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**Representing the Plough and Harrow of Knowledge:
Popular Literacy and the Creation of New Models of Reading and Writing in Victorian Prose Genres**

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Ryan Stephenson

Thesis submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
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Table of Contents

Abstract	vi
Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction	viii
Representations of Reading and Writing in Educational Literature	xii
Representations of Reading and Writing in Periodicals and Reading Guides	xv
Representations of Reading and Writing in Fiction: George Eliot and George Gissing	xxi
 Chapter 1	
What and How to Read: Models of Reading in Elementary Schools Before 1870	1
Contextualizing School Books: The Variety of Victorian Schools for the Masses	4
Uses of Readers and the Philosophy of Reading Instruction Before the 1860s	8
The Pedagogical Goals of Early Victorian Readers	15
Mid-Century Changes in Models of Reading and the Role of Matthew Arnold	19
The New Breed of Readers	28
The Pedagogical Changes of the 1860s in Action: The Work of J.M.D. Meiklejohn	35
Conclusions	45
 Chapter 2	
What and How to Read II: Writing in Elementary Schools and Late Victorian Models of	
Reading	47
Changes to Models of Reading and to School Readers After 1870: Expressive and Intelligent Reading	48
Writing Instruction in Victorian Elementary Schools and Textbooks	60

The Role of Composition in Victorian Schools and Textbooks	68
The Place of Writing in Late Victorian Educational Debates	80
Conclusions	89

Chapter 3

Consumption, Addiction, and Disease: Some Models of Literacy in Victorian Reading

Guides and Periodicals	93
Literary Gluttony and Mental Repletion: Reading as Eating	103
"I can't do it! I can't do it!": Reading, Eating, and Overpressure	111
The "Morbid Hunger" for News: Reading as a Habit or Vice	118
The Reading Habit and the Decline of the Educational Ideal	125
Conclusions	138

Chapter 4

Aimless Reading and Natural Writing: More Models of Literacy in Victorian Reading

Guides and Periodicals	141
"Ballooning" and "Navigating": Desultory and Systematic Reading	142
Class and Gender in the Desultory Reading Model	152
You Too Can Read Productively: Systematic Reading	160
Reading With Attention	171
Intensive and Extensive Reading	176
Natural or Cultural: The Representation of Writing in Victorian Periodicals	183
Writing and Interiority	197
Conclusions	203

Chapter 5

The Psychology of Reading and Memory in George Eliot's *Romola* and

<i>Daniel Deronda</i>	205
Some Connections Between Reading and Memory in Victorian Education and Psychology	207
Baldassarre's Illiteracy: Reading and Forgetfulness in <i>Romola</i>	213
The Mnemonic Network of Printed Words: Problems of Reading, Memory, and Attention in <i>Daniel Deronda</i>	227
"Fixed by the Tool of the Graver": Bardo's Inner Sight	240
The Epistemic Limitations of Inward Reading in <i>Romola</i>	246
"It is a way of printing": Reading the Inner Language of a Nation in <i>Daniel Deronda</i>	255
Conclusions	265

Chapter 6

Trapped, Obsessed, and Spellbound: The Complexities of Literacy, Work, and Gender

in George Gissing's Fiction	268
Mr. Baker and Miss Yule: The Complexity of Popular Literacy in <i>New Grub Street</i>	272
Reading/Writing Gender in the British Museum Reading Room	279
Marian Yule as a Women Writer	290
Public Space and the Public Sphere	297
Reading, Writing, and a Man's Business in "Spellbound" and "Christopherson"	309
Books and Idleness in "Spellbound" and "Christopherson"	320
Conclusions	332

Conclusion**A New World of Readers and Writers** 334

Literacy and Control, Both Personal and Social 338

The Psychological Implications of Literacy in Victorian Prose 342

Literacy and Purpose in Victorian Writing 348

Bibliography 357

Primary Sources 357

Secondary Sources 366

Abstract

This project examines the impact of popular literacy on the representation of reading and writing in Victorian prose. Literacy increased dramatically in Victorian Britain, becoming nearly universal by the turn of the century, and major developments in education and publishing accompanied this growth. While critics have investigated extensively the reading habits of women (Flint 1993, Phegley 2004) and the working class (Vincent 1993, Brantlinger 1998, Rose 2001), my thesis argues that the rise of popular literacy caused a more wide-ranging reconceptualization of what was involved in the acts of reading and writing for literate Britons from across the social spectrum. This redefinition of literacy occurred intergenerically through the development of diverse conceptual models of reading and writing in Victorian prose. By examining the literacy models circulated in educational literature, periodicals and popular reading guides, and fiction, my thesis reveals literacy's association with control of the self and the social body and outlines the perceived impact of reading and writing on individual psychology. I trace the transformation of reading and writing instruction in elementary schools from a process intended to engender obedience and moral conformity to one intended to create a habit of reading. The models of reading as eating, reading as an addiction, and desultory reading circulated in periodicals and reading guides demonstrate the perceived dangers of this habit, once created. Critics and educators constructed counter-models of intensive, systematic reading to combat these dangers. Examining George Eliot's *Romola* and *Daniel Deronda* and George Gissing's *New Grub Street*, "Spellbound," and "Christopherson," I show how these authors reinterpreted popular models of literacy in their fiction, exploring the effects of reading and writing on psychology and gender identity. Through this analysis of literacy's representation in Victorian prose, my thesis reveals the complicated position of reading and writing in the nineteenth century.

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Introduction

The development of reading and writing in Victorian Britain was a complex socio-historical process, closely connected to the creation and expansion of national education, the extension and modification of the literary market to include emerging and newly literate audiences, and corresponding advances in the means of literary production through new print technologies. The rise of popular literacy lies at the heart of these developments. The statistics (based on the signing of marriage registers, which began to be enforced in 1754) currently used by historians who examine nineteenth-century literacy suggest that the national literacy rate increased dramatically over the course of the Victorian period, rising from 67.3% for men and 51.1% for women in 1841 to 97.2% for men and 96.8% for women in 1900 (Altick 1957, Mitch 1992). Thus, by the end of the century, Britain seemed able to boast of the universal literacy dreamt of by proponents of social progress. Although many commentators have pointed out the presence of regional and generational variations in literacy data (Vincent 1993, Mitch 1992, Altick 1972, Webb 1955, Stephens 1987), the consensus is that with the dramatic expansion of literacy amongst the working class, Britain became a far more literate nation during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Faced with popular literacy and major changes to the education system, Victorian educators, reformers, and journalists alike sought to define precisely what was involved in the practices of reading and writing, to understand fully their uses and potential, and to discern better the relationship between them. While many commentators proudly recognized popular literacy as a distinctively nineteenth-century achievement, they also expressed considerable anxiety about the potential limits of reading and writing and the social consequences of

popular education. Discursively linked to issues of class, gender, and self-improvement, the progress of literacy was addressed by politicians, theologians, literary critics, and publishers with increased frequency from the 1860s until the end of the century. Yet, important as these philosophical and institutional perspectives are, an examination of the period's literature reveals that the task of defining what was mentally and physically involved in the acts of reading and writing was often undertaken most thoroughly and imaginatively by Victorian novelists as they attempted to understand the two practices on which their literary careers were founded. Therefore, without an examination of how novelists themselves defined reading and writing and how they understood the modern world to be mediated by these practices, our understanding of the power of Victorian literacy in its specific historical context is problematically incomplete. My dissertation offers a more comprehensive picture of Victorian popular literacy by exploring the relationship between its rise in the latter decades of the nineteenth century and the numerous and varied representations of reading and writing in the works of educators, journalists, and novelists. The goal of this project is to reveal how the interaction between educational writing, periodical literature, and fiction led to the construction of diverse models of reading and writing, models that provide for contemporary critics a framework with which to judge what was at stake for Victorians in the discourse on popular literacy.

Recognizing that the Victorian period witnessed the development of a reading public that incorporated members of the working class, many works within the field of literary studies have charted the transformation of this mass reading audience and the problems and expectations faced during the nineteenth century by readers drawn from the lower classes (Altick 1957, Vincent 1993, Klancher 1987, Jacobs 1995, Brantlinger 1998, Lyons 1999, Rose 2001, Mays 2004). Recent studies by feminist critics have attempted to redress the

frequent masculine bias of such works while simultaneously investigating the emergence and transformation of middle- and working-class women as distinct literary audiences (Flint 1993, Gilbert 1997, Losano 2005, Phegley 2004; 2005, Pykett 1992, Shaw 1992, Homans 1986). In addition, renewed interest in working-class autobiography since the mid-1980s (Burnett et al. 1984-89, Rose 2001, Vincent 1982, Mays 2004) has revealed how members of a newly literate group understood and represented their own experiences with print. Yet, while these studies of particular groups of readers and writers are important to our comprehension of Victorian literacy, they only tell us part of the story about popular literacy's effects on British culture.

In fact, a close examination of the Victorian discourse on popular literacy reveals that its steady advance encouraged many writers to reconceptualize more broadly what was involved in the acts of reading and writing, not just as these acts were performed by women and by the newly literate lower classes, but by a wide range of literate Britons, crossing divisions of class, gender, and age. In short, the rise of popular literacy dramatically altered the way that reading and writing were defined as mental and physical activities. Patrick Brantlinger's work (1998), in particular, emphasizes this point, by showing that the "threat" of a mass readership can be discerned in the discourse on novels and within novels themselves. Although a considerable amount of critical effort has been spent establishing reading and writing as social practices and studying the extent to which newly literate groups altered the dimensions of reader and writer as social categories, exactly how Victorians defined reading and writing as distinct acts in themselves has received far less scrutiny. As a result, a wide array of primers, guides, manuals, articles, and editorials – appearing with increased frequency from the 1860s onwards – that sought to define the exact dimensions of these acts has been largely ignored by recent criticism, as has the connection between such

sources and the representation of reading and writing in novels of the period. Our understanding of Victorian assumptions about readers and writers is incomplete without a detailed account of how contemporary commentators defined the individual acts upon which such categories were founded.

Relying on a historical and materialist critical perspective, my dissertation investigates how the advent of popular literacy changed the way reading and writing were understood and depicted by evaluating key representations of these acts in Victorian prose, both fictional and non-fictional. I argue that Victorian definitions of reading and writing were constructed inter-generically, and that our ultimate views on these acts need to take into account the influence of educational, journalistic, and literary perspectives. We cannot begin to understand the full impact of a model of reading or writing on popular consciousness until we come to grips with its presentation in a variety of contexts. As Pamela Morris has observed, to render the buzz of discourse and ideology that reside within literary works intelligible, “it is necessary to recognize the other voices that make up the discursive web within which a text is responding” (6).¹ Therefore, while “systematic” reading, for instance, has a specific set of expectations in teaching manuals and elementary school primers, it is not until we recognize the preconceptions about class and gender upon which this model of reading is built that we are able to judge its influence on children in Victorian Board Schools. Statements on systematic reading in popular periodicals and reading guides draw these preconceptions out. The definition of this reading model is enhanced and transformed yet again when it is taken up by novelists who dramatize the effects of systematic reading on their characters while simultaneously providing commentary on definitions circulating in the

¹ Pamela Morris, *Imagining Inclusive Society in Nineteenth-Century Novels: The Code of Sincerity in the Public Sphere* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins UP, 2004).

press and elsewhere. Recognizing this interaction between prose genres in the creation of literacy models gives us a more complete understanding of the discursive web from which novelists drew in their constructions of readers and writers in their works.

Representations of Reading and Writing in Educational Literature

This dissertation is divided into three sections, each containing two chapters. The first section examines the representation of reading and writing in educational literature, the second in periodical literature and popular reading guides, and the third in fiction, specifically the works of George Eliot and George Gissing. My first chapter, “What and How to Read I: Models of Reading in Elementary Schools Before 1870,” establishes specific definitions of reading by focusing on texts used in schools before the passing of the 1870 Education Act, the century’s most concerted effort to establish universal education in Britain. My examination of the pedagogical philosophy behind Victorian reading instruction begins with the models of reading presented in teaching manuals and “readers” (or primers) used in elementary schools before the 1860s. This decade is a useful point of division because British educational philosophy changed dramatically between the 1850s and the 1870s, thanks in large part to a major piece of legislation, the Revised Code of the Committee of Council on Education, which was passed in 1862. Texts published from the 1860s onwards are frequently composed on the basis of a different pedagogical philosophy than those of the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s.

An investigation of early Victorian manuals and readers, such as Henry Dunn’s *Principles of Teaching: or, the Normal School Manual* (1837), *The First Book of Lessons for the Use of Schools* (1842) by the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland, and Neil Leitch’s *Juvenile Reader* (1852), suggests that many educators viewed reading instruction as

a means to inculcate religious and moral values or to exercise social control. However, similar texts from the 1860s and afterwards – such as Favell Lee Mortimer’s *Reading Without Tears, or, A Pleasant Mode of Learning to Read* (1857), J.S. Laurie’s *Graduated Series of Reading Lesson Books* (1861), and George White’s *A Simultaneous Method of Teaching to Read* (1862) – tend to emphasize the creation of interest and the cultivation of attention in reading lessons, in the hope of instilling a “habit of reading” in elementary school children. Proponents of more interesting readers – containing secular stories, illustrations, and graduated methods of instruction – hoped that their books would solve one major problem of elementary education: that working-class readers frequently lost their tenuous hold on literacy because they rarely picked up a book after leaving school. In examining the work of J.M.D. Meiklejohn, who published a vast array of readers and pedagogical studies during the period, I show how the philosophies of the 1860s translated into educational practice. The views of Matthew Arnold, who worked as an elementary school inspector from 1851 to 1886, are central in this transformation. Arnold called for the same civilizing and humanizing education in his inspector’s reports as he did in his better-known critical essays, although the contexts for these demands are different. My arguments in this chapter build on important studies of Victorian elementary textbooks by Alec Ellis (1971), J.M. Goldstrom (1972), David Vincent (1993), Gretchen Galbraith (1997), and Stephen J. Heathorn (2002), while examining the different sociological and pedagogical assumptions made about the practice of reading.

My second chapter, “What and How to Read II: Writing in Elementary Schools and Late Victorian Models of Reading,” examines the effects of the 1870 Education Act on reading instruction and studies the role of writing in elementary schools between the 1830s and the end of the century. The Education Act helped to foster changes to the elementary

curriculum in the century's final decades by creating a greater opportunity for working-class children to attend state-funded schools and by placing new scrutiny on the means by which they were educated. While the new models of reading circulated by educators and authors in the final decades of the century – expressive reading and intelligent reading – have their roots in the pedagogical philosophies of the 1860s, the inclusion of historical, geographical and literary readers in the post-1870 curriculum also helped to set new standards for comprehension. I argue that the evolving definition of “intelligence” in the discourse on elementary education provides us with a way to chart some of the most important changes in reading instruction in the latter part of the century. While reading “with intelligence” did not become a requirement of the Educational Code until 1875, educators from at least the 1840s onwards looked to the concept of intelligence as a means of assessing the quality of a child's reading ability. In the early decades of the period, a child was thought to show intelligence by providing well-rehearsed answers to an instructor's many questions about what he or she had read, so that intelligence and comprehension were made nearly synonymous. By the 1880s, however, educators tended to see intelligent reading as a more active form of reading, so that measuring intelligence meant gauging students' abilities to incorporate outside knowledge into their readings and their responses to teachers. Rather than simply receiving information passively and repeating it automatically, children were being asked to create knowledge as they read.

The ability to write was also considered a means of displaying intelligence, but writing instruction was very limited in elementary schools before composition finally entered the official curriculum in 1871. For most of the nineteenth century, writing in elementary schools simply meant copying, and as Henry Dunn explains in his teaching manual, composition was often neglected in Victorian schools because it was felt that “prejudice

would be excited” by any effort to teach working-class children to record their thoughts. By examining teaching manuals by Thomas Morrison and J.M.D. Meiklejohn, writing and composition textbooks, and readers, I show that while writing was often identified as a practical skill for working-class children (linking writing instruction to debates waged throughout the 1880s on the need for more technical education in elementary schools), composition could be presented as a means of drawing out a pupil’s individuality and expressing his or her inner life. Some commentators thought that Board Schools would be most effective in producing a productive, obedient, and respectable workforce, while others believed that working-class children should be given an opportunity to further develop their intellectual abilities, regardless of the occupations in which they might find themselves later on in life. Writing instruction and advanced reading instruction were both conflicted sites of discussion in these debates.

