

of engaging with the physical world. In this regard, nineteenth-century novels are not so much a training ground where readers practice forms of perception that they will apply in everyday life. Rather, the knowledge they have acquired and the capacities they have honed from the cumulative labor of everyday experience make it possible for readers to grasp a scene that is totally absent from the senses.

NOTES

1. Georges Poulet, "Phenomenology of Reading," *New Literary History* 1 (1969): 53–68, 55.
2. Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: Experiencing Flow in Work and Play* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975), 36–48.
3. Teun A. van Dijk and Walter Kintsch, *Strategies of Discourse Comprehension* (New York: Academic Press, 1983).
4. Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. Nicola Bradbury (London: Penguin, 2003), 149.
5. Rolf A. Zwaan and Carol J. Madden, "Embodied Sentence Comprehension," in *Grounding Cognition: The Role of Perception and Action in Memory, Language, and Thinking*, ed. Diane Pecher and Rolf A. Zwaan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 224–45.
6. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 111.
7. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957), 29.



Reading

JESSE CORDES SELBIN

BY the end of the nineteenth century, few social questions had not been linked to what, in 1845, Sarah Stickney Ellis called "the art of reading well."¹ Little wonder, then, that many of today's most imaginative theories of this art have emerged among scholars of nineteenth-century literature; taking this object of study, theorists of methods such as surface reading, distant reading, and curatorial reading reproduce a major concern of their era of study. But unlike those of their

antecedents, these theories are chiefly academic: how we read as a dimension of how we research. Rare is the theory inherited from the Victorians themselves, whose beliefs about reading are largely relegated to the purportedly uncritical prehistory of academic professionalization. But understanding what constitutes critical reading requires ascertaining what it has been—necessitates asking, in Michael Warner’s words, “what alternative reading disciplines might be misrecognized as uncritical.”² As Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian have recently suggested, methodological pluralism is a sign of the health of a discipline.³ In that spirit, the conceptual resources of earlier eras might form a larger share of contemporary conversations about reading. In particular, excavating a lapsed culture of reading built around the social value of the endeavor stands not only to enrich contemporary research methods, but to help forge neglected links between specialized disciplinary tools and strategies for broader public engagement.

Even as major monographs of the past few decades have revealed the heterogeneity of nineteenth-century approaches to reading, the full history is still richer, stranger, and more diverse than we have yet understood.⁴ Throughout the era, reading strategies promoted to mass audiences offered both rigor and system, even as practitioners formulated broad ideals that left room for adaptation to textual specificity. For figures such as Blanche Leppington and Geraldine Jewsbury, for instance, it was crucial to read novels like *Ivanhoe* or *The Moonstone* twice to appreciate, distinctly, both plot and form: first, as Leppington put it, “for the sake of the story itself, and then for the sake of observing how it has been constructed.”⁵ In 1889, the National Home Reading Union formed to promote the “organisation of reading, its method and system”⁶ by convening local reading groups, pressing members “to form opinions for themselves,”⁷ and publishing monthly journals that posed interpretive “questions and difficulties.” These efforts consolidated more and less formal protocols—“rules for reading”⁸—that had emerged over decades in popular journals, elocution guides, literary reviews, and public lectures. Yet reading credos also often consciously avoided formalizing particular prescriptions, and instead praised the spontaneity and unpredictability of a lively, context-responsive form of reading so unlike the kind inculcated in what Frederic Harrison deemed the “patent high-pressure Reading Machine” of modern education.⁹ Indeed, the era’s popular reading advocates consistently suggest that theories and methods cannot be fully determined in advance; rather, texts indicate their own modes of analysis and interpretation. Theorists today might productively

appropriate this stance of openness from their predecessors, whose model of reading often stresses what Rachel Ablow has described as “a willingness to accommodate ambivalence, ambiguity, and perhaps most important, surprise.”¹⁰

