change and social reform. Through shared involvement with books, women activated a 'social identity' and built a sense of 'solidarity.' In the unequal world of patriarchy, women's reading proved indispensable. It generated both personal transformation and group power.[13]

Virginia Woolf once invented the figure of Judith Shakespeare, imaginary sister to the bard, to dramatize the silence of women in the past. Denied the tools of literacy, what mark could she leave on the historical record? That was a plausible speculation before scholars filled in the evidence. From studies of signature literacy, defined as the ability to inscribe one's name on a legal document, we discerned the cultural deprivation of Shakespeare's sisters in colonial New England and Pennsylvania and charted the rapid progress of female knowledge in the era of the American Revolution. By the early republic, signature literacy was near universal among women as well as men in the Northeast. But reading and writing, E. Jennifer Monaghan has shown us, were not interchangeable arts. In early America, women learned to read at home, commonly from mothers, or at dame schools, but were often assigned the needle, not the quill. Writing was long deemed a

13. Kelley, 'Reading Women/Women Reading,' 144–45; Sicherman, 'Women Reading in Late-Victorian Culture,' 202; Sicherman, 'Reading *Little Women*,' 247; Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, '"Nous Autres": Reading, Passion, and the Creation of M. Carey Thomas,' *Journal of American History* 79 (June 1992): 72; Sicherman, 'Reading and Ambition,' 79; Long, 'Textual Interpretation as Collective Action,' 197.

tool of trade, the preserve of men. Whether they wrote or not, women actively cultivated reading and from the late eighteenth century pressed onward for expanded educational opportunities. By the eve of the Civil War, white men and women possessed similar reading ability, depending on region and class, but it was women who put this talent to the fullest use. Middletown's businessmen set aside books in the 1920s, abandoning culture to their wives and daughters. Guides for parents in picking children's reading were forthright about the gender gap: 'at every age girls read more than boys.' Restricted in the workplace and reserved to the sphere of leisure, many women, notably in the privileged classes, may have enjoyed ample time for reading, like it or not, and for composing the abundant diaries and letters that document their strenuous literary life.[14]

However circumscribed their public presence, women found in reading a means of participating in the larger culture and shaping it to their needs. In the rise of the novel, as Cathy Davidson has suggested, we can register the growing power of female readers during the age of Revolution. Male authorities, especially the clergy, denounced the new genre for encouraging 'false and exaggerated notions which are sure to corrupt the heart,' in the words of the Reverend Timothy Dwight. Sentimental fiction excited fantasies of passion and pleasure, tempting unwary readers, especially women, to imitate the characters they admired in books—to put on 'the leer, the affected anguish, the yawn of feigned ennui . . . the pert titter, adopted from some imaginary countess.' Even when novel-reading did not issue in aristocratic pretensions or sexual vice, it remained an intolerably antisocial act. To withdraw into the hothouse of imagination was to isolate the self in a fevered cult of private experience. In the official order of books,

14. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (rpt., New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981; orig. pub., New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), 46–50; E. Jennifer Monaghan, 'Literacy Instruction and Gender in Colonial New England,' in Davidson, ed., *Reading in America*, 53–80; Carl F. Kaestle et al., *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading since 1880* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 19–25; Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 232–34; Sicherman, 'Reading *Little Women*,' 23.

literature belonged in the masculine public sphere. But female readers ignored the advice and embraced a literary form in which for the first time they could find women like themselves, following their hearts, seeking their own gratifications, breaking out of conventional roles. The emblems of that enthusiasm are inscribed in the margins and endpapers of such books. Thanks to the female audience, publishing expanded rapidly in the early republic. The demand for fiction, Davidson concludes, secured women the representation in letters they were denied in the state. This was a revolution in culture parallel to that in politics.[15]