Representations of Reading and Writing in Periodicals and Reading Guides

In the second section of my dissertation, I shift my focus away from educational literature in order to look at the conceptual models of reading and writing prevalent in periodicals and reading guides marketed to a more diverse collection of readers. Many of the statements about literacy in these sources attempt to prescribe productive and intellectually rigorous methods of reading to a popular audience composed of both new and veteran readers of varied social classes, often designated collectively as “the general reader.” The authors of the articles and guides I examine here also strive, at times even more forcefully, to steer readers away from what Frederic Harrison (1886) calls “the misuse of books, the debilitating waste of brain in aimless, promiscuous, vapid reading, or even it may be, in the poisonous

inhalation of mere literary garbage and bad men's worst thoughts" (1).² While a number of critics have shown that distinct groups of readers (such as children, women, and members of the working class) were told *what* to read by the authors of these publications (Flint 1993, Phegley 2004; 2005, Pykett 1992, Shaw 1992), I argue that these authors also prescribed both implicitly and explicitly *how* reading and writing should be practised on a fundamental, intellectual level.

While both literacy skills were the topic of frequent critical debate in the popular press, reading became a focal point in these discussions because (as I show in my first section) it tended to be taught first in elementary schools and was commonly believed to be the only skill that the partially literate would retain. Accordingly, I begin by analyzing popular representations of reading in my third chapter, "Consumption, Addiction, and Disease: Some Models of Literacy in Victorian Reading Guides and Periodicals." The most ubiquitous Victorian model of reading figures the activity as a form of consumption, frequently associating it with physical digestion. In his study of Romantic-era reading audiences, Jon Klancher argues that the prospect of a mass culture in early nineteenth-century Britain caused the definition of reading as a mode of reception, "a symbolic giving and receiving of texts between great writers and singular, sensitive readers," to give way to a model of reading as a mode of consumption based on the laws of the marketplace among "innumerable writers and vast, faceless audiences" (13).³ However, while Klancher demonstrates that the receptive model of reading associated with high culture continued to prevail amongst several of the distinct audiences he charts in the literature of the Romantic period, I show that the reception model is replaced almost entirely after the 1860s by the

² Frederic Harrison, *The Choice of Books and Other Literary Pieces* (1886; London: Macmillan & Co., 1887).

³ Jon P. Klancher, *The Making of Modern Reading Audiences, 1790-1832* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1987).

consumption model, which becomes the standard metaphorical presentation of reading for both upper- and lower-class audiences.

One effect of the consumption model's pervasiveness was to encourage a number of commentators to represent reading as a passive experience that was mentally, physically, and morally dangerous to the reader. We find evidence of this perceived danger in books and articles that document the "vice" or "habit" of reading, which some Victorian alarmists considered to be as bad for the working classes as the habitual consumption of drink, tobacco, or narcotics. However, concerns about physical distress resulting from the over-consumption of reading matter can be found in periodicals marketed to middle-class readers as well. These anxieties are evident too in the "overpressure" crisis of the 1880s, during which a number of concerned parents, educators, and physicians argued that the overly ambitious demands of successive Education Codes were force-feeding intellectual food to elementary school children, resulting in health problems and even death through "brain fever." Some commentators went so far as to imply that the policies set out by the Education Act and the Revised Code were hurting elementary school children genetically unsuited for the brainwork required to read and write at high levels (Galbraith 1997). While a number of articles on the disease of reading tended to focus on women and working-class readers, there is evidence that such concerns were not confined to these typically marginalized groups. This chapter also examines the transformation of the notion of a "reading habit" during the late Victorian period. While the term tended to have a positive connotation in the popular discourse on reading and education in the middle of the century, it was frequently used by the 1880s and 1890s to refer to harmful and addictive reading practices. I argue that well-publicized changes to the British publishing industry (especially periodical and newspaper publishing) and the decline of what Mark Hampton (2004) has called the "educational ideal" amongst

prominent critics encouraged many commentators to represent the vast, and hence in part indiscriminate, range of British print as primarily destructive instead of instructive and improving. This shift helps to explain the redefinition of the term “habit” in popular articles on reading.

I continue my examination of popular reading models in my fourth chapter, “Aimless Reading and Natural Writing: More Models of Literacy in Victorian Reading Guides and Periodicals.” In addition to addressing representations of writing in the periodical press, this chapter examines reading models that, unlike those explored in Chapter 3, some critics believed could have beneficial effects on readers. I look first at desultory reading and systematic reading, two apparently dichotomous forms of interacting with print that were discussed frequently in popular journals, especially in the wake of Stafford Henry Northcote’s *The Pleasures, the Dangers, and the Uses of Desultory Reading* (1886). James Stephen (1853) and Frederic Harrison (1886) also helped to construct the model of desultory reading in their treatises on the subject. In these sources, desultory reading tends to be presented as a product of the increased proliferation of the popular press. The apparently overwhelming abundance of newspapers, magazines, and cheap books, some critics believed, encouraged directionless and superficial interaction with reading material, leading readers to pass from one article or book to another in an aimless or wandering fashion. In his essay on the subject, James Stephen defines desultory reading as a lightening of the mental habits, making reading a means of recreation instead of self-disciplined study. He focuses on the political and social implications of this distinction and insists that readers were required to choose self-denying study over more superficial forms of reading because of the new intellectual demands placed on them by the progress of reform. Published three decades later, Northcote’s lecture on desultory reading argues, on the other hand, that the desultory method

has distinct benefits that are not to be garnered by systematic study. Northcote constructs a revised model of desultory reading that eschews reading material with the greatest potential to be destructive, thereby offering his audience a way to acquaint themselves with a greater portion of the books (and books only) provided to them by the juggernaut of British publishing. Though women and members of the working class were most frequently associated with desultory reading in the periodical articles I examine in this chapter, Stephen, Northcote, and a handful of lesser-known journalists consulted here presented middle-class men as desultory readers as well.

At the other end of the spectrum lies systematic reading, which was often positioned as the main goal of elementary education and as a corrective to desultory reading and the other destructive models of literacy discussed in Chapter Three. A number of critics offered plans for systematic reading, most notably James Stephen, John Ruskin (1865), and Frederic Harrison, and I show that many of the statements of systematic reading by these authors and by anonymous journalists – such as the author of “Reading as a Means of Culture” (1867) – insist on reading as a way of *communicating* with great authors of the past (recalling Klancher’s reception model of literacy). I show, too, that critics frequently put systematic reading forward as a form of active reading in opposition to the seemingly passive interaction with texts imagined in the models of reading as eating or addiction. As the notion of attention was central to the definition of systematic reading, this chapter also takes into account the work done on Victorian classifications of attention by Stephen Arata (2004) and Jonathan Crary (1999). Before moving on to discuss the place of writing in popular discussions of literacy, this chapter also argues that desultory and systematic interactions with books can be seen to embody the distinctions between extensive and intensive reading discussed by Roger Chartier (1994). While Chartier suggests that the apparent opposition between these modes of

reading needs to be rethought, the Victorian critics whose writing I examine in this chapter show themselves to be entirely comfortable with the common distinctions, tending to favour intensive reading and to promote practices such as re-reading and note-taking.

While it was often associated with reading in critical discussions, writing was also governed by its own set of assumptions and definitions, and conceptual models of writing are presented far less frequently in the periodical sources I examine in this chapter. Writing did not attract the sorts of social and political questions that reading did, primarily because while reading was seen as a mass activity, writing continued to be seen as a specialized one, reflecting the treatment of the two practices in Victorian elementary education. When conceptual models of writing are introduced in the periodical sources I assess in this chapter, authors often focus on the technological character of writing. The activity of writing became increasingly and more obviously mediated in the late Victorian period by technological advances in the printing and publishing industries (Feltz 1993, Dooley 1992, Sutherland 1995). At the same time, however, some authors sought to offer a less mediated model of writing that linked the activity to natural and bodily processes. I demonstrate attempts to “naturalize” the process of writing in articles by the journalist Elizabeth Noble (1877) and by chemist and director of the Industrial Museum of Scotland, George Wilson (1859). Noble and Wilson both associate the practice of writing with powerful phenomena of the natural world, rather than with rotary and steam-powered presses. For Noble, the process of writing is best compared to the radiation of astronomical objects, and Wilson defines the human retina as “a living paper” (34) while suggesting that every pen is “but a living finger or more fully, a living hand” (35). These treatments of the writing process provide clear examples of what Walter Ong (1986) refers to as the *interiorization* of the technology of writing, but other writers of the period, such as the celebrated archeologist W.M. Flinders Petrie, drew their

readers' attention to the essentially technological nature of all writing. I argue that these divergent views on the character of writing provide evidence of conflicting positions on the relationship between the activity of writing and interiority in Victorian literature.

Representations of Reading and Writing in Fiction: George Eliot and George Gissing

After analysing the pedagogical, psychological, and sociological assumptions that govern reading and writing in educational texts, periodicals, and other popular sources, I turn in the final section of my thesis to an analysis of fiction by George Eliot and George Gissing. The goal of these two final chapters is to explore the ways in which Eliot and Gissing reproduce, respond to, and resist dominant theories about the tools of literacy and their implications for personal identity. I have chosen to direct my research towards the work of two prominent authors rather than towards a more diffuse collection of Victorian writers because I believe that focussing on Eliot and Gissing exclusively allows me to look in greater detail at the ways in which popular models of literacy informed Victorian fiction. Through a more nuanced analysis of two authors my dissertation is able to survey a number of fictional works closely and to investigate in greater detail the unique models of reading and writing that they provide. As well, analysing several works by these two authors allows me to show how their views on the meaning of reading and writing transformed over the course of their literary careers, sometimes in response to national changes in the fields of education and politics.

I have chosen Eliot and Gissing for a number of reasons, most importantly because both display within their fiction an obvious interest in the practices of reading and writing and a desire to understand what these activities involve on an intellectual, physical, and (for Eliot) spiritual level. Scenes of reading and writing, narrative developments that rely on them,

and metaphorical constructions built on images of these activities occur with remarkable frequency in their works, and while the much-publicized advances in popular literacy encouraged many Victorian novelists to include scenes of reading and writing in their narratives, such scenes take on a particular hermeneutic value in the fiction I study here. My choice of material has also been guided by an attempt to examine the representation of literacy skills in a range of literary contexts. While each of the texts I investigate in Chapters Five and Six belongs quite clearly to the category of Victorian realism, my selection also represents a range of fictional subgenres – from the historical novel, to multi-volume works set in contemporary Britain, to short, satirical stories and psychological sketches. In their fiction, Eliot and Gissing represent the acts of reading and writing as they are practised by both men and women of various social positions and diverse educational backgrounds. Taken cumulatively, these representations of literacy help to clarify our view of what the ability to read and write meant in the context of Victorian fiction.

Working chronologically, I begin in my fifth chapter, “The Psychology of Reading and Memory in George Eliot’s *Romola* and *Daniel Deronda*,” by examining Eliot’s investigation into the psychological implications of reading and writing, focussing my attention on her presentation of the relationship between reading and memory. I show that Eliot’s theoretical perspective on the role of memory in reading contributed to a growing body of work on this subject in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Taking into account recent studies of memory in Victorian literature and psychology by Sally Shuttleworth (2000), Rick Rylance (2000), and Nicholas Dames (2001), as well as studies of Eliot’s own depiction of memory by Hao Li (2000) and Michael Davis (2006), I demonstrate that reading and memory were frequently discussed in conjunction in both popular periodicals and philosophical journals. In educational and pedagogical discussions, for instance, retention

was frequently used as a measuring stick with which to gauge a pupil's comprehension of what he or she had read. In studies of psychology, as well, books and reading generated useful metaphors for writers attempting to explain how individual memory and forgetfulness functioned.

My analysis of these topics begins with Eliot's *Romola* (1863), a historical novel set in Renaissance Florence, in which the narrative of the novel's titular heroine allows Eliot to explore the lives of a group of scholars embroiled in political and religious discord. I show first that Eliot frequently uses reading and writing as metaphors with which to describe the many instances of prevision and prophecy that occupy the novel's plot. In some cases, prophecies become inscribed onto the minds of those who witness them, as is the case with Romola, who is deeply affected by a vision her brother relates to her on his deathbed. Dino's words are metaphorically written into his sister's mind so that they remain constantly present in her memory. Furthermore, the proclaimed Florentine prophet Girolamo Savonarola sees his ability to foresee the future as a kind of supernatural literacy, as do the lesser visionaries that populate the narrative. In the character of Baldassarre Calvo, Eliot makes her most complex contribution to Victorian discussions about memory and literacy. Though he is stricken with a form of amnesia by years of mental and physical hardship, the eventual return of Baldassarre's memory is depicted in a scene of reading. Eliot represents the aging scholar's memory as a text that he is once again able to read and interpret when he regains a part of his mental empire.

The ability to read and remember, Eliot suggests, puts Baldassarre into a different relationship with himself and the world around him. Later, when Baldassarre is asked to prove his identity through a reading test, the hold he has on his mental powers proves too tenuous, and he is thrown into illiteracy and impotence once again. The form of inward

reading from memory that Baldassarre practices is also practiced by Romola's father, the blind scholar Bardo di' Bardi, but I show that the individual failures of these men over the course of the narrative are significant in terms of Eliot's epistemological views. Eliot connects their method of reading to a more general epistemic system, using their inward, mnemonic reading to represent a way of acquiring knowledge of the world that she felt to be deeply flawed because it relied so heavily on generalizations and preconceptions, failing to fully take into account the importance of close observation to detail. Here I also examine a number of Eliot's essays, in which she lays out what she believes to be the most ethical and productive ways of gathering knowledge.

I continue my analysis of Eliot's novels in this chapter by turning to *Daniel Deronda* (1876), in which Eliot continues, more than a decade after the publication of *Romola*, to explore the relationship between literacy, memory, and knowledge. As Tony E. Jackson has argued, literacy plays a major role in this novel. *Daniel Deronda* presents its readers with a world where the majority of personal relationships, indeed of personal experience in general, are mediated by literature. In Jackson's opinion, the novel "represents literature as a determinative cause in human consciousness" and suggests that "literary experiences and interpretive ability are directly associated with a character's kind of reading of other people" (232).⁴ More importantly, at least for my purposes, *Daniel Deronda* also contains a number of scenes in which reading, memory, and attention become major problems for the novel's characters. Daniel Deronda himself, who is, according to Jackson, the book's best and most sympathetic reader of character, reads unsuccessfully several times because of his mnemonic and emotional condition. For Deronda, reading intensively becomes impossible because

⁴ Tony E. Jackson, "George Eliot's 'New Evangel': *Daniel Deronda* and the Ends of Realism," *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture* 25 (1994): 229-48.

pressing emotional memories are *too* forceful, coming between reader and book. However, in response to these scenes of failed reading, the author also presents a powerful scene of close reading featuring Gwendolen Harleth. In these contrasting scenes of reading, I argue, Eliot provides a blueprint for the proper interplay of memory, will, and emotion required for productive, intensive reading.

Daniel Deronda also reintroduces the notion of inner, mnemonic literacy that Eliot explores in the characters of Baldassarre and Bardo in *Romola*. Here, however, Eliot reinterprets this activity as a successful method of cultural transmission rather than a limited method of acquiring knowledge of the world. Mordechai Cohen, the scholarly and ascetic brother of Mirah (the waif with whom Deronda falls in love after he saves her from drowning in the Thames), views Jewish cultural/racial knowledge as an often illegible but ever-present writing within every Jew. All that is required to reunite the Jews as a coherent national force, he believes, is an outward sign to act as a form of metaphorical illumination. This “torch of visible community” (497), as Mordechai calls it, will make that dimly seen internal writing legible to every Jew.⁵ In the character of Deronda, Eliot suggests that Mordechai’s vision of inborn cultural knowledge is apt, thus promoting a positive vision of mnemonic reading in opposition to the flawed one offered by *Romola*. Mordechai recognizes immediately in Deronda (before the latter knows anything of his true parentage) the perfect Jewish type into whom he can pour the knowledge he has acquired, and Deronda himself feels an intense reaction to Mordechai and to several aspects of Jewish spiritual life. In this way the novel does indeed present national and racial belonging as inborn, in much the same way that Mordechai’s metaphorical construction suggests. Eliot also dramatizes a more traditional method of cultural transmission in this novel. On acquiring the Hebrew manuscripts handed

⁵ George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Graham Handley (1876; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984).

down to him through his estranged mother from his grandfather, Deronda feels “himself to be touching the electric chain of his own ancestry” (670), so that his reading practices are key in the construction of his personal identity. I argue, however, that these material texts are less important to Deronda’s identity than they may first appear because of the power of the internal writing posited by Mordechai and confirmed by the complexities of Deronda’s character.