The names that constellate this lost history are largely unfamiliar, yet their questions remain vital. How is it, asked Richard Chevenix Trench—pondering the concept of subtext through Ralph Waldo Emerson’s idea of language as “fossil poetry”—that texts both say what they say *and* say what they don’t say?¹¹ Can fiction offer readers, as Anne Mozley believed it could, a distinct way of knowing?¹² How might reflective reading practices be rendered habitual, Lucy Soulsby wondered, without becoming rote?¹³ In order to become better “interpreters of human things” writ large, as James Welldon put it, should we work to reconcile disparate elements of a text rather than enjoying it “cut up or boiled down”—a practice, then as now, extolled widely and employed rarely?¹⁴ What, more generally, was entailed by the widespread charge to “read with attention,” and how did it relate to Arthur Helps’s advice to “read with method,”¹⁵ Sydney Smith’s injunctions to “read heartily,”¹⁶ or prevailing conceptions of the importance of “close thinking”?¹⁷ These questions were reprised throughout the century, commonly in settings designed to foster debate. Far from a solitary enterprise, reading was meant to be discussed among members of a community: “If it was not worth conversing about,” John Cassell insisted, “it was not worth reading.”¹⁸ This collective ideal of reading prompted the Home Reading Union’s formation of collaborative reading societies designed to facilitate discussion of the “diverse opinions of different writers” through the “comparing influence of thought.”¹⁹ The Union’s model drew upon that of the American Chautauqua societies—wherein, Joshua Girling Fitch enthused, “collective reading and mutual conference” worked to “quicken into new enthusiasm” the literary aspirations of participants²⁰—and rapidly enfolded older organizations like the Glasgow Eclectic Reading Club, who had first banded in order to “give more definition to our reading.”²¹ Among political actors of many stripes, reading skills were framed as tools for parsing ideological glosses, holding legislators accountable, and devising canny appeals for liberation. The belief was not without warrant: as Leah Price has shown, anxieties and fantasies about the spread of literacy underwrote many of the era’s defining sociopolitical reforms.²²

Exploring outmoded beliefs about reading is not an act of navel-gazing, but a means of recovering lost skills and cultivating contemporary strategies. Earlier reading practices are already resurfacing in the

literary-studies classroom. Witness the increasing tendency to assign readings in the serial installments in which they originally circulated, or to rethink memorization and recitation—nineteenth-century stock-in-trade—not as a flattening of the analytic enterprise, but, with the right framing, as an embodied enhancement to it.²³ Other approaches from the era stand to set current doxa of literary-critical scholarship in productive tension. Reading *with* the nineteenth century, when thinkers found lively ways to speculate about authorial meaning without regarding it as definitive—when, indeed, annotation was often framed as a form of colloquy with authorial opinions readers were licensed to dissent from—we might ask why intention is still so frequently invoked as a fallacy. We might also reconceive lingering taboos against identification, absorption, and other messy affective states by drawing inspiration from Victorian attempts to reconcile informational and imaginative reading.²⁴ In so doing, we might devise a more nuanced vocabulary for the structures of feeling that attend experiences of reading. Perhaps most simply, we might articulate anew the value of rereading and emphasize the surprising way in which—as many a bygone theorist has marveled—the literary object becomes stranger with each reentrance into its pages. Nineteenth-century thinkers had creative ideas about these and other facets of the reading process, resources to draw upon in elaborating practices that are less starkly divided between professional and ordinary readers. In unearthing these older methods, we need not replace abiding ones, but might find good cause to rethink them.