The cult of the novel, to be sure, was not limited to women. Then again, female readers staked claim to the entire canon of Western literature. In the eighteenth century, 'women read *Cato's Letters* and Paley's *Natural Theology*,' writes Linda Kerber; 'men read fiction.' If many rural women stayed faithful to religious 'steady sellers,' others, especially those who flocked to the nearly four hundred female academies and seminaries founded between 1790 and 1830, sought out works in geography, history, classics, and natural science. In a recent article, Mary Kelley documents this ambitious reading program. On their own, women like the New Englander Harriet Cary thrilled to Plutarch's *Lives*: 'I have fought battles with Coriolanus, and I have been wandering with Timoleon, a victim to regret,' she informed a friend in 1816, 'but since I have restored him again to glory and honour,' while a generation later, Bessie Lacy, a student at the Edgeworth Seminary of Greensboro, North Carolina, proposed to plough through 'Locke, Bacon, Stuart, and Blackstone,' a regimen from which she sought 'recreation' in 'the beauties of Shakespeare, Milton, Spenser, Cowper [and] Scott.' Supporting such aspirations were not only the academies but also female-founded clubs like the Charlestown, Massachusetts, Female Reading Society, launched in 1812, which met to discuss the latest publications in all fields.

15. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word*, 10–79; Dwight, quoted in G. Harrison Orians, 'Censure of Fiction in American Romances and Magazines, 1789–1810,' *Publications of the Modern Language Association* LII (1937): 202.

This wide-ranging reading, Kelley suggests, 'served as the ground on which women built a dense and diversified mental life.' Seizing that terrain as 'a site for experiments in personal transformation,' women 'made reading a vehicle for . . . self-fashioning. . . . Sometimes books confirmed an already familiar identity. Sometimes they became catalysts in the fashioning of alternative selves.'[16]

In contrast to Birkerts's solitary reader, women incorporated reading into social relations. Literary societies and women's clubs were the public face of the devotion to books. Intimate settings allowed a fuller, more intense play of sentiments. Barbara Sicherman has documented the extraordinary literary-mindedness that marked the elite 'family culture' of the Hamiltons in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Three generations of Hamiltons participated in this intense cultivation of letters. The high cultural fare Victorians deemed 'the best' commanded attention, but there was time for popular magazines, light fiction, and religious works on Sunday. Reading aloud linked the generations: taking up a duty as well as pleasure, parents read to children, older to young siblings, adult daughters to elderly mothers. At one point, two generations of Hamiltons turned themselves into 'a sort of a reading club,' with cousins visiting one another to recite from Gibbon and Carlyle. Books supplied the lens through which Edith Hamilton, the future scholar of classics, viewed the world. On one occasion, Edith Hamilton was bemused by a striking visitor from England: 'She is a kind of girl I have never read of before.' The Hamiltons may have been unusual in their bookishness, but not in the way literature seeped into their lives. In the Gilded Age, young women and even men liked to 'make believe' they were characters from *Little Women*, though there was often competition to be Jo. More mature relationships could also issue from reading. In the

16. Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 235; Kelley, 'Reading Women/Women Reading,' 140–42, 146, 157–58. The quotation from Harriet Cary comes from the manuscript version of Kelley's essay, 'Reading Women/Women Reading: Bessie Lacy's Interpretive Community in Antebellum America' (1995), 34. The original source is Harriet Cary to Elizabeth Mayhew Wainwright, 20 March 1816, Peter Wainwright Papers, Special Collections, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

poetry of Swinburne and the French novelist Gauthier, as Helen Horowitz has shown, M. Carey Thomas felt 'rapture and fire' and a delicious eroticism that would transform her passionate friendships with women into physical love. In the history of reading, life often imitated art.[17]