In my sixth and final chapter, “Trapped, Obsessed, and Spellbound: The Complexities of Literacy, Work, and Gender in George Gissing’s Fiction,” I examine *New Grub Street* (1891), one of Gissing’s most popular novels, as well as two of his short stories, “Spellbound” (1897) and “Christopherson” (1902), which have received less critical attention. I believe that Gissing is an important subject in any study of Victorian popular literacy because the individual and collective effects of education are constant topics in his fiction. In fact, Gissing suggests throughout his later works that a character’s relationships with books can be just as substantial in defining that character as his or her relationship with other men and women. This chapter begins with an analysis of Gissing’s *New Grub Street*, his well-known study of the lives of journalists and other literary labourers in late-Victorian London. Although *New Grub Street* has been extensively analyzed for the light it sheds on the publishing industry and Gissing’s place within it (Keating 1968, Selig 1983, Brantlinger 1998), less scrutiny has been devoted to the novel’s representation of its characters’ reading and writing practices, the extent to which these representations reflect Gissing’s understanding of the difficulties and intricacies of popular literacy, and the complications inherent in any attempt to define mass literacy.

The first aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how Gissing uses his characters, primarily the character of Marian Yule, to explore the social and cultural distinctions that

Victorian society made between the practices of reading and writing. My analysis focuses on the British Museum scene, in which Marian Yule laments her lot as a woman who must write in order to live. I argue that although Marian Yule is often aligned with other women readers thought to be “invading” the British Museum Reading Room in the late-Victorian period, or interpreted as little more than an amanuensis, secretary, or slave to her literary father (Hoberman 2005, Selig 1983), we need to redefine Marian as an active and productive writer of texts in order to fully comprehend her characterization and her struggles in the Reading Room. Marian is more than a passive reader and consumer of literature, a more traditionally feminine position in the literary market. Her sense of discomfort and alienation in the physical space she inhabits comes from her necessary negotiation of the Reading Room and the literary market. Gissing uses her move from passivity to activity in the Reading Room scenes to illustrate the feminization and expansion of the literary marketplace at the end of the century, thereby pointing to the changing definitions and representations of reading and writing that were brought about by an increasingly literate nation.

The implications of reading and writing for gender and class identity are also central concerns of “Spellbound” and “Christopherson,” but Gissing’s focus here is the intersection of literacy with middle-class masculinity. These stories suggest that the manner in which a man interacts with books can have troubling and negative effects on his manliness, especially when that interaction interferes with his ability to work. In “Spellbound,” for instance, Gissing takes on the model of desultory reading so widely circulated in periodicals during the 1880s and 1890s. The story’s protagonist, recently sacked draper’s salesman Percy Dunn, appears to have become addicted to reading periodicals in London’s free libraries as other men might become addicted to alcohol or gambling. Having lost his job, Dunn avoids getting another one and spends all his time reading, passively and apparently unthinkingly, while his

wife and her younger brother support his household. Taking into account studies of Victorian masculinity by Herbert Sussman (1995), James Eli Adams (1995), Martin Danahay (2005), and John Tosh (2005), as well as Janet Oppenheim's study of Victorian representations of nervous disorders (1991), I argue that Gissing's narrative shows desultory reading to be dangerous because of its ability to throw men into abject idleness, putting them at odds with the traditional ideology of Victorian bourgeois masculinity. By the end of the nineteenth century, this pervasive ideology stressed self-control, physical vigour, and the ability to work as defining characteristics of manliness; in the wake of widespread industrialization, gentlemanly idleness was no longer as attractive a model of manliness.

In "Christopherson," Gissing represents a fallen gentleman (rather than a member of the lower-middle class) who has similarly descended into idleness because of his attachment to books. Unlike Dunn, however, Christopherson is a bookworm who hoards in his tiny flat volumes purchased out of the small income his wife brings home from her position in a London shop. Here, Gissing constructs his protagonist's problematic masculine identity by pitting his character against Pomfret, a rugged and vigorous Yorkshireman with whom both the narrator and Christopherson are friends. Against Pomfret, the worn and nervous Christopherson appears even less of a man, but it is his unnatural attachment to books and subsequent withdrawal from public life that defines him. I argue that while these stories contain a number of similar elements, a key difference between them becomes evident in their conclusions. Christopherson's act of will, an important element of Gissing's method of characterization throughout his fiction, allows him to overcome his addiction to books and perform his role as a husband. In contrast, Dunn is never pushed to a crisis, and the narrative leaves him in the same position in which readers initially find him. These divergent conclusions, I believe, point to stylistic differences in the stories, but they also reflect the

evolution of Gissing's thought on the topic of popular literacy during the 1890s. They provide the author with an opportunity to develop a theory, as Eliot does in *Daniel Deronda*, about the importance of the will in productive methods of reading.

Despite the recent surge of interest in nineteenth-century readers and the literature they consumed, the full extent of popular literacy's effect on Victorian culture has yet to be explored. While some studies focus only on marginalized groups of readers and others examine reading and writing merely as metaphorical tropes for the interaction between characters, the definitions of literacy skills established throughout a range of Victorian prose genres need to be more closely scrutinized. If, as we are led to believe by both Victorian and contemporary commentators, the emergence of popular education and mass literacy was such a defining characteristic of the nineteenth century, then it is essential that we come to an adequate understanding of what reading and writing meant to novelists, critics, and the common readers that made up their audience. My project merges criticism of novels with an analysis of the period's critical and popular discourse on literacy and the skills associated with it in order to show the complex relationship between these prose genres. In doing so, it outlines a new methodology and offers a more complete understanding of the power of Victorian literacy in its specific literary and historical context.

Chapter 1

What and How to Read I:

Models of Reading in Elementary Schools Before 1870

"If we of the present day go wrong in our choice [of books]," says an anonymous critic for the *Westminster Review* in 1886, "it is not for want of warning, for we are deluged with advice as to what books we should read, and how we should read them" (99).¹ In his review, entitled "What and How to Read," the writer surveys a variety of recent publications designed to provide Victorian readers with a framework for confronting the mass of printed matter available to them. Presented with a limited amount of leisure time and seemingly infinite possibilities when it came to the choice of reading material, the reader might naturally face a troubling intellectual dilemma. Add to this the tricks of the book-agent and what another reviewer calls "the apparatus devised in this cunning age for persuading [one] that his chaff is wheat" (Morse 1), and it is clear that the general or untrained reader is standing on uncertain ground.² How, he or she might naturally ask, is one to avoid the dangerous habit of falling into wasteful and unprofitable reading? How is one devoted to self-improvement, but possessed of only a scanty formal education, to make the best of the various resources for reading that are offered in the form of free libraries and inexpensive books? In short, how is one to find value in books and to cultivate an intellectually plausible system of reading?

In his survey of the books that profess to answer these questions, the *Westminster's* reviewer takes on several of the most popular works marketed as guides to readers aspiring to enter the higher orders of literary study. Each of these publications aimed, in its own way, to give the general or untrained reader a system for either reading or buying books in order to

¹ "What and How to Read," *Westminster Review* 126 (1886): 99-118.

² James Herbert Morse, "Leisure Reading," *The Critic and Good Literature* 5 (1884): 1-2.

ensure that reading material was both well selected and well read. Although their audiences may not have been identical, the guiding force behind each book reviewed was the recognition that Britain was becoming an increasingly literate nation, with new audiences emerging and previously established audiences growing. Popular though they were, these guides were only one means among many through which readers were educated in the proper methods of reading in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Other kinds of books also sought to propose definitions of reading and writing as distinct intellectual processes in the context of an increasingly literate nation, and it is my contention that the Victorian novel took part in this process of definition. However, before attempting to establish where and how the novel fits into the discourse on reading, writing, and education during the latter half of the nineteenth century, it is essential that we understand the true nature of those texts with which it was interacting. The first step towards establishing this historical and cultural context is to analyse the models of literacy put forward by elementary school primers and other books on the theory and practice of elementary education.

The first two chapters of this dissertation examine the models of reading and writing transmitted through Victorian schoolbooks and seek to determine how this transmission was carried out. In the present chapter, I will investigate primarily how reading was dealt with in educational discourse before the Education Act of 1870. I will show that the definitions of reading held by educators and authors of Victorian reading-books changed between the 1830s and the 1870s as they responded to a constantly evolving conception of what was required of popular education and to the realities of teaching a growing number of working-class children to read. While many early Victorian educators perpetuated a model of reading as a form of social and moral programming, an increasing number of reformers and authors in the 1860s began to see the ineffectiveness of reading-books and teaching methods designed on the basis

of this philosophy. Later authors and teachers understood that *interest* and *attention* were essential aspects of teaching children to read, and that school books would only interest children if they could create a desire to read and encourage a habit of reading. As a result, the focus of reading instruction shifted from moral instruction to intellectual instruction in the 1860s, so that by the 1880s “intelligence” and “expression” had taken the place that obedience and passivity had once held at the centre of the curriculum.

Although this discussion will focus on the readers used in the elementary schools that catered to working-class children, it is important to recognize that while they were sometimes employed in different ways, the books used to teach reading to middle-class children were not all that different. While the male children of the wealthy would often have been taught to read individually by a parent or a governess before heading off to a grammar school in their early teens, their first readers were often, like those of working-class children, “dreary, dog’s-eared, inhuman spelling-books which, with remorseless accuracy and terrible impartiality, taught [children] how to spell all the words from ‘dog’ and ‘cat’ up to ‘embarrassment’ and ‘unintelligibility’” (Farrar 447).³ Like teachers in the elementary schools, most parents and governesses would also have relied on a host of books and manuals to supplement their own limited educations in their attempts to instruct their charges (447). It is also possible that middle-class children would have used readers like this in a variety of privately run schools, which were coming to be known as secondary schools. While other kinds of books were available to these students, reading primers still maintained an important position in the reading instruction of the upper classes.

³ Rev. F.W. Farrar, “Learning to Read,” *Macmillan’s Magazine* 21 (1870): 445-8. In part, Farrar’s negative reaction to reading books serves the purpose of his article, which is intended to laud a new form of reader that he finds far superior to older forms. For more on the role of the governess as an educator of middle-class children, see Edward E. Gordon, “The Victorian Governess as Educator,” *Vitae Scholasticae* 8 (1989): 235-58.

Contextualizing School Books: The Variety of Victorian Schools for the Masses

Education is clearly the discipline in which reading, writing, and literacy were most central in the nineteenth century, so there is good reason to turn first to educational texts – and especially school-readers – in order to analyse the models of reading and writing that they constructed. As a writer for the Victorian educational journal *The Teacher's Aid* explains in a review of one series of readers at the turn of the twentieth century, “no other book in the student's outfit is so universally used as the reading-book. Everyday, from the lowest class to the highest, it is in constant requisition for a greater or lesser period of the session.”⁴ While these readers were employed in a variety of educational situations in the nineteenth century, they took their most central role in the schools that educated the children of the working class, as children of the wealthy had access to a wider variety of texts.⁵ In his study of elementary school readers in late-Victorian and Edwardian schools, Stephen Heathorn makes a case for the centrality of these texts in the future reading lives of the students who used them, arguing that “readers were often the first books that most working-class children read, and so they formed the basis of all future reading” (9).⁶ Heathorn's aim is to show that ideologies of nation, class, race, and gender were easily transmitted through these readers, providing a “lexicon for the development of personal and collective identity” (9), alongside the ability to read and write. In fact, educational authorities and the authors of school-readers counted on

⁴ Quoted in the front matter of George Matthews' *Class-Work in English: Book 1* (London and Edinburgh: T.C. and E.C. Jack, 1904). *The Teacher's Aid* was published in London, beginning in 1885, and aimed to provide assistance to teachers in their schools and in their private studies.

⁵ According to Alec Ellis's *Educating Our Masters: Influences on the Growth of Literacy in Victorian Working-Class Children* (Aldershot: Gower, 1985), common examples of books used to educate middle-class children in the early Victorian period included Mangall's *Historical and Miscellaneous Questions*, Darton and Harvey's *The Decoy of English Grammar*, Mrs. Ward's *Child's Guide to Knowledge*, and Mrs. Marcet's *Conversations on Chemistry, The Seasons*, and *Willy's Grammar*. Each of these publications ran into several editions (103). By the 1880s, working-class children in government-funded Board Schools would also have access to other subjects (such as History and Geography), although the vast majority of students continued to use readers.

⁶ Stephen J. Heathorn, *For Home, Country, and Race: Constructing Gender, Class, and Englishness in the Elementary School, 1880-1914* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2000).

the easy transmission of ideas in these books, and readers were often used in the early Victorian period to train working-class children “to accept their lowly position in life” (Goldstrom 11).⁷ In addition to inculcating this form of passive acceptance of working-class circumstance, readers commonly emphasized the importance of cleanliness, tolerance, and diligence (Heathorn 9).⁸

An analysis of early nineteenth-century schoolbooks suggests that, from the turn of the century into at least the 1840s, this model of moral inculcation was the chief goal of the books used to teach working-class children, and the techniques used to develop the intellectual skills of reading and writing in these works were often no more than an afterthought. Thus, in the words of an elementary teaching manual published in 1816 by the British and Foreign Schools Society (one of the societies that began receiving state funding for education in 1833), popular elementary education as a whole, with reading instruction forming a major part, was desirable because it gave children “clear notions of the moral and social duties, [prepared] them for the reception of religious instruction, [formed] them to habits of virtue, and [habituated] them to subordination and control” (vii).⁹ Whether or not elementary texts were capable of the morally and socially transformative feats that early Victorian educators ascribed to them is a question too large to address here, but if we accept Heathorn’s claim for the centrality of readers in students’ lives, and if it is true that the ideological and moral content of these readers could have a lasting impact on students, then it is likely that the models of reading and writing that these books proposed would also colour all future reading and writing experiences.

⁷ J.M. Goldstrom, *The Social Content of Education, 1808-1870: A Study of the Working-Class School Reader in England and Ireland* (Shannon, Ireland: Ireland UP, 1972).

⁸ Cf. Goldstrom 92-5 and Heathorn 7-12. Both writers cite Henry Dunn and John Thomas Crossley’s *Daily Lesson Book for the Use of Schools and Families*, 4 vols. (London: British & Foreign School Society, 1840-2) as an example of the kind of book aimed at such inculcation.

⁹ *Manual for the System of the British and Foreign School Society of London, for Teaching Reading, Writing, Arithmetic and Needlework in the Elementary Schools* (London: Longman & Co., 1816).

Understanding how models of reading and writing were conveyed through schoolbooks requires an idea of the educational context in which such books were used. This context is best explained through a brief review of Victorian schools and their mandates. While the options for middle-class schooling in the Victorian period were numerous, they were in no way as various or diverse as the educational situations faced by the children of the working class. Because there were so many types of schools for these children, the readers used in schools were employed in many different ways. In fact, David Vincent claims that “the most striking characteristic of the procedures adopted to teach children their letters up to the imposition of universal and compulsory elementary education between 1870 and 1880 was the sheer variety” (67).¹⁰ For instance, children who never attended school at all might still have learned how to read through the instruction of a relative or neighbour in their community. Here, the cheaper editions of reading and spelling books produced originally for a domestic middle-class market could be used. Outside the home, there was also a wide assortment of schools for working-class parents to choose from before the arrival of Forster’s 1870 Education Act, which standardized schools and sought to compel children to attend them. At the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, for instance, it was common for the children of labourers to attend charity schools; in this case, the children of the community who were deemed “deserving” were boarded at, or attended daily, a school “financed and managed entirely by local beneficence and effort,” often supervised by the tradesmen and clergy of a community (Sutherland 4-5).¹¹ Sunday Schools also provided an opportunity for working-class children to learn to read – and read only, as voluntary schools such as these and the charity schools seldom taught the related skills of writing and arithmetic

¹⁰ David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993).