NOTES

1. Sarah Stickney Ellis, “The Art of Reading Well, As Connected with Social Improvement,” in *The Young Ladies’ Reader; or, Extracts from Modern Authors*, ed. Sarah Stickney Ellis (London: Grant and Griffith, 1845), 1.
2. Michael Warner, “Uncritical Reading,” in *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, ed. Jane Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004), 20. For a more recent take on this question, see Michael Allan, *In the Shadow of World Literature: Sites of Reading in Colonial Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).
3. Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian, “Form and Explanation,” *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Spring 2017): 650–69.
4. See, for instance, Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader, 1837–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Nicholas Dames, *The Physiology of*

- the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Deidre Shauna Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).
5. Blanche Leppington, "Ivanhoe," *National Home Reading Union Monthly Journal*, January 4, 1890, 35; Geraldine Jewsbury, unsigned review [*The Moonstone*], *Athenaeum*, July 25, 1868, 106
 6. George Radford, *The Faculty of Reading: The Coming of Age of the National Home Reading Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910), 21.
 7. S. M. Amos, "Biographies of Working Men," *National Home Reading Union Monthly Journal, Artizans' Section*, January 4, 1890, 39.
 8. John Cassell, "Rules for Reading," *The Working Man's Friend and Family Instructor*, January 12, 1850, 61.
 9. Frederic Harrison, *Autobiographic Memoirs* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1911), 327.
 10. Rachel Ablow, "Introduction," in *The Feeling of Reading: Affective Experience and Victorian Literature*, ed. Rachel Ablow (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 4.
 11. Richard Chevenix Trench, *On the Study of Words* (1851; New York: A. C. Armstrong, 1885), 19.
 12. Anne Mozley, "On Fiction as an Educator," *Blackwood's Magazine* 108 (1870): 449–59.
 13. Lucy H. M. Soulsby, *Stray Thoughts on Reading* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1897).
 14. J. E. C. Welldon, "The Art of Reading Books," *National Review* (April 1894): 213–18, 215, 216.
 15. Arthur Helps, *Friends in Council: A Series of Readings and Discourse Thereon*, Vol. 2 (London: Pickering, 1847), 10.
 16. Sydney Smith, *Wit and Wisdom of the Rev. Sydney Smith* (New York: Widdleton, 1856), 209.
 17. John Cassell, untitled introduction, in *The Working Man's Friend and Family Instructor, Supplementary Number* (March 1850): 1; and J. G. Fitch, "The Chautauqua Reading Circle," *The Nineteenth Century* 24 (July–Dec. 1888): 487–500, 489.
 18. John Cassell, "How to Read Profitably," *The Working Man's Friend and Family Instructor*, August 3, 1850, 120–24, 123.
 19. Radford, *Faculty of Reading*, 8.
 20. Fitch, "Chautauqua Reading Circle," 489.

21. Qtd. in Robert Snape, "National Home Reading Union," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 7, no. 1 (2002): 86–110, 93.
22. Leah Price, "Victorian Reading," in *The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*, ed. Kate Flint (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 34.
23. See, for instance, Jerome McGann, "Recitation Considered as a Fine Art," *Experimental Literary Education, English Language Notes* 47, no. 1 (2009): 181–83; Jonathan Culler, "The Closeness of Close Reading," *ADE Bulletin* 149 (2010): 20–25; Catherine Robson, *Heart Beats: Everyday Life and the Memorized Poem* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).
24. For a concise illustration of how major Victorian reading theories press upon this distinction in relevant and productive ways, see Stephen Arata, "Literature and Information," *PMLA* 130, no. 3 (2015): 673–78, especially 677.



Realism

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IN considering Aru, the young, idealistic protagonist of her 1996 novel *A Matter of Time*, Indian novelist Shashi Deshpande has her narrator muse on her own narratorial/authorial enterprise and technique:

But to [admit knowledge of the future into her narrative] is to admit that Aru is the heroine of this story; only for the heroine can Time be bent backwards.

Is Aru the heroine? Why not? She has youth, one of the necessary requirements of a heroine. And the other—beauty? Well, possibly. The potential is there anyway. (The *Natyashastra* lays down that the heroine should have nobility and steadfastness as well. But we can ignore this. We no longer make such demands on our heroines.) Perhaps there's this too, this above all, that Aru is trying to make sense of what is happening.¹

Victorianists might easily recognize the allusion to George Eliot's famous "why always Dorothea?" passage from *Middlemarch*, making explicit not only the connection between the two protagonists but also the genres in which they appear. We might then ask: if the allusion to