This pleasing view of women bonding through books should give us pause. It was the bibliomania of high Victorians like the Hamiltons and her own family that provoked Jane Addams to sigh that her generation was 'lumbering our minds with literature' and to seek renewal through personal contact with Chicago's immigrant poor, who would, ironically, be invited to enjoy the world of books and art inside Hull House. Alice Hamilton once acknowledged that she and her sister found the literary ambience of home a burden, but 'family pressure made us too into bookworms finally.' One wonders if bookishness wasn't clannishness—a form of snobbery in an upper-class milieu. For all its appeal today, family reading deserves more critical appraisal. If reading aloud joined young and old in common pastimes, it may also have imposed adult tastes on indifferent children, subjected them to unwelcome surveillance, and insured conformity to family values. How different was the experience of Emma Goldman, whose enthusiasm for books was enacted in the face of paternal opposition! Back in Russia, Goldman's father tried to marry her off at age fifteen, and when she resisted, he flung her French grammar into the fire. 'Girls do not have to learn much!' he announced. 'All a Jewish daughter needs to know is how to prepare *gefilte* fish, cut noodles fine, and give the man plenty of children.' Vowing 'to study, to know life, to travel,' Goldman made her way to America and radical anarchism. In the varied routes taken by the notorious Goldman and the proper Alice Hamilton, who gained national renown as a physician and Harvard's first female professor, we

17. Sicherman, 'Sense and Sensibility,' 206–209; Sicherman, 'Reading *Little Women*,' 257–60; Horowitz, '"Nous Autres,"' 88–89. In collective reading, Mary Kelley notes, antebellum women 'constructed a common intellectual and cultural world' through which they derived the materials—the literary models and the personal support—to 'fashion themselves.' See Kelley, 'Reading Women/Women Reading,' 142.

may ponder what happens when reading is an oppositional act, rather than the fulfillment of parental desires.[18]

Janice Radway brings a bracing, critical outlook to the study of women's reading in her 1984 work, *Reading the Romance*, which concludes my brief survey. This ethnography of a female reading circle, devotees of popular romances, rests on close observation of and interviews with her subjects—an advantage unavailable to most historians. It differs from the other studies I have discussed in another, crucial respect. Whereas those accounts accentuate the benefits of women's reading, Radway presents a darker view. Seeking to explain the popular appeal of romances, her investigation takes its lead from the informants but does not stop there. Radway asks what sorts of romances the women admired or disliked, under what circumstances they read them, and how they accounted for this consuming interest. The responses evoke familiar themes. The women, mostly high-school graduates, stressed self-improvement through reading. Romantic novels expanded vocabulary and, through exotic locales and period settings, instructed in geography and history. As in the eighteenth-century origins of the novel, women legitimated the 'escape' into fantasy as a socially useful act of learning. At the same time, indulging the imagination was justified as satisfaction of the self—a rare private moment of pleasure in a routine oriented to serving others. Romance-reading was a woman's time for herself, commonly meant to lift her spirits. Like Lynne Sharon Schwartz, they might have said, 'This and only this I did for myself.'

Yet these explanations are insufficient for Radway. Why do the women require such constant reinforcement? The answer lies in the theoretical apparatus Radway brings to bear upon the interviews and the themes in the romances. Her interpretation calls attention to the latent psychological functions of such reading: the

18. Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House: With Autobiographical Notes* (rpt., New York: New American Library, 1981; orig. pub., New York: The Macmillan Company, 1910), 63; Sicherman, 'Sense and Sensibility,' 204; Katherine Tinsley and Carl F. Kaestle, 'Autobiographies and the History of Reading: The Meaning of Literacy in Individual Lives,' in Kaestle et al., *Literacy in the United States*, 230–32, 238–39.

novels offered temporary compensation for the emotional injuries inflicted by patriarchal marriage. But that comfort was short-lived—hence, the insatiable need for a fix—and illusory. In an analysis that recalls the viewpoint of Richard Hoggart, adapted to a feminist context, Radway judges romance reading to be psychologically damaging and politically debilitating: an emotional restorative that reproduced the underlying condition it was supposed to relieve. It eased yet deepened 'cultural subordination.'[19]