¹¹ Gillian Sutherland, *Elementary Education in the Nineteenth Century* (London: The Historical Association, 1971).

(Vincent 72). Another form of private, voluntary school was the Dame school, where children would be left for the day, often with “men and women who had either failed to hold down any other job, or who combined teaching with a whole host of other parish odd-jobs” (Sutherland 12). While some of these may have been run well, most historians suggest that the conditions in the schools were as deplorable as the education that children who attended them received.¹²

Another popular option for schooling in the early-nineteenth century was the Church schools run on the monitorial system devised independently by Andrew Bell and Joseph Lancaster. Here, teachers would instruct older pupils who would, in turn, instruct the younger ones so that hundreds of children could be “educated” by only one instructor, using only a few reading books. The basic process in these schools was the decomposition of language into small pieces that, it was believed, could be learned more easily. The technical nature of this instruction required the use of primers, but not many were needed as the basis of the system was that one primer could sustain a large group of children under one monitor (Vincent 75). Though some educators continued to see the benefits of the monitorial system well into the middle of the century,¹³ these schools had declined in favour as early as the 1830s and would eventually disappear completely.¹⁴ By this time, the independent charity schools that were so common in the eighteenth century began to see increased competition from schools run by the National and British and Foreign Schools Societies. The monetary aid for schools offered for the first time by the Whig government in 1833 was channelled through these groups, with the

¹² Cf. Vincent 69-70 and Altick 149. For more on the voluntary schools and their continued work alongside state-funded schools throughout the Victorian period, see Phil Gardner’s *The Lost Elementary Schools of Victorian England* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

¹³ See George White’s comments in his *A Simultaneous Method of Teaching to Read* (London: Houlston & Wright, 1862). White finds the monitorial system useful, efficient, and powerful, and claims that it failed chiefly because the supply of monitorial agents failed. The system, he claims, “became unpopular in practice, notwithstanding it continued to be meritorious in principle” (19).

¹⁴ It is interesting to note, however, that Matthew Arnold (in his capacity as an inspector of schools) refers to a few establishments still using the monitorial system in his 1852 Report on Elementary Schools. See Gillian Sutherland, *Matthew Arnold on Education* (London: Penguin, 1973) 24.

state-sanctioned Anglican Church represented by the National School Society and Dissenting interests represented by the British and Foreign School Society. In 1839 the state began to supervise the work done by these schools through inspections. Attendance at National and British schools increased steadily over the century, but attendance remained officially voluntary until the late-Victorian period, when the government established local school boards to facilitate the provision of education, which led to the construction of additional schools across the country.

Uses of Readers and the Philosophy of Reading Instruction Before the 1860s

The books used to teach children to read in homes and elementary schools across Britain underwent as many transformations during the Victorian period as the schools in which they were used. These changes came in response to constantly evolving pedagogical theories and new ideas about what exactly children needed to be taught. It has become a commonplace now to say that in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries the perceived primary role of popular education was to keep the masses from becoming disorderly, and that education by the state and the state-sanctioned church was thought to prevent revolutionary ideals from taking hold (Altick 141-2).¹⁵ David Mitch ties this supposed social role of education directly to the acts of reading and writing, pointing out that the aims of literacy have always been dependent on the historical moment. If elementary education came to be seen as a means of “instilling socially desirable behaviour” in working-class children during times of unrest, it was because “the discipline involved in decoding the printed page and wielding a pen” was seen as somehow “conducive to orderly social behavior” (Mitch

¹⁵ Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1957). Cf. Goldstrom 9-10.

xx).¹⁶ Thus, in the first three decades of the nineteenth century, in the wake of foreign revolutions and domestic unrest, arguments for literacy as a politically and socially stabilizing force were common; these arguments were revisited in the wake of Chartist uprisings in the 1830s and '40s.¹⁷

Although widespread, this view of education's role was far from universal, and some critics of popular education believed that popular was dangerous. In fact, reading instruction was one of the most disputed aspects of popular education at the beginning of the nineteenth century because for a literate member of the working-class, reading sedition and atheism was just as easy as reading scripture (Altick 144). Later in the century, when violent revolution ceased to be as present an anxiety as it had once been, other concerns about the role of education in reading and writing were voiced. For instance, Patrick Brantlinger has shown that instead of political dissent, other social problems were linked to education. In his discussion of Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and its representation of a group of literate criminals, Brantlinger argues that early Victorians saw the possibility that some education in reading and writing could turn children into criminals. Statistical evidence concerning the presence of education in the backgrounds of prisoners was used to fuel the debate over this connection (72-3).¹⁸

These undercurrents of distrust in the debate on literacy and education remained undercurrents, however, and the changes to elementary education initiated by the state, the church, and a variety of other public groups show that many in power embraced the belief that

¹⁶ David F. Mitch, *The Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England: The Influence of Private Choice and Public Policy* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1992).

¹⁷ Altick claims, "what the moral-force Chartists proposed, certain middle-class humanitarians, after 1848, tried to achieve," and "the campaign to educate the adult worker ... set off in new directions" (208). Cf. Vincent 83, 85-6.

¹⁸ Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1998).

the achievement of popular literacy was a distinct sign of national progress.¹⁹ David Mitch has shown, as well, that the drive towards working-class literacy was not simply a top down affair, the product of active members of the middle and upper classes devising educational policies for a largely passive working class. Instead, he argues, there is evidence that throughout the Victorian period “the demand of the working classes for education was growing independently of public educational policies” (Mitch xiv). Although these parties had different goals in mind, the eventual result of a push for mass literacy from both public and private groups was an increased number of children in schools and a corresponding increase in the production and availability of literature to teach them, because while verbal instruction, whether in the home or in a school, might yield a degree of progress in reading and writing, printed material was eventually necessary. While it is true that in many working-class homes and day schools in the early-nineteenth century almost any kind of writing – books, tracts, and newspapers – could and would be used to teach children how to read, books designed especially for reading and writing instruction had been available for over a hundred years. Many of these books were priced low enough to be affordable to some working-class families, but not all were necessarily relevant to the educational needs of working-class children (Ellis 103).

Just what kinds of books were used in the schools that taught working-class children, and what does their use tell us about the definitions of reading that educators held? Initially, the emphasis on moral and religious instruction in schools of the early Victorian period resulted in the frequent use of the Bible as a reading text. This was true both of privately run

¹⁹ In her *Reading Lives: Reconstructing Childhood, Books, and Schools in Britain, 1870-1920* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997), Gretchen Galbraith claims that while “the French Revolution, English radicalism, and industrialization had left upper-class opinion divided as to whether the ability to read was a dangerous tool in the hands of the masses or an instrument that could be used to shape their morals, and thus their actions ... the Evangelical vision of education as a vehicle for inculcating morality and combating worker unrest won the day” (86).

schools and of schools subsidized by public funds. Ellis claims that, prior to 1850, it was normal for secular schools to use the Bible because “a well-bound and printed copy of the New Testament” could be acquired from the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge for one-third the price of one of the Society’s primers (112-13).²⁰ By using a book as complex in its language and syntax as the Bible, early educators show that they saw the process of learning to read as little more than a process of memorization, as if simply learning the symbols for words through constant repetition would instill a sense of the technical workings of the English language in the minds of students. Even if such methods were successful in teaching reading, the overall benefit was doubtful, and according to at least one Victorian commentator on education, the result of beginning reading instruction with the Bible was that “the power to read is gained at the cost of the desire to read” (qtd. in Graff 390).²¹

Books that incorporated biblical extracts were also used frequently in nineteenth-century schools. Vincent points out that many Biblical readers moved from “the alphabet and basic syllables to the most arcane regions of the English language,” the result of which was that learning to read meant “doing battle with sentences such as ‘and the names of Joktan’s sons were Almodad, Sheleph, Hazarmareth, Jerah, Hadoram, Uzal, Diklah, Obal, Abimael, Sheba, Ophir, Havilah and Johab’” (Vincent 78).²² Biblical material might have been difficult for children to understand, and it may have been more conducive to a method of instruction based on memorization and rote-learning than real comprehension, but the advantages of using the Bible as a reading text – the lack of expense and the perceived moral and religious

²⁰ The price difference apparently occurred because “the rules of the Society forbade the allowance of discounts on secular books, but they were available for Bibles and other works of a religious character” (112-13).

²¹ Harvey J Graff, “Exaggerated Estimates of Reading and Writing as Means of Education (1867), by W.B. Hodgson,” *History of Education Quarterly* 26 (1986): 377-93.

²² Vincent is referring here to Sarah Trimmer’s *Charity School Spelling Book*, 9th ed. (London: F.C. and J. Rivington, 1805).

influence – ensured that extracts from the Bible could still be used to teach reading in schools even after the educational reforms of the 1870s (Ellis 113).

As the nineteenth century progressed, teaching methods gradually began to take precedence over moral and religious instruction in elementary schools, and secular books were used more often to teach reading and writing. The pressure generated by an increasing pool of students (due in large part to a rapidly growing population) “forced attention on the techniques of acquiring the skills of reading and writing on which the wider ambitions of the elementary schools depended” (Vincent 76). This new attention to technique, in turn, led to the production of elementary school primers that used a variety of new methods to teach children how to read and write. Although the methods employed by these texts evolved over the course of the nineteenth century, it is possible to discern trends at various stages in this development. While the attention to technique that Vincent notes is present in some of these texts early in the Victorian period, noticeable improvement to readers did not begin until after the 1850s. As a result, many readers produced in the first decades of the period were not all that different from readers that were popular since the early eighteenth century. Many books were still composed based on the same understanding of reading that led to the use of the Bible as an instructional source for reading. The authors who wrote them and the instructors who used them believed that reading could be taught through the repeated study of words, no matter how difficult or esoteric these words were. Purely by mechanical practice and repetition children were thought to be able to translate printed symbols into their spoken equivalents, and comprehension was rarely considered (Altick 151). Some early readers were structured according to topics rather than according to a graduation of reading difficulty, making them as difficult to read, much less to comprehend, as the Bible.

Neil Leitch's *Juvenile Reader* (1852), which was listed by the Committee of Council on Education (and thus approved for use in government-funded elementary schools), is a good example of such poorly planned readers. The following passage, originally taken from Oliver Goldsmith's *A History of the Earth and Animated Nature* (1774), is an extract from Leitch's book and intended for young children learning to read:

The universe may be considered as the place in which the Deity resides; and the earth as one of its apartments. We behold an immense and shapeless mass of matter, formed into worlds by his power, and placed at distances to which even imagination cannot travel. In this great theatre of his glory, millions of suns like our own bright luminary, fixed in the centre of its system, wheeling its planets in times proportioned to their distances, and at once dispersing light, heat, and action . . . (qtd. in Ellis 104) ²³

Even if we disregard how difficult it would be for children still only newly acquainted with written language to understand how to translate the letters in words such as "proportioned," "light," "millions," and "theatre" into their oral equivalents (because of the irregularities of English pronunciation), it is unlikely that any child from a working-class home would have ever heard words such as "luminary," "shapeless," or "dispersing" spoken in their domestic environments, especially if their own parents were barely literate themselves. What is absent in a primer such as Leitch's, in contrast to those that would be produced later on, is a system of graduated steps towards more complex words and sentences. Also absent is a notion of the importance of inculcating interest in children who were only now becoming accustomed to the form of sustained thought called for by interaction with the printed word. As a sign of the

²³ Neal Leitch, *The Juvenile Reader: Consisting of Religious, Moral and Intellectual Instruction; Exercises in Spelling ... and an Appendix Containing Select Pieces for Recitation, etc.* (Glasgow: John Burnet, 1852).

prevalence of such readers well into the Victorian period, Leitch's reader was still being printed in 1852, at which point it was in its seventy-fifth thousand.²⁴

While Leitch's reader and others like it were popular at the beginning of the Victorian period, other books that recognized the benefits of some form of graduated system of instruction were also in use, though the methods of graduation they employed were sometimes ineffective. Like the other methods already discussed, instruction through the use of these graduated readers also had a long history and stretched back to well before the beginning of the Victorian period. In many of these books, the English language was decomposed into what was thought to be its essential and constituent parts, beginning with sets of unmeaning, one syllable sounds ("ba ab ca ac") through to lists of monosyllabic words and, eventually, sentences of a "relentlessly spiritual or moral character" composed of these words; the process was then repeated for words of two to seven syllables (Vincent 76-7).²⁵ That most children, regardless of their social position, would never have an opportunity to say a seven-syllable word, much less read or write one, was not taken into consideration by authors. Words were thought difficult to read if they were long, and, as a result, the graduation used in these readers was exclusively syllabic; thus, the highest attainment such readers could offer was that of being able to read and spell massive words. As later authors and educators realized, however, because of the eccentricities of English pronunciation and spelling, some one- or two-syllable words can be far more difficult for a beginner to read than some words of six or seven syllables. Authors and publishers of early-Victorian primers clearly held a *quantity* theory of reading rather than a *quality* theory.

²⁴ The earliest edition of Leitch's book I can find is one published in 1839 by A. Lottimer in Glasgow. A note on this edition says that the book is in its sixth thousand, placing its original publication several years earlier.

²⁵ Vincent cites Henry Innes' *The British Child's Spelling Book* (1835), and C.W. Johnson's *The English Rural Spelling Book* (1846) as examples of this form of reader.

The Pedagogical Goals of Early Victorian Readers

Although most critics would now agree with a number of late-Victorian educators that the earliest graduated readers were a hindrance rather than an aid to learning, the method of reading that they engendered interacted conveniently with the definitions of reading and its purpose held by a number of Victorian educators. From the monitorial schools of the early-nineteenth century to the schools run on public funds later in the Victorian period, the classrooms that used these readers employed oral instruction as their chief means of teaching. Altick claims that in pre-Victorian schools, “no provision was made for silent reading” (152) and Vincent refers to the comments of F.H. Spencer, who began his schooling in the late 1870s and recalled, “we read nothing silently in school, for amusement or information” (Spencer 51).²⁶ In part, the books that were used by students in Victorian schools contributed to this method of instruction; the lists of sounds (to start) and words (later on) called for oral repetition and interrogation. Thus, students were forced to fit themselves into a systematic process of communal chanting or of question and answer.²⁷ Not surprisingly, learning to read in this manner had a great potential to become dull and mechanical. When books such as those described above were used in the schools that employed the monitorial system, “words were read out to the monitors, who spelt them aloud as they wrote them down, and then each monitor repeated the words to the class, who in turn pronounced them as they inscribed them on slates or sand trays” (Vincent 79). Readers composed on the principal of syllabic

²⁶ Frederick Herbert Spencer, *An Inspector's Testament* (London: English Universities Press, 1938). According to Galbraith, the mixture of literacy and orality was a social feature well into the late-Victorian period as well: “Certainly, in late nineteenth-century Britain there was no clear break between orality and literacy, but instead a mix of the two within individual life-cycles and in families and communities Ultimately, literacy must be placed in historical context and viewed as a social practice connected to other social practices, institutions, and power structures” (Galbraith 3).

²⁷ Vincent attributes this method to the “experience the Church had gained over the centuries in transmitting the tenets of Christianity to illiterate and semi-literate parishioners Pupils were catechised in their letters and as they became proficient were set to memorize the Catechism itself” (79). For more on the role of oral instruction and interrogation, see Henry Dunn’s *Principles of Teaching; or, The Normal School Manual* (London: Sunday School Union and Hamilton, Adams, & Co., 1837) 81-3.

graduation persisted in many schools, even though new types of readers, considered by many to be superior in their attempts to interest children and their use of different methods of graduation, were produced in the latter decades of the century. In addition, even where newer books were used, the systematic oral method of instruction that the earlier readers contributed to continued to be a major facet of elementary school instruction. Gretchen Galbraith notes in her study of elementary education in the latter decades of the Victorian period, for instance, that many school inspectors complained that while reading was often considered to be the most vital elementary subject in the 1860s, it

received the least attention with regard to teaching methods. Teachers were trained to get children to pass exams, not to develop their powers of observation and reasoning. Teaching methods were ‘defective’ or non-existent, and lessons became a dull grind: books were distributed, the first boy read the first line, had his pronunciation corrected, then the second boy read, and so on, without the words ever being explained in a way calculated to arouse the children's interest. (125)

When later additions to the nation's educational policies introduced systematic, individual oral examinations (which determined the amount of money the school would receive from the government), the possibility of silent study was even further distanced from the elementary school experience, at least initially.

It is not difficult to see how well the attitudes about reading as a regulatory instrument of social order interacted with the reading books of the early Victorian period and the methods of classroom instruction with which they coexisted. Historians of Victorian education often associate learning to read with a “context of enjoyment,” believing that this connection of reading with pleasure can facilitate acquisition of the skill (Altick 149). Without some sense that a skill such as reading could provide solitary relief from the labour and struggle of the

day, it is unlikely that working-class children taught to read in Victorian schools would ever practice what little skill they acquired in order to become readers. The communal chanting of lists of sounds and words, the constant interrogation concerning every aspect of the lessons, and the repetition of moralizing phrases did not provide such an environment, but at least they kept the children busy and out of trouble. With these processes as a basis, school reading for working-class children looks like a not-so-subtle form of indoctrination rather than a form of intellectual education. Indeed, Vincent argues that many aspects of the education of working-class children in the early nineteenth century were part of a program to distance the child from the “domestic curriculum,” the body of knowledge they learned from their family and community before they entered school (55).

The use of the Bible and readers comprised of Biblical extracts and moralizing tales was part of the ambition of the early Church schools to dismantle “the process of cultural transmission which took place in the homes of the laboring poor, and replace it with a self-sufficient body of values, information and cognitive skills” (Altick 92). In pursuit of this greater goal, it is remarkable how quickly some early readers would jump from simple sounds and one-syllable words into moralizing phrases thought to be improving. For instance, the first of a series of five readers compiled and published by the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland in 1842 (*The First Book of Lessons*) begins with a lesson that contains ten letters of the alphabet and a selection of phrases composed of two-letter words created from those letters: “an ox, my ox, is it an ox? / it is, is it? it is my ox” (6).²⁸ Only five pages later, however, another lesson begins with slightly more complex sentences (“I can get a wax doll, and a cap”) before finishing with two statements of moral truth, printed in italics to set them off from the rest: “*If I sin, I am bad. / Let me not sin, as bad men do*” (11). Other books

²⁸*First Book of Lessons for the Use of Schools* (Dublin: Commissioners of National Education, 1842).

in the series show further signs of what Ellis calls a devotion to “middle class views of the ideal workman and the benefits he would derive from a life of industry and thrift” (Ellis 105).

The manner in which such readers were used in the classroom is evidence that the belief David Mitch has associated with the early-nineteenth century, that the act of decoding a page could instill “orderly social behavior” in working-class students, continued to be a common one well into the Victorian period. The sound produced by a chorus of children from the laboring classes chanting about their desire to keep from sin must have been reassuring to those who taught them. As well, while silent and solitary reading might have allowed for a degree of intellectual freedom, in the sense that students would be able to work at their own pace and to interpret individually the phrases and sentences they read, perhaps even finding pleasure in their own individual readings, oral instruction and interrogation encouraged an extremely limited interpretation of each phrase and passage. The ability for a child learning to read and to reflect on the meaning of what he or she had read was eliminated by “the constant, nagging necessity of parsing, explaining derivations, searching a desperate memory for a fixed definition of this word and that, a definition modified at the pupil’s peril” (Altick 151). The readers used in Victorian schools contributed greatly to this model of reading.

Books which were unsuitable for young children because of the complexity or dullness of their content or because of the mechanical method they relied on to teach reading were especially abundant throughout the 1840s and 1850s. This fact is evident from statements of school inspectors sent out by the Committee of Council on Education to assess the quality of instruction in the schools funded by the government. While many readers were considered by inspectors to be “ill adapted to [the child’s] state of mind” because of the complexity of the words and phrases that they used to teach reading or because of the aridity of their content, others contained a large number of errors (Ellis 106-7). To those involved in education in the

middle years of the century, it sometimes appeared that the Revised Code of 1862, with its focus on the three R's (with reading in the most prominent position), contributed to the mechanical nature of instruction. At times, it seemed, the Code encouraged teachers "to cram pupils narrowly for their examinations," because the government's school subsidies were partially tied to the test results of the school's students (Rose 149).²⁹ Thus, the model of reading as a form of rote learning encouraged by early Victorian school readers seems to have persisted in some schools. In addition, reading as a process of memorization also endured, and there are anecdotal accounts of students dropping the book or sheet they were reading in the midst of an examination by a government inspector and carrying on unperturbed.³⁰ At the same time, however, there is also evidence to suggest that ideas about the ultimate ends of literacy and definition of reading were changing throughout the 1860s, and the new interest in the techniques of reading instruction that Vincent attributes to the Victorian period really become evident after the adoption of the Revised Code, even if they were not the direct result of the Code itself.

Mid-Century Changes in Models of Reading and the Role of Matthew Arnold

Several new assumptions about reading, learned in part from the lack of real progress in increasing national literacy levels throughout the 1840s and 1850s, began to feature more prominently in readers during the late 1860s and the 1870s. As Vincent notes, by the end of the 1850s, it was becoming increasingly clear that the schools funded by the government were "failing to overcome the influence of the parents of working-class children," and that changes

²⁹ Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Class* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2001).

³⁰ In his *Short History of English Schools* (Hove, England: Wayland, 1979), Christopher Martin describes some of the forms of fraud used by teachers to increase the number of passes recorded by inspectors: "Test problems were passed from school to school. Secret signals (hands in pockets = multiply; hands behind back = subtract) told the pupils what to do. Pupils continued to "read" when they dropped the book or held it upside down" (50).

had to be made to the tools used to teach reading and writing if progress was to be made. The result was that, “very gradually . . . the inspected schools began to turn their sails to catch the interest of the children who seemed to be gaining so little from their efforts” (84). Taking their lessons from the shortcomings of the past decades, educators and publishers began to perceive that creating *a desire to read* was essential if reading instruction was to benefit children and if the act of reading was to become a habit. The perceived need to form such a habit became more and more pressing as surveys showed that many labourers who learned to read early in the century had almost completely lost the ability because they ceased to read once they left school. Contemporary accounts from the early 1860s support Vincent’s claims for a new preoccupation with the child’s interest in his or her studies. For instance, primary school teacher and author George White claims in his 1862 volume, *A Simultaneous Method of Teaching to Read*, that “school inspectors and others, who, either from inclination or duty, are brought into contact with the children of the working classes, during the school period and that immediately succeeding it, are not uniformly favorable in their testimony to the efficiency of the methods employed.” “It is to be feared,” White goes on, “that there may be found numbers of children who, having attended primary school even for years, are still unable to read an easy book” (3-4).³¹ How, then, could these children be expected to read their Bibles?

Well aware of the problem of diminishing results, the educational reformer W.B. Hodgson emphasized the need for less mechanical instruction and for more enjoyable selections of readers and teaching methods in the 1860s. In a speech entitled “Exaggerated Estimates of Reading and Writing as Means of Education,” presented to the Social Science Association in Belfast, 1867, Hodgson discusses many of the most immediate problems facing popular education in that decade. For instance, he questions the early Victorian assumptions

³¹ Cf. Matthew Arnold, “The Twice Revised Code,” *Matthew Arnold and the Education of the New Order*, eds. Peter Smith and Geoffrey Summerfield (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969) 161-2.

about elementary education, including the value of reading and writing as activities in themselves and the extent to which illiteracy was productive of crime. Although his major finding is that reading and writing should not be considered all the education afforded to the children of the masses, he also has much to say about popular attitudes towards reading. Speaking metaphorically, he refers to the practices of reading and writing as “the plough and harrow” of education, tools for planting and harvesting a “crop” of knowledge, and to be clearly distinguished from the crop itself (qtd. in Graff 386). In Hodgson’s words, the power that these tools create “often rusts unused, if it is not wholly lost, through neglect and apathy after leaving school. The attainments are not usually carried far enough to render their use either easy or pleasant, and the power gradually decays” (386). In this model, literacy is not an end in itself, and it can only be used to attain truly useful intellectual and moral aims if those taught to read find the activity pleasing and easy enough to make it a habit.

Although he may have stood out for his scepticism about the value of reading and writing, Hodgson was not alone in his views about the need for different kinds of school readers and for a more interesting form of education in general. Others involved in education, including Matthew Arnold, also espoused a model of elementary education that placed new emphasis on interest and enjoyment instead of repetitive moral and linguistic programming. Arnold is an important figure in any discussion of mid-nineteenth century educational policies because he dealt with the education and the improvement of society on two different levels: firstly, in a practical capacity as one of Her Majesty’s elementary school inspectors, and, secondly, in a more abstract capacity as a critic of literature and of modern culture. He defined the objectives of this latter, critical role most clearly in two of his major works of the 1860s, “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” (1865) and *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). Although it has been argued that Matthew Arnold’s main interest in education was with the

education of the middle-class,³² a class that he believed needed to be better instructed in order to reform and lead the nation, he also had much to say about the state of elementary education in the middle decades of the 1860s. There is, in fact, a clear and sturdy bridge between Arnold's work as a school inspector and his work as a cultural critic. Fred Walcott argues, for instance, that the origins of *Culture and Anarchy* can be traced back "to the professional thinking of the assistant commissioner and the lay inspector of schools" (57).³³ It is also possible to see the increasing concerns about the value of reading and writing instruction and the changing perceptions regarding the requirements of education as closely related to the notions of culture and civilization, and to the role of criticism that Arnold put forward in the essays he wrote in the 1860s.

Arnold began his thirty-five year career as an inspector of schools in 1851, after being helped into the position by Lord Lansdowne, to whom he was already acting as secretary. His first direct experience of the schools, therefore, came at a time well before the introduction of the Revised Code and the system of "payment by results" that it initiated (against which Arnold was to protest so vigorously). Again, the early 1850s marked a low point for reading instruction and for the books used to educate children in the skills of literacy. Although the drive to educate the masses was growing as the country's population was exploding, overall expectations for popular education were still low. Walcott argues that for much of the period "education of the lower orders had, in the popular mind, a status equivalent to other charitable projects" (6). Thus, popular education was still seen very much as a local concern, and it

³² In *Matthew Arnold on Education*, Gillian Sutherland claims that "the most important aspect of his work as an inspector was that it engendered a preoccupation with the schools he was not allowed to inspect," - the secondary schools (9).

³³ Fred G. Walcott, *The Origins of Culture and Anarchy: Matthew Arnold and Popular Education in England* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1970). Recognizing that such a categorical statement requires some justification, Walcott explains that Arnold's thought process was one which always showed evidence of "the constant recurrence of salient strands" so that concepts and illustrations reappear again and again in his prose, from the Prefaces, to the Oxford Lectures, to *Culture and Anarchy*, and beyond (57-8).

lacked the national focus and sense of innovation that it was to come to possess in the decades to come. In large part, it was this limited vision and resistance to government intervention that angered Arnold so much over the course of his career as an inspector, and he was often disheartened by the reluctance amongst the middle-class men and women involved in education to allow the state to manage the nation's educational resources.³⁴

By the end of his first decade of inspection, Arnold was beginning to show more and more dissatisfaction with the state of reading instruction as well, especially when it came to the tools that teachers used to instill literacy in their pupils. For instance, in his 1860 *Report on Elementary Schools*, Arnold thought it necessary to voice his concerns over the content of the primers he saw being used in his districts. Having experienced first hand the dry and mechanical methods of instruction that these readers employed, Arnold argued that the best way to inspire a love of reading in young scholars was by "animating and moving them" with interesting, literary selections in reading books, instead of "treatises on the atmosphere, the steam-engine, the pump" (88).³⁵ It is essential, he argues, that the content of the children's readers be of a superior quality because in "many cases [the child's] reading-book forms the whole of literature, except his Bible" while he is attending elementary school; it must, therefore provide real, "humanizing" literature and foster a desire to read the best that is offered (87). As the situation stood, the readers that Arnold became acquainted with were full of bad literature, which would do more harm than good to children. Made up of "dry scientific disquisitions, and literary compositions of an inferior order" (87), these books that were the

³⁴ Walcott points to statements made in Arnold's 1857 school report, in which he decries the rural petitioners that hope to maintain their school system solely on voluntary local effort. For Walcott, Arnold's comments show "his mistrust of the Philistine spirit of independence and its supporting claptrap, his insistence on the national establishment of schools for the rising middle class as the only hope of humanizing their harsh augmenting of political control, and his recognition of the ancillary need to develop a truly national system if education were ever to become universal" (15).

³⁵ Matthew Arnold, Francis Richard Sandford, and John Sandford, *Reports on Elementary Schools, 1852-1882* (London: Macmillan, 1889). George White's comments also speak to this concern: "Reading must be made a pleasant exercise before we can reasonably expect it to be productive of educational advantage" (5).

only means of forming the taste of poor scholars were, in fact, spoiling their collective taste (87).

In Arnold's insistence that the literature used to teach children be "humanizing," we see a clear connection between his attitudes towards the education of the lower orders and his more widely circulated cultural criticism. In essence, the basis of Arnold's humanism lies in his belief in the perfectibility of men and women, and through these men and women, the perfectibility of the nation as a whole. Education plays a major role in these attempts at perfection. In "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," for instance, Arnold claims that the critical spirit improves the nation and prepares it for moments of great creative powers by providing a "nationally diffused life and thought" (8).³⁶ The men and women of the nation may be perfected and humanized by their execution of the critical spirit, a curiosity or "free play of the mind on all subjects" (15) and, most importantly, a desire "to know the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics, and everything of the kind" (16). Readers and lessons that require mechanical recitation of mere facts about weather and industrial machines, or even moral axioms, will never inspire curiosity and, therefore, never contribute to the perfection or humanity of the working-class children who read them.

Other statements Arnold makes in his school reports provide further evidence of his belief that members of both the working class and the middle class might profitably take part in the process of civilization and improvement necessary to advance the position of the English nation.³⁷ In his 1855 report, for example, he finds that the simple physical environment of a school, especially in depressed areas, tends to act with a "civilizing" and

³⁶ Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," *Selections from the Prose Writings of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Lewis Gates (New York: Henry Holt, 1898) 1-39.

³⁷ Galbraith contends that Arnold's comments on education are a complex mixture of conservative and egalitarian attitudes. While his desire to "humanise" students was "born of his fear of mob rule following the extension of the franchise in 1866," his writings "also contained an egalitarianism in that he presented universal access to good education and ideas as a right, a contention denied by most conservatives" (123).

“humanizing force” on the class that dwell in that area (48). Although in works such as *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold tends to dwell on the importance of a new, culturally revitalized middle class in the improvement of English society, his ultimate vision was more democratic than this, envisioning as it did “the ultimate self-realization of all men through the power of human expansion within a milieu made favorable to human growth” (Walcott 113).³⁸ There is a distinction to be made here between the *political* ideal of Arnold’s message, which looked to new national leadership from a middle class that would no longer be merely self-seeking and self-satisfied, and its *intellectual* ideal, in which the author foresaw the need for the continued intellectual and moral improvement of *all* parts of society.

In essence then, Arnold’s notion of culture and its power is democratic in that it foresees the fusion of men and women belonging to different social classes through a process of cultural assimilation. While his comments on elementary school readers, recorded above, were made well before the passing of the Second Reform Bill, it is not hard to see how they reflect the concerns that surrounded the debate about the extension of the franchise, which Arnold and many others were astute enough to see coming.³⁹ After the passing of the Reform Bill, he was even more explicit in his claims that every class of British society needed to be improved and humanized. In *Culture and Anarchy*, for instance, he argues that the right for the working class to vote will be useless without their having been initiated into the realm of culture. As the middle classes are told to be satisfied, proud, and uncritical about their accomplishments, and told that they should be proud of what they have built with their

³⁸ See also Arnold’s comments to his mother in a letter he wrote to her in 1861, while the Revised Code was being debated. Believing (wrongly) that the tide was turning against Lowe and others who supported a system of payment by results and a reduction in the variety of education in elementary schools, Arnold was pleased that more public figures were coming around to his belief “that the State has an interest in the primary school as a *civilizing* agent, even prior to its interest in it as an *instructing* agent” (qtd. in Walcott 79).