We have thus come full circle, back to the mass culture critique with which commentary on women's reading began. But there is an important twist: Radway dissects not just the novels but also the readers' responses and puts the results within a larger analytical framework on patriarchy and mass culture. With that move, she enables a critical stance on the historical studies I have surveyed. Inquiry into women's reading in the past is a work in progress, only recently begun. Its approaches and themes are still being developed and refined. For white women of the middle and upper classes, we have significant patterns: leading genres (notably, fiction); levels of access (broad-based); key settings (home, academies, clubs); social practices (reading as a medium of family, friendship, self-improvement). A dominant interpretation has already emerged: women's reading served at once to sustain self and community, in a reciprocal relation that generated challenges to patriarchy.[20] Yet, in the course of reflecting on this scholarship, I

19. Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 61–71, 90–3, 103–109, 208–22. The sociologist Elizabeth Long offers an equally complex appraisal of contemporary women's reading groups in Houston, Texas. Participants seized upon novels and other genres as a spur to self-knowledge; by reading and discussing such texts, they clarified their own values and experiences. But such textual engagements, Long emphasizes, proved limited. Focusing on individual characters and plot, the Houston women, like Radway's romance readers in the Midwest, personalized the situations they encountered in books and in life. 'You know, when I read something,' one woman told Long, 'I'm looking for me and my experience.' The result was a narrowing of intellectual horizons; Long discerned in such groups little critical reflection on the organizing structures of social life and hence slight potential for radical politics. Long, 'Women, Reading, and Cultural Authority.'

20. From his exploration of women's diaries and letters in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Richard Brown offers a different view. In his telling, women's reading served to reinforce conventional gender roles in a society marked by separate spheres for male and female. From Mary Vial Holyoke in Salem during 1760–1800 to Lucy Breckinridge in the Valley of Virginia during the Civil War era, the women studied by

have become skeptical of the themes of identity and selfhood. When Sven Birkerts renders reading as a means of self-creation, I detect ideology. But is it not also a statement of experience? How do we distinguish between the two? Or to be more sophisticated, should we not emphasize that his perspective is a representation of a cultural practice—and no less deeply felt, for that. That proviso is equally essential in the study of women's reading. Did engagements with books foster new identities, or was that the language within which young women, in school and on the verge of adulthood, framed their literary pursuits? Was it, in other words, a female variant of bourgeois liberalism?

Closer attention to discourse may prompt a search for alternative representations and practices. I have limited my treatment here to privileged whites, but the extant investigations of African-Americans tell a similar story of self-making, community formation, and resistance to racism, perhaps because of the ideological pressure on blacks to demonstrate their humanity through literacy and also as part of the 'signifying' tradition Henry Louis Gates identifies in black writing. We have yet to turn up any Menocchio's in African-American folk culture, though we might take some cues from Lawrence Levine's reconstruction of the sacred world of the slaves. And we might consider the unusual reading practices of the Nation of Islam, with its mix of Masonry, Washingtonian self-help, Garveyite nationalism, Christian preaching, anti-Semitism, and Afrocentrism, and probe the narratives of prison reading by Malcolm X, among others, in settings of ideological indoctrination.[21] To religion we ought to turn.

Brown used books primarily to strengthen or, in the case of the itinerant painter Candace Roberts, to replace social relationships. Sentiment, affection, cultivation of personal feelings and social bonds: these were the principal themes and objects of female reading, which was incorporated, without any hint of tension, into the informal rounds of social life. If women gained access to information independently of fathers and husbands, they did not challenge the dominant terms of patriarchy. 'That such a momentous change was socially acceptable was largely owing to the vitality of the doctrine of separate spheres,' Brown writes; '. . . the idea of separate but equal gender spheres palliated adjustment to women's new roles as they gradually evolved during the 19th century.' Brown, *Knowledge Is Power*, 160–96 (quotation, 196).

21. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *'Race,' Writing, and Difference* (Chicago and London:

From the edifying reading of Puritans, yearning to imbibe the divine spirit with the sacred word, and their street literature of wonders and providences, David Hall has revealed anew a remarkable culture of faith, whose stunning persistence into the nineteenth century David Nord is bringing to light in fascinating accounts of the evangelical publishing crusade.[22]

Even as we explore diverse cultures of reading, we may find ourselves reviving older approaches to the past. Helen Horowitz's brilliant portrait of M. Carey Thomas, ravished by the perverse passions of Swinburne and Gautier, belongs in an honorable genre: the intellectual biography. Reading along with Thomas,

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University of Chicago Press, 1986), 1–14; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Janet Duitsman 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); Grey Gundaker, '"Without Parse of Script": The Interaction of Conventional Literacy and Vernacular Practice in African American Expressive Culture' (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1992), 214–70; Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); Anne Ruggles Gere and Sarah R. Robbins, 'Gendered Literacy in Black and White: Turn-of-the-Century African-American and European-American Club Women's Printed Texts,' *Signs* 21 (Spring 1996): 643–78; Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). In the library of the Norfolk, Mass., state prison, Malcolm X embarked upon the 'serious reading' he sustained throughout the rest of his life, ranging across African and world history, discovering the philosophers Schopenhauer, Kant, and Nietzsche, and immersing himself in the debate over Shakespeare's real identity (Malcolm opted for King James I). 'My alma mater was books,' Malcolm later recalled. Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Random House, 1965), 151–210 (quotation, 179). For the interpretive practices of the Nation of Islam, see Henry Louis Gates's fascinating profile of its leader Louis Farrakhan. Gates, 'The Charmer,' *The New Yorker* 72 (April 22–May 6, 1996), 116–26. On prison reading in general, see my review essay, 'Retribution, Rehabilitation, and Redemption: Prisoners in Print,' *The Book*, Number 36 (July 1995): 8–10. The reference to Menocchio is, of course, to the sixteenth-century Friuli miller, Domenico Scandella, whose eclectic readings, screened through a putative oral culture of the peasantry, coalesced to form the extraordinary world view analyzed by the historian Carlo Ginzburg in *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

22. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment*, 21–116; David Paul Nord, 'The Evangelical Origins of Mass Media in America, 1815–1835,' *Journalism Monographs* 98 (May 1984): 1–30; David Paul Nord, 'Systematic Benevolence: Religious Publishing and the Marketplace in Early Nineteenth-Century America,' in Leonard I. Sweet, ed., *Communication and Change in American Religious History* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 239–69; Nord, 'Religious Reading and Readers in Antebellum America.' For a brief overview of religion and print culture, see my review-essay in *The Book*, Numbers 37 and 38 (November 1995 and March 1996): 3–5.

tracing her progress from the moral heroism of Alcott and Carlyle to decadent European aesthetes, finding the influence of ideas on her life, Horowitz contributes a valuable chapter to the story of learned culture. In turn, such case studies disclose how large movements in art and thought play out in individual lives. In M. Carey Thomas, as revealed by Sicherman and Horowitz, we have a Romantic-turned-aesthete, traveling an unanticipated literary circuit. In a similar vein, Cathy Davidson shows the dissemination of eighteenth-century sentimentalism and Linda Kerber the diffusion of republicanism. 'For a very long time and continuing to the present day,' David Hall has observed, 'reading has been a synonym for the reception and diffusion of ideas.' It will continue to enrich intellectual history in the future.[23]

Let's not neglect the culture wars of the present. From the exaggerated rhetoric of Sven Birkerts to the conservative campaign for phonics, lately endorsed by the grammatically challenged Bob Dole, reading has political meanings for us all. If we would sustain the real Precious Joneses of America in their struggles for literacy and self-esteem, we need to unmask the mystifications of reading and demonstrate that textual encounters always bear the weight of history. In that enterprise, there may even be occasion to leave the study, however briefly, and, in the spirit of Jane Addams, engage the real world beyond the books.

23. Horowitz, '"Nous Autres"'; Davidson, *Revolution and the Word*; Kerber, *Women of the Republic*; Hall, 'Readers and Reading,' 338.

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