³⁹ See, for instance, Arnold’s comments in a letter to his wife in 1851, shortly after he had taken his position as inspector: “I think I should get interested in the schools after a little time; their effects on the children are so immense, and their future effects in civilizing the next generation of the lower classes, who, as things are going, will have most of the political power of the country in their hands, may be so important” (qtd. in Walcott 4-5).

“energy, self-reliance, and capital,” “democracy” (or the working classes) are told that they have accomplished all with “their hands and sinews” (180).⁴⁰ For Arnold, however, to teach democracy to put trust in these kinds of achievements is merely to train them to be Philistines, and “to take the place of the Philistines whom they were superseding” (180).

The result of this pride in material achievements and satisfaction with the status quo, Arnold feels, is that like the Philistine middle class, the working class “will be encouraged to sit down at the banquet of the future without having on a wedding garment, and nothing excellent can then come from them” (180). However, if democracy can comprehend “the idea that culture sets before us of perfection – an increased spiritual activity, having for its characters increased sweetness, increased light, increased life, increased sympathy,” then they are capable of having an idea far more blessed and important “than the idea of the blessedness of the franchise” (180). The process of humanizing the lower orders through elementary education is thus implicated in the political future of the nation. W.B. Hodgson and others interested in popular education, such as James Kay-Shuttleworth, also argued in the 1860s that the significance of new methods of educating the working-class could be found in the new political power afforded to the labouring classes.⁴¹ If the lower orders were to determine the course of the nation, then they needed to be educated, but more than this, they also needed to be civilized; the only way to accomplish this was to interest them in reading at school, thus inspiring in them a desire to read quality, humanizing literature outside of school as well.

Other official voices were calling for a review of popular education in the middle decades of the century too, and the first major step taken towards the improvement of

⁴⁰ Matthew Arnold, “Culture and Anarchy,” *Matthew Arnold and the Education of the New Order*, eds. Peter Smith and Geoffrey Summerfield (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969) 164-269.

⁴¹ Cf. James Kay-Shuttleworth, *Memorandum on Popular Education* (London: Ridgeway, 1868) 5-6. As well, Hodgson claims in his “Exaggerated Estimates of Reading and Writing” that “the recent extension of the suffrage is opening the eyes of many to the necessity of training the masses to the judicious and beneficial exercise of the power thus conferred” (391).

elementary education was the Revised Code of 1862. This new education policy was the immediate result of the Newcastle Commission, a Royal Commission established in 1858 “to inquire into the Present State of Popular Education in England, and to consider and report what Measures, if any, are required for the extension of sound and cheap elementary instruction to all classes of the people” (qtd. in Sutherland 23-4).⁴² What the Commission found was already known to instructors and others who were intimately involved with popular education – that “the vast majority of children” left school without so much as approaching the level of attainment of the basic literacy skills expected of them (Sutherland 24-5). Specifically, the level of attainment of literacy established by the Commission involved being able to “spell correctly the words that he will ordinarily have to use,” to be able to “read a common narrative – the paragraph in the newspaper he cares to read – with sufficient ease to be a pleasure to himself and to convey information to listeners,” and to be able to write a “legible and intelligible” letter to a family member (qtd. in Sutherland 24).⁴³ However, the Commission also found that a small minority of pupils went beyond this basic level of attainment and stayed on at school to learn elementary science and to further their understanding of languages. The Commission approved of neither of these developments and accused teachers of neglecting their younger pupils while pretentiously catering to the intellectual over-development of the older ones (Sutherland 25). As well, the Commission found a discrepancy between the “objectives of the suppliers and consumers of elementary education” (Vincent 86). While educators before the 1860s had wanted to teach moral and religious improvement to the working classes in order to keep them from being a danger to themselves and others, working-class parents were more interested that their children learn the

⁴² Cf. Vincent 86-7 and Hurt 29-34.

⁴³ The last of these abilities, the composition of a letter, did not become a reality for many elementary school graduates until the latter decades of the century.

basics of literacy and numeracy so that they might find decent employment and advance themselves economically and socially. If parents did not find that their basic demands for their children's educations were met by the publicly-funded schools, they would send them to private venture schools or to no school at all. Therefore, when the Revised Code was drawn up and implemented in the early 1860s, the result was that "where the teaching of basic literacy had been the subordinate concern of the schoolmaster, a means to a much larger and more important end, it was now placed at the centre of the curriculum" (87).

The New Breed of Readers

To what extent were the views of Matthew Arnold and other educators regarding the need to make reading instruction more interesting and enjoyable reflected in mid-Victorian school readers? It would seem that with literacy now at the centre of the elementary school's curriculum, the books used to teach reading and writing would improve dramatically, as evidence from the past decades suggested that these texts were not successfully performing the job assigned to them. However, the immediate impact of the Revised Code on the production of more ambitious school readers and the overall quality of instruction was uncertain. To some, it seemed that the method of examination that the Revised Code called for was having an effect opposite to that which was desired, actually requiring less interesting material because school inspectors could only ask students under examination to read from the single book that they had used in school throughout the year. Frequently, students read the passages fluently from memory rather than from real comprehension. Instead of being asked to strive towards understanding more ambitious literature, students would have the passages required for the exam drilled into them in order to achieve a pass. Recognizing that such practices were common, Arnold complained in his report for 1867 that the mechanical means

by which students were tested under the Revised Code actually led to a “decline in intellectual life” (Arnold et al 122). What was still missing, Arnold points out in a report he made seven years later, is “the animation of mind, the multiplying of ideas, the promptness to connect, in the thoughts, one thing with another, and to illustrate one thing by another” (175). The requirements Arnold puts forward as signs of “intellectual life” – animation of mind and the production and connection of ideas – continue to crop up throughout the discourse on reading for the rest of the century, and they would become even more central in this discourse in the 1880s and 1890s. These vital intellectual qualities are dependent upon interest, because animation requires a form of mental activity that cannot be reproduced by mechanical indoctrination. If educators could create interest and animation in young readers, then the curiosity that lies at the heart of Arnold’s concept of criticism might take hold, thereby contributing to the strength and intellectual wealth of the nation.

With so much riding on literacy and education – especially considering the increasingly democratic nature of English politics – one might expect the current system of examinations would be done away with and books that encouraged children to read promoted. In fact, advances in education policies throughout the rest of the century were built on “payment by results” rather than doing away with the system, and it was not until 1897 that grants for tests in specific subjects were finally abolished altogether.⁴⁴ Yet, although a large number of the opinions on the Revised Code and its effects that reach us from the 1860s and 1870s assert that it was a detriment to education, there remains a lack of complete consensus on its overall consequences. There is even evidence to suggest that some inspectors believed the Revised Code to have distinct advantages over the old. For instance, in the *Report of the*

⁴⁴ The removal of “payment of results” had been on its way since at least 1888, however, when the Cross Commission, established to survey the progress of elementary schooling since 1870, found that “payment by results” was “a system of cram, which . . . ought to be relaxed in the interests of the scholars, of the teachers and of education itself” (qtd in Martin 52).

Committee of Council on Education for the years 1869 to 1870, an inspector named Mr. Du Port argued that the new Code constituted an “individualizing system” that made sure each child had some understanding of what he or she had been taught. He describes how, under the old system, oral lessons and interrogations were only ever held collectively, with the result that a class of thirty students would seem all to be answering the question posed by the teacher, while the majority were, in fact, merely “catching the cue” and co-responding with five or six bright children who really knew the answers (qtd. in Goldstrom 136).

In addition, while Arnold was crying down the Code and its examinations as further roads to rote-learning and mechanical instruction, his criticisms were directed almost exclusively towards the Code’s system of “payment by results,” and he admitted in his Report for 1863 that the “happiest effect” of the Revised Code could be found in its “improving the quality of school reading books” (Arnold et al 104). Some later commentators have agreed with Arnold, claiming that “payment by results” and the intense focus on the skills of literacy the new Code initiated “made teachers critical of the dreary material and long words in reading books,” so that readers in the 1860s “were revised and much improved” (Goldstrom 137).⁴⁵ In fact, from the early 1860s on, authors and educators showed themselves to be much more interested in formal and methodical innovation than their counterparts in the early Victorian period had been, attempting by various means to avoid the aridity and pedantry of earlier reading books.

In short, interest and delight became keywords in the discourse on elementary education during the 1860s and 1870s, and they remained key in the discourse on education and reading in the decades to follow. The belief that, as one education critic put it, “a child

⁴⁵ Vincent argues that while the reforms of the Revised Code initially created a sense of anxiety that “delayed the move away from rote-learning,” eventually “the newly defined standards brought forth a generation of textbooks which represented a clear advance over their predecessors” (88).

ought to go to his lessons as naturally and as happily as he goes to his play” (Farrar 448) became much more common during the middle decades of the nineteenth century than it had ever been when Biblical passages and moral and religious pamphlets formed the staple of a child’s reading material. The primary means of achieving interest and enjoyment were the use of illustration, the inclusion of new methods of graduation, and a shift towards secular narratives as lessons. Each of these three methods is evident in Favell Lee Mortimer’s popular volume, *Reading Without Tears; or, A Pleasant Mode of Learning to Read*, first published by Hatchards in 1857 but reprinted frequently in the 1860s and over the course of the next fifty years (it was last published by Longman’s in 1911).⁴⁶ The title of Mortimer’s reader is indicative of the new mode of teaching reading, and while the book was exceptional when it was first published in the late 1850s for realizing that “the child will become wearied by lists of words, and must have sentences in order to render study delightful” (xiii), an increasing number of books produced in the decades that followed held the same model of children’s reading. According to Galbraith, Victorian educators began to see that “it was crucial to interest children in reading by making it a source of pleasure and an end in itself, not just a means of transmitting information. If young children had more time to read, they could learn to do it with pleasure, and to employ this new power to acquire knowledge and cultivate their higher faculties” (127).

Reading Without Tears included woodcut illustrations in order to add to the “delight” and interest of young readers, and it employed a version of the “phonic method,” which meant that irregular words were initially omitted in order to increase the ease and simplicity for the newly literate. As the author explains in her preface to the 1861 edition, “great pains have been taken to render this book pleasing to children. To allure them to tread the path to

⁴⁶ Favell Lee Mortimer, *Reading Without Tears, or, A Pleasant Mode of Learning to Read* (London: Hatchard & Co., 1861). The first edition of the book was published under the author’s maiden name, Bevan.

knowledge - steps have been cut in the steep rock, and flowers have been planted by the wayside. Pictures are those flowers - careful arrangement and exact classification are those steps" (vii). Throughout Mortimer's book, the focus is on the child's enjoyment, rather than the strictness of the method.⁴⁷ J.S. Laurie's schools readers also sought to encourage reading through interest and delight, and this was accomplished by a move away from moral and religious verses and stories towards more secular content. In fact, in the preface to his series of readers from the 1860s, Laurie explains that arousing interest in pupils is the first indispensable condition of a reader's usefulness. As the reading lesson constitutes "the main work of the day" in elementary instruction, the book from which these lessons are taught should not be "dull or unsuitable," according to Laurie (iii).⁴⁸ Laurie explains that if the book is "flat and uninteresting, or if it is not adapted to the mental condition of the pupil, - the very aspect of it begins inevitably ... to generate a feeling of listlessness or aversion" (iii). While Laurie's readers used engraved illustrations infrequently, the use of illustrations continued to be one of the preferred methods of attracting a young reader's interest in primers throughout the rest of the Victorian period. Many of these books advertised their use of illustration in their titles. The readers produced by Edward N. Marks for Thomas Nelson & Sons in the 1860s and 1870s— *The Royal Road to Spelling and Reading: An Illustrated Spelling Book* (1867) and *The Little Reading Book: In words of one syllable; Illustrated with pretty pictures* (1872) – are examples of this new style.

The series of elementary school readers authored by John Miller Dow Meiklejohn later in the century are clearly products of the pedagogical philosophy of the 1860s. They also

⁴⁷ Ellis discusses this book in the context of elementary education, but aspects of the book itself suggest that, though it may have been used in elementary schools, it was also intended for a middle-class audience. The preface to the book continually addresses itself to the parents of the learning child (vii-xi), whereas children of the working class were far more likely to be instructed by a teacher or a monitor.

⁴⁸ J.S. Laurie, ed., *The Graduated Series of Reading Lesson Books* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861).

include copious illustrations in order to attract the interest of young readers and to help foster a taste for reading. Meiklejohn explains in the preface to a reader called *The Golden Primer*, which he produced with Walter Crane for Blackwood & Sons in 1884, that the use of pictures is essential to catch the interest of the young reader: “In this little book, ART comes, to fix the child's attention, Science, to guide his steps. Pictures - words in the pictures - words out of the pictures - words in sentences; this is the first Ladder to Learning!” (3).⁴⁹ Again, interest – expressed here by the author’s reference to “attention” – is the focus of reading instruction; the art of illustration now becomes one of the chief means of getting young readers involved in their lessons. However, this book demonstrates that illustration could be more than simply delightful for easily wearied children. The role of the illustrations is made explicit in Meiklejohn’s “Method of Teaching *The Golden Primer*,” printed inside the book’s back cover, where he advises teachers to rely on the book’s illustrations heavily in the ideal, discursive method of instruction that he sets out: “1. Describe the picture, or tell the story given in it. Get the child to talk about everything in it; and when the printed words are mentioned, the child should point to them.” The teacher is then advised to “let the child point to each word on the picture *in every possible order*” before he or she actually reads anything. Like other educators of the time, Meiklejohn hoped that if the young reader’s attention could be held long enough, he or she might engage with the printed word until the “animation” that Arnold writes of could take hold. Interest and attention were thus the first steps in a new, intellectual form of improvement through reading.

While illustration was one of the means educators used to teach children their letters, the phonic method, which was used more frequently in readers from the 1860s onwards, was another. This is the “Science” that Meiklejohn mentions in his preface. The phonic method

⁴⁹ J.M.D Meiklejohn, *The Golden Primer [In verse. With Illustrations by Walter Crane]* (London: Blackwood & Sons, 1884).

managed to find support amongst educators and was used more widely in readers of the late Victorian period, showing that it was no passing fad. Writing of the progress of elementary education in 1870, for instance, F.W. Farrar commends the new reader, entitled *The English Method of Teaching to Read*, that Meiklejohn produced in 1869 with Adolf Sonnenschein for its use of this technique, which takes pains to acquaint young readers only with “regular” words at first. Instead of employing what Farrar calls the “rigidly Chinese method” of earlier primers and spelling books, “which seems to regard every word as an isolated phenomenon ungenerously contributed to an immeasurable heap of difficulties,” the phonic method used by Meiklejohn and Sonnenschein teaches the child the functions of the letters, slowly adding to the original vowels taught in order to increase the child’s vocabulary (Farrar 447-8). This new method of graduated instruction differs from the method employed by the readers of the 1840s in that it focuses only on the regular parts of the English language until children are better acquainted with it; there is no gradual building towards words of seven syllables, as in earlier readers. While in more traditional systems of reading instruction language was decomposed into a series of monosyllables “heaped together entirely at hap-hazard, exceptional sounds and combinations being mixed up in a perplexing way with those that are regular” (448), the phonic method employed by Meiklejohn entirely excludes irregular sounds at first, introducing them only sparingly later on. Although not every review of the book was as positive as Farrar’s, *The English Method of Teaching to Read* was reprinted eighteen times, and was still in print as late as 1908.

The Pedagogical Changes of the 1860s in Action: The Work of J.M.D. Meiklejohn

Meiklejohn was a major force in the field of education from the 1860s until his death in 1902.⁵⁰ He produced several series of readers for Blackwood's and for the Chambers brothers, including editions of Shakespeare's plays, as well as grammar, history, and geography texts for use in elementary schools. He also published several works on pedagogical theory and on some of the major educational debates of the period. The problems involved in teaching children to read were his special focus, and in the short works that he wrote in the 1870s – *The Fundamental Error in the Revised Code with Special Reference to the Problem of Teaching to Read* (1870) and *The Problem of Teaching to Read Restated and Attempted to be Solved* (1879) – he dealt specifically with the predicament of the reading instructor, while at the same time promoting his own methods and the publications that employed them. Meiklejohn sets out his views on teaching children to read English most clearly in *The Problem of Teaching to Read*, and as his comments there inform the readers he produced in later decades, it is useful to turn to that work to explore the models of reading that the book proposes.

The keynote of Meiklejohn's educational philosophy is the oral nature of the English language, to which writing is nothing more than a useful but alien addition. As he explains in the opening pages of *The Problem of Teaching to Read*, "we must not forget that the language itself – the real English language is not a set of writings, but a *tongue* or a *speech*; that we speak thousands of words for every one we write; that writing or printing is only more or less

⁵⁰ Meiklejohn's reputation as an educator and expert on the English language seems to have been high amongst some groups in the early twentieth century, though it has suffered since his death. Jonathan Rose cites the memoirs of C.H. Rolph, who claims that Meiklejohn's *English Grammar* (1889) occupied a position in the house of his father (a London policeman) "usually accorded at that time to the Bible" (qtd. in Rose 128). To Rose, however, Meiklejohn's book is simply one "middlebrow reference book" among many (128).

a convenient device – but is no necessary part of language” (5).⁵¹ This belief in the oral basis of all language is repeated in the grammar textbook that Meiklejohn produced in 1892, in which the author explains that while a language may be written as well as spoken, “it is plain ... that we speak a thousand words for every one we write” (1).⁵² The key question in reading instruction, then, is what “powers of feeling, imagination, or intellect - because there is intellect even in the dumbest and youngest” ought to be employed to implant the black marks that represent this “real” spoken English into the minds of children (*Problem 6*).

To Meiklejohn, the English alphabet, with which so many earlier readers began their lessons, should be regarded as a “*code of signals*,” perhaps simply the “decayed fragments of a pictured speech” (12). As a code of signals, however, the alphabet is misleading because many of the signals represent more than one sound, and a single sound may be asked for by more than one signal; the ultimate result is that the 26 letters of the alphabet are “set to do the work of 45 sounds” (26). What is required, at least in Meiklejohn’s opinion, is regularity and standardization, two qualities missing from English notation because of its dialectic and “piebald” character (a product of the country’s linguistic history): “The symbols by which we attempt to carry words to the eye of a child are constantly changing in meaning and value; and the child’s mind is proportionally confused and weakened” (29). It seems that more is at stake in the process of reading instruction than merely the level of difficulty in a child’s attempts to learn his or her letters. Meiklejohn suggests that the traditional method of teaching the alphabet and reading goes against not only the flow of the child’s natural propensities to form habits from repetition, but against the flow of western civilization’s progress as well.

⁵¹ My references throughout are to the Canadian reprint, *The Problem of Teaching to Read Restated and Attempted to be Solved: With Suggestions for Methods and Plans* (Toronto: W.J. Gage, 1881).

⁵² J.M.D. Meiklejohn, *A New Grammar of the English Tongue* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1892).

Like F.W. Farrar, Meiklejohn associates this method with “oriental” tendencies that he sees as backwards and destructive: “Thus the child of our language sinks nearly to the level of the Chinese. The essence of European thinking is classification; but, so far as the notation of the language is concerned, we are out of the European sphere. And it is this tedious and mindless procedure that costs this country so much” (34).⁵³ In the analogies that he uses to further elucidate the effects of the language’s eccentric notation, Meiklejohn adds to his implied assertion that the problems of reading instruction are potentially national problems. He maintains, for instance, that there is a similarity between the depreciation of education and that of coinage, so that “just as twenty-five per cent of base or depreciated coin thrown into the circulation of the country would upset all commerce and turn bargaining into barter or merely individual transactions,” the twenty-five percent of eccentric and “anomalous” notation (a modest estimate, according to Meiklejohn) transforms all the endeavors of a child’s attempts to read “into a series of hand-mouth transactions” (35). Furthermore, in the final section of his pamphlet, he speaks directly to the “economic side” of the reading question, asserting that “Dr Gladstone, with great moderation, calculates that the loss from friction, due to our eccentric notation, amounts to ‘1200 hours in a lifetime,’ and that ‘more than half a million of money per annum for England and Wales alone’ is wasted on training our children to habits in that which has itself no habits” (65). The phonic method, as it is implemented by Meiklejohn, is thus an attempt to re-civilize the teaching of reading through regularity and system and to bolster its value, joining together once more the now distinct

⁵³ Kelly J. Mays provides some insight into the role of this kind of orientalism in her discussion of reading and literacy in “The Disease of Reading and Victorian Periodicals,” (*Literature in the Marketplace*, eds. John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995] 165-94). Mays claims that an image of China or “the Orient” was central to the discourse of “progress and devolution” that often accompanied discussions of literacy (176). The term “Chinese” seems to point to a dissolution of identity and a lack of classification, in which everything and every word is treated as a seemingly meaningless piece of what De Quincey called a “torbid blob of life” (176).

“*eye-language*” and “*ear-language*” into a renewed whole and increasing the worth and economic power of the nation.

Meiklejohn’s use of language and analogy situates his work within the context of nationalism that Stephen Heathorn associates with ideas about education in the final quarter of the nineteenth century. Heathorn claims that by “deploying the rhetoric of contemporary social and political commentators, the new educationalists pointed to the connection between the health and wealth of the state and the need for ‘national’ schooling ... and to education being fundamental to the future retention of the empire” (4).⁵⁴ Moreover, ideas about reforming the methods of reading instruction through a revised form of English were popular in this period. Galbraith shows that the School Board of London began looking closely at the issue of teaching reading in a more efficient manner towards the end of the 1870s. In 1876, the Board went a step further than Meiklejohn by actually appealing to the government to reform English spelling. The Board believed that “a more consistent system [of English spelling] that ‘represented in the simplest form the exact sounds of every word’ would be more economical and efficient,” and they contended that “since education was now national work, and since children would not leave school to work until they had passed required standards of proficiency, the government should see spelling reform as essential for educational progress and the national economy” (126). Like Meiklejohn and Mortimer, the committee put together by the School Board of London found that the alphabetic method that had been used so extensively in schools over the course of the century “was ‘false’ and tedious because letters’ names and sounds did not correspond” (126). The committee recommended the use of a phonetic method of teaching to read, and the adoption of this method in London schools

⁵⁴ Similarly, Galbraith argues that the educational controversies of the final decades of the century, in which questions about how best to teach reading were central, “took place against a backdrop of fears about Britain’s eroding position in the world economy, the disruption of political stability with the enfranchisement of property owning working-class men in 1867 and 1884, and the growing strength of feminist and labor movements” (122).

would create a substantial market for the readers that Meiklejohn was producing under his reformed system.⁵⁵

But just how were these grand aims for setting English instruction back on track to be undertaken? For Meiklejohn, just as the problems of teaching to read reside in English notation, so do the remedies. He claims to have found a form of notation that solves the problems and confusions that he has identified with the traditional methods of teaching reading, and suggests that “amongst the detritus of notations which represent the English language upon paper, there exists a PERFECT NOTATION, which is always self-consistent, and in which sound and symbol are always in agreement” (39-40). The existence of this perfect notation therefore puts into the hands of teachers everywhere “the true method of teaching to read” (40). Although he makes it sound quite complex, his system involves little more than teaching children to read words that use only letters and combinations of letters that have one “sound-function.” By learning to read in this way, the child is able to form habits and develop mental powers in an environment of consistency and regularity before moving on to irregular and difficult words later on.⁵⁶ Endorsing his own works, the author claims to have used perfect notation in the primers that he composed for W. and R. Chambers, first published between 1878 and 1880.⁵⁷ In the preface to the first book of that series, Meiklejohn reminds teachers that it is best “that the *names* of the letters be not taught until a *need* for their names has arisen in the pupil's mind” (3), and he points out that “the fact that *only one power* of

⁵⁵ This discussion of the debates about reading undertaken by the School Board of London is taken up in James Spedding's “Teaching to Read,” *The Nineteenth Century*, 1 (1877): 637-45.

⁵⁶ Throughout this discussion, Meiklejohn's metaphors consistently call up Victorian notions of progress and power, as when he suggests that the result of his method of learning through “perfect notation” is that the child is “put on a kind of railway; and his power and work are not lost in mere friction” (44).

⁵⁷ J.M.D. Meiklejohn, *Chambers's English Readers*, 6 vols. (W. & R. Chambers: London and Edinburgh, 1878-80).

single letters is used in the lessons contained in the early part of the book, from page 7 to page 19 inclusive, adapts the series perfectly to the *Phonic Method*" (3).⁵⁸

The first part of the primer is alternately referred to as "the 26 Letters in 26 Lessons strung upon a e i o u" (7), and Lesson 1 contains the following phrases, in which the author's system of perfect notation is exercised: "1. a cat and a rat. / 2. a rat and a hat" (7). Lesson 2 continues in this fashion, adding further vowel sounds: "1. the cat sees the rat. / 2. run, rat, run. / rat run from the cat" (7). At the bottom of the page are the words "rat cat hat" written out in script, evidence of the author's advice to teachers to have their pupils "read and write script from the beginning" (3). In addition, each page contains woodcut illustrations of those animals or objects that the nouns in the sentences describe; the print is large and clear, in line with the prevailing trends in the more ambitious late-Victorian school readers. Although the phrases used in these lessons appear to be lacking in significant interest, it is Meiklejohn's belief that they appeal to the child's "common sense" to a far greater extent than those nonsensical phrases used by some other readers. Phrases such as, "He had a gad / The lad at the cab is mad/ Dad, the lad, and Mab, the pad/ Is Dad a bad lad? Tab is sad" (*Problem 48*), Meiklejohn believes, will force the child to ask if it is to read things such as this that he or she is learning to read.⁵⁹ The use of simple, recognizable words representing animals and objects that children are assumed to be familiar with is intended to delight children and engage their attention and interest, those two highly regarded elements of education after the 1860s. Meiklejohn believes that the "feelings and pleasant memories of the children [will be] aroused

⁵⁸ J.M.D. Meiklejohn, *The First Primer: Being the Alphabet in Pictures and Words* (Toronto: Gage & Co., 1881). This edition is simply a Canadian reprint of the Chambers series. The lessons are identical.

⁵⁹ Since the author does not cite his source for these examples, we can assume that he has created them himself based on his own impressions of other popular readers. However, Ellis sites some examples of similar phrases in his survey of Victorian school readers, such as the following from *Harris's First Book*, used in Board schools in the 1870s: "I am to go up, if he do it, / He is to be by, if we do it./ So do it, if ye go, as we do it . . ." (qtd. in Ellis 108).

and excited by hearing the word *cow* or *dog* spoken aloud, which calls up a delightful image, and at once sets the mind in motion" (52).

Of course, dogs are fairly common (though cows might be less so for working-class children growing up in an urban environment), and whether or not the words that call up their images really have the capability to delight a child, they would at least have been recognized by most of the working class children who used Meiklejohn's readers in the Board schools. However, Meiklejohn's series for the Chambers brothers focuses very noticeably on the rural environment and animal life in the hopes of stirring interest in readers. In doing so, it seems to be making false assumptions about its audience. In fact, Meiklejohn's *English Readers* and other similar series, such as *The Holborn Series of Reading Books* and Cassell's *Modern School Series*, would have had a hard time conjuring up feelings and pleasant memories in the children who used them because "in the latter years of the nineteenth century the experiences of working class children were decreasingly related to country life, and were limited to a deprived urban environment" (Ellis 112). The focus on country life in these readers, then, seems to be the product of an impulse on the part of authors to purify or naturalize the lives of working-class children with scenes and images from some simpler time and lifestyle, just as school trips to the country were intended to improve the tastes and imaginations of children living in the heart of London, or of other urban centers.⁶⁰ In this sense, the use of rural imagery in reading instruction conforms to David Vincent's understanding of official schooling for the lower classes as an attempt to distance children from their wider working class communities and from the "domestic curriculum" that absorbed them before they started school.⁶¹ If this is the case, then it is clear that instruction in the skills of literacy continued to

⁶⁰ For a description of such programs, see Alexander Paterson's *Across the Bridges; or, Life by the South London River-Side* (London, E. Arnold, 1911) 115.

⁶¹ Cf. Vincent 92-4.

be seen as socially transformative in the late Victorian period even though the books that were used to teach reading and writing had significantly changed themselves. Although illustrated narratives that were more likely to hold the attention of a young child had replaced (in some areas) the Bible stories and moralizing narratives on temperance, hard work, and acceptance of one's lot, the reforming energy in which these earlier texts were steeped remained.

In Meiklejohn's opinion, however, there was nothing more natural than the techniques that his readers prescribed. His aim, as he explains it in *The Problem of Teaching to Read*, is to make reading as easy and natural as breathing. For him, the whole aim of education is the formation of habits through "the perpetual repetition of small acts of the mind and of the body" (32). The final result of this constant repetition is that the acts involved in decoding the "eye-language" of English "become part of the spontaneous nature, and are performed with perfect ease and pleasure, and beneath consciousness" (32). Just as the cook and the physician must have "Nature" with them, "so must the Teacher have Nature with him also" (46). To be aligned with nature in such a way is to "interest" the child, the author explains (47), and to use his method to accomplish this.⁶² So confident is Meiklejohn that his phonic method of reading instruction is spontaneous and natural that he boasts that one teacher to whom he explained his plan called his perfect notation "*an inner language*" (44), an "inner speech that the child should be first quite at home in" (44). Yet how "at home" would working-class children feel if the manner in which their teachers pronounced the words listed in their readers was widely different from the manner in which their families pronounced them and in which they themselves had pronounced them before they began school?

⁶² Although interest is clearly important to Meiklejohn, he maintains that the business of teaching to read must be kept serious. Children, he believes, "are perfectly serious; they always want to get to business, and like to believe they are doing something useful" (*Problem* 47). The question of whether knowledge should also be entertaining is nothing but "fiddle faddle" (46).

Although the constant noise of the schoolroom might have made pupils from the lower classes feel “at home” in their new educational surroundings, the focus on oral instruction that produced this noise also meant that attention was drawn towards pronunciation, especially so when it came to the use of phonic methods like that employed by Meiklejohn’s readers.⁶³ This form of instruction actually distanced them from their homes. According to Vincent, programs that employed the phonic method were remedies for “the tendency of pupils to import or invent their own rules” of pronunciation; by the beginning of the nineteenth century, “proper” pronunciation was not that form invented by students or taught to them in the homes and communities in which they were raised, but the form used by a merchant class and confined to London: “The subsequent development of the public school system served to bind the ruling class into a single speech community, whilst the elementary schools of the Church Societies set about imposing linguistic discipline on the lower orders” (80).⁶⁴ From this point of view, the interiority that Meiklejohn promises in his method of perfect notation is illusory, and the phonic method, although it was likely superior to other modes of graduation (such as the simplistic syllabic model) was one more socializing tool to be wielded by middle-class educators at the top of the elementary school hierarchy. Even the teachers, who towards the end of the nineteenth century may not have been much higher on the social scale than many of their students, were advised to “distance themselves from the speech communities from which their pupils came” (Vincent 82). Instead of adding to the skills that children had already

⁶³ To at least one educator, the noise of the schoolroom was an essential part of its operation. In Henry Dunn’s 1837 book, *Principles of Teaching*, a book designed for use in the “normal schools” that trained teachers, the author explains, “noise is inseparable from the united employment of numbers, and there is no remedy for it but dispersion or listless indolence” (58).

⁶⁴ For a discussion of problems with the pronunciation of working-class students in London Board schools, see Galbraith, who argues that in cases where pronunciation problems were seen as too prevalent “reading was a means of eradicating the sounds of class and regional differences” (126).

learned before they approached the doors of their schools, reading and writing instruction actually involved slowly taking apart the knowledge that children already possessed.

Besides the subtle attempts to socialize working-class pupils through an emphasis on rural life and middle-class dialect, the method of reading instruction that Meiklejohn's readers advocated shares common assumptions with the methods employed by educators in the early years of the nineteenth century in other ways as well. Although his readers showed more attention to method, a recognition of the need to include more of the subject of instruction in the learning process, and a greater emphasis on the enjoyment and interest that reading material might provide to pupils, they also contain a great deal of repetitive and regimented tasks. This tendency comes out less in the books themselves than in the instructions for use that accompanied them. For instance, the guidelines for the use of *The Golden Primer*, laid out within the book's back cover, make it appear that getting through even this simple reading book could be very slow going. In the "Method of Teaching *The Golden Primer*" Meiklejohn suggests that after the instructor has his or her charge point to the words on the illustrated page in every possible order, he or she should let the child name the words when they are pointed to "again in *every possible order*." Then the child should point out these same words "each in its turn, then each in a new turn" in the sentences, before naming the words when the teacher points to them. Finally, the child reads the sentence, but immediately after he or she is asked, once again, to name the words, this time beginning at the end of the sentence and going backwards. When this process is repeated for every sentence on the page (a typical page has twelve such sentences), the child is then to read the entire page again, starting from the bottom. With this completed, the pupil has completed six of the thirteen numbered recommendations that Meiklejohn supplies in his "Method." The remaining seven instructions have the child writing the words he or she has just read (or constructing them out of loose

letters), counting how many times the words appear on the page and in the illustrations, hunting down the words he or she has learned in another book “with clear large type,” printing the nouns he or she has learned in plural, and then finding out “as many new words as he can, that rhyme with those he has learned.”

Conclusions

These, then, were the concerns of the publishers and authors of elementary school readers during roughly the second-half of the nineteenth century: a preoccupation with interesting the children who used their books; an attempt to create a desire in these children to read so that the practice might become a habit; a recognition of the power of illustration in this process; and a willingness to break away from the traditional methods of instruction in favor of a wider variety of methods (phonetic, look-and-say, simultaneous). As Meiklejohn’s readers show, many of the readers published and used in the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s were the pedagogical products of the 1860s. The schools themselves and the way they were run also changed a great deal between the 1830s and the 1860s, though they would transform even more dramatically in the decades that followed. However, the spirit of innovation and secularization in the production of elementary school readers did not completely remove those ideologies of improvement and transformation associated with working class education of an earlier time. While the use of Bibles and religious pamphlets would slowly be removed from elementary schools in the middle of the century, the philosophy behind their use persisted and evolved.

What remains in some of these readers, a fading but still perceptible belief left over from the early decades of the century, is the notion that reading instruction can produce results beyond the intellectual, that reading can improve the character and sociability of working-

class readers while it instills in them the literacy skills required, in Rowe's words "to discharge the duties cast upon them" (qtd. in Altick 156). As educational legislation continued to develop from the 1870s until the end of the century, with more children of the lower classes being offered spaces in elementary schools, the models of reading and writing that were common in the middle of the century continued to evolve, and writing took a more central place in definitions of literacy. After 1870, the concepts of humanization and intellectual improvement of the masses espoused by Matthew Arnold, so important to the changes to readers in the 1860s and beyond, continued to have noticeable effects on readers, but they were met with competition from other models of popular education that sought to promote technical and industrial education as more beneficial to the country and the empire and as more useful for members of what would be a truly *working* class.

Chapter 2

What and How to Read II:

Writing in Elementary Schools and Late Victorian Models of Reading

The changes to the philosophy of education and reading that led educators and publishers to reassess the systems behind elementary school textbooks and their content – a push towards creating interest and towards secularization, and a reconsideration of teaching methods and the role of the physical characteristics of textbooks – continued to have noticeable effects on the books used to teach reading and writing throughout the remainder of the century. In many cases, in fact, the models of reading circulated in the 1860s took time to find their practical application in actual readers. We have seen how educators and authors such as Matthew Arnold, J.M.D. Meiklejohn, and Favell Lee Mortimer contributed to the new models of pedagogy and new definitions of reading that were to change the experience of learning to read for Victorian children. However, like individual authors, publishers, educators and activists, the state had a role in changing the protocols of reading instruction in the 1860s and 1870s. This chapter will examine several changes to the system of elementary education that are characteristic of the late-Victorian period. These changes were sometimes based on the ideas of individual educators and sometimes on the pedagogical theories officially advanced by the Education Department. Specifically, this chapter examines the introduction of new requirements and standards of reading during the 1870s and 1880s, the changing role of writing in Victorian schools, and ideas about the uses of composition in the education afforded to the lower classes. It also investigates challenges to the “advanced” intellectual education that Matthew Arnold and others advocated from the middle years of the century, challenges

staged by supporters of a more practical and technical education for the lower classes in the 1880s and 1890s.

Changes to Models of Reading and to School Readers After 1870: Expressive and Intelligent Reading

After the adoption of the Revised Code in 1862, the next significant change to the elementary education system in England was W.E. Forster's Elementary Education Act of 1870. Although the Act did not change the content of education or the central preoccupations of school readers as remarkably as the Revised Code and the drive for innovation that surrounded it, it did dramatically alter the way education was administered, and it created an environment for changes to the curriculum that occurred in the 1880s and 1890s. The main effect of Forster's Act was the creation of school boards (and then schools) for parts of England and Wales with insufficient space in existing schools. As Galbraith explains, "although children of the lower middle class would also benefit from the new school system, it was intended to fill 'gaps' left by voluntary schools in the education of children ranging from 'street Arabs' to 'respectable' working class" (85). It also gave these school boards the power to enforce attendance. In reality, however, compulsion did not begin in earnest until 1880, when the power to compel children to attend school became "a duty" of the school boards under Mundella's Education Act (Hurt 3).¹ In a broader sense, Forster's Act was intended to show the government's commitment to a national system of education, and to act as a safety net for the very poor, many of whom had remained untouched by the expansion of education before 1870. However, the education provided by this "safety net" was still

¹ J.S. Hurt, *Elementary Schooling and the Working Classes, 1860-1918* (London: Kegan Paul, 1979). In non-school-board areas, where there was sufficient room for children in the already existing elementary schools, the school attendance committee charged with compelling school attendance was created four years earlier, in 1876 (Hurt 3).

considered to be completely self-contained, “ending by or before a student's thirteenth birthday, and ‘not preparatory to a grammar school or other education’” (Galbraith 85). In addition, payment by results remained the status quo for elementary education in England until the end of the nineteenth century, and it was still the case immediately after the adoption of Forster’s Act in the early 1870s that working-class children were expected to be provided with just enough instruction in the three R’s to conduct their natural business in life.

Although the most direct changes that the 1870 Education Act initiated were administrative, it is clear that the Act did have immediate, albeit indirect, effects on the production of school readers, mostly in terms of their quantity. For instance, it continued a trend begun by the Revised Code of 1862, whereby the presence of a steadily growing base of consumers drew further attention to the need for better quality readers. Alec Ellis argues, for instance, that the Act “resulted in a vast development in the publications of schoolbooks, which was particularly due to the demands of a larger school population and the more liberalized curriculum of the following decade” (107). His view is confirmed by the educationalist Joseph Landon, who claimed in the early 1880s, “probably no class of books has developed at so rapid a rate . . . as that intended for school use” (251).² However, as Stephen Heathorn explains, the most far-reaching changes in the content and purpose of instruction were not made by the 1870 Education Act, but by the educational codes set out between 1875 and 1882, which were meant to improve the quality of the intellectual education made available to the newly expanded population of elementary school students (10-11). During these pivotal years, readers transformed for two main reasons: first, because of the growing number of subjects taught in elementary schools; and second, because of the new level of attainment required by examinations in reading and writing.

² Joseph Landon, *School Management* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1883).

In the late 1870s and early 1880s, authors and publishers began to respond in earnest to the transformed mandates of the Educational Codes. During the 1860s, the impact of the Revised Code and its emphasis on basic literacy led to the production of a large number of multi-subject reading books, based on the argument that the variety of subjects that were taught in schools before the imposition of the Code would be better taught from one book in the course of the day's reading lessons. As a result, a wide variety of history readers, geography readers, and domestic economy readers, for instance, were produced well into the 1870s. The practice of teaching other subjects through the medium of reading lessons led to concerns that readers were focusing more on the particular subjects (such as history or geography) than on the skills of reading themselves. Alluding to such concerns, the Committee of Council on Education declared in 1879 that these reading books seemed "intended to teach physical science, geography, history, English literature, domestic economy, spelling, composition, etymology, arithmetic, anything in fine except reading" (qtd. in Ellis 119). In response to this criticism, members of the Education Department made revisions to the Revised Code, beginning in the late 1860s, introducing changes to the subjects taught in elementary schools. During the last three decades of the century, the Education Department recognized three groups of subjects: obligatory, class, and specific. The obligatory subjects were the three Rs (and needlework for girls), which remained the minimum level of education in elementary schools until the Department added drawing for boys in 1891 (179). By 1893, the Department added one class subject to be taught throughout the school to the list of obligatory subjects, and by 1895 it had also added "object lessons and suitable occupations" in Standards I to III (179).³

³ Hurt explains that object lessons might involve taking students to museums or other places during school-time, or getting children to "count the rings of a felled tree to estimate its age, grow mustard on flannel, collect, press, and label leaves" (182). Suitable occupations included pastimes such as modelling, weaving, plaiting, singing,

Additional grant-earning subjects were introduced in 1867, and by 1875 they came to be known as “specific subjects.” Only a small minority of students would have studied specific subjects because they were only available for students in Standards IV to VI; most pupils left school by the end of Standard IV, a level of education that could reasonably be attained by a ten-year-old (Fletcher and John 424).⁴ Class subjects were created in 1875, when the Code moved English, geography, history, and grammar – which had been the most popular of the additional or specific subjects taught – to this group (423).⁵ Like the obligatory subjects, these class subjects could be grant-earning too, but a school had to offer two of the three subjects above Standard I in order to make such grants possible. Hurt claims that by 1880, 90% of schools were eligible for these grants. The new popularity of these class subjects added to the perception that readers were teaching “everything but reading,” a concern addressed in a circular to inspectors issued by the Education Department in 1881, which made it clear that text books should be kept distinct from reading books (Ellis 119-20). While readers that taught history, geography, or literature persisted in schools, they were used as additions to basic reading books, which were intended to overcome the technical difficulties of learning to read for children in the lower Standards (120).

While it was not a direct result, the provision of a wider variety of disciplines in elementary schools in the late-1870s – both in readers and in separate, examinable class subjects – reflects suggestions made by Matthew Arnold towards the end of the 1860s.

Always advocating rich and “humanizing” education over mechanical lessons in reading and

recitation, or other activities that might “relieve the younger children . . . from the strain of ordinary lessons” (182).

⁴ Alfred Ewan Fletcher and Mariella E. John, *Sonnenschein's Cyclopedia of Education*, 3rd ed. (1888; London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1906). Fletcher is the sole author of the 1888 edition.

⁵ Other specific subjects included Latin, more advanced mathematics, mechanics, and elementary sciences (Hurt 180). The literary subjects were the most popular, perhaps because they were the least expensive to teach, requiring little in the way of apparatus (unlike the science classes). Fletcher maintains that English was required as a class subject and that in boys' schools the second taken “is almost universally geography,” as opposed to needlework in girls' schools (Fletcher and John 426).

writing, Arnold used his Report on Schools for 1867 to call for the inclusion of a wider array of subjects and a better manner of teaching them in order to further interest pupils and encourage them to read. He complains that the spirit and inventiveness of teaching has fallen off, and that “matters of language, geography, and history, by which, in general, instruction first gets hold of a child’s mind and becomes stimulating and interesting to him, have in a great majority of schools fallen into disuse and decay” (Arnold et al 123). Arnold’s cry for greater diversity in elementary education corresponds to his theories about the power of reading, which he outlines in a Report for 1878, about the time when the Committee began to consider dividing subject books from reading books. For Arnold, “the power of reading . . . is not in itself formative” (210), and to treat it as the only ends of elementary education is to make that education too technical, focusing wrongly on the machinery of instruction rather than the cultural and moral improvement of the people as a whole. It was Arnold’s belief that in order to be useful, subjects such as history, geography, and literature needed to be taught in a way that elevated them above the acquisition of mere information. While he makes no direct comments on the use of historical and geographical materials in books used primarily to teach reading, his comment that reading lessons should not be used “only to increase a child’s stock of what is called information” (215), suggests that he was in favor of dividing reading instruction from instruction in other subjects, while at the same time providing a place for interesting lessons in geography and history in the elementary school. The best possible material for a reading lesson, according to Arnold, is “sterling poetry” (215), the study of which will “contribute to the opening of the soul and the imagination” (215).

The other major change to readers in the 1880s and 1890s involved a shift in the minimum requirements of reading ability, which was directly connected to the advent of new elementary subjects. Heathorn points out that when the codes of 1880 and 1882 “officially

mandated the use of historical, geographical, and literary readers in the elementary school system,” the reinsertion of these disciplines, which had initially been removed from elementary schools by the Revised Code, came through “the ‘back door’ of the basic requirements for reading proficiency” (11). These disciplines were brought back into the educational fold not solely for the benefits they might have for pupils, but in order to accommodate changes that had been made to the requirements for reading examinations. In addition to increasing the number of subjects taught in schools, the codes set out between 1875 and 1882 changed the accepted level of reading required in each of the four Standards offered by the majority of schools and required “complete fluency” at the highest levels of instruction (Heathorn 11).⁶

Under the code of 1882, historical readers were introduced into Standards III to VII (Ellis 115) and the “examination of literacy was to be conducted through the reading of passages from English history and English literature rather than from lines of simple ‘poetry,’ ‘modern narratives,’ or ‘newspapers’ of the earlier code” (Heathorn 11). Most importantly, instead of a level of literacy that would simply allow working class children to conduct their “business in life,” the codes set out between 1875 and 1882 called for “intelligent” and “expressive” reading. Some authors incorporated these new definitions of reading into the books they produced, in order to advertise their suitability for elementary schools. For instance, in the third book of the *English Readers* series (intended for use in Standard III) that J.M.D. Meiklejohn produced for the Chambers brothers in the 1870s and 1880s, the author points out in his preface that the book meets the necessity that exists in every reading book

⁶ Heathorn explains that “most elementary students received instruction in Standards I through IV, but a decreasing number went on to the highest levels allowed in the elementary school, Standard VI and, later, Standard VII” (11). For more on the education provided in these higher Standards in the late Victorian period, see Sutherland’s *Elementary Education in the Nineteenth Century*, 41-4.

“for matter which naturally promotes lively reading” (3).⁷ Because of the provisions of the book, “it will be found that children who have been judiciously carried through this book will have acquired good habits of *expressive* reading” (3). Other books produced by the author similarly advertise their adherence to the requirements of the new code, such as *Expressive Reading, with Readings in Prose and Verse* (1894) and *Expressive Reading: A Manual to Accompany All Reading Books* (1897). The revised third edition of Fletcher’s *Cyclopedia of Education* defines expressive reading and recommends Meiklejohn’s *Expressive Reading* as a guide for teachers. Fletcher notes, “reading should include not only intelligent comprehension of the subject-matter read, but a perfect modulation of the voice, to enable the reader to express the meaning of what he reads to others” (308). While teachers were also being advised to promote a greater facility with silent reading amongst their pupils, a tendency to see reading as a performance – no doubt initiated by the emphasis on individual examinations since 1862 – is evident in discussions of reading during the period.⁸

David Vincent has charted the evolution of the concept of “intelligence” as it relates to elementary education throughout the Victorian period. Although requirements based on the overall intelligence shown by a student’s ability to read did not enter the official Code until 1875,⁹ Vincent shows that from the 1840s onwards the concept of intelligence was popular as a means to assess the quality of teaching a child had received: “From the inception of the school inspectorate onwards, increasing emphasis was placed on the ‘intelligence’ of the elementary school pupil. The quality was seen as both the immediate objective of the school curriculum and the principal criterion for measuring the success of reading and writing

⁷ J.M.D. Meiklejohn, *English Readers, Book III* (Toronto: Gage & Co., 1881).

⁸ See, for instance, “Reading Made Easy,” *All the Year Round* 16 (1866): 176-9, and “The Art of Reading,” *All the Year Round* 23 (1879): 343-7.

⁹ Heathorn explains, “‘reading with fluency of expression’ and ‘reading with intelligence’ were phrases first included in the requirements of the higher standards in the codes of 1875 and 1879” (236). By 1882, expression and intelligence were required in Standards I through IV as well (11).

lessons" (82). Inspectors in the 1840s and 1850s continually rebuked teachers for failing to call forth the intelligence of their pupils in reading lessons; they expected the children they examined to show "underlying mental activity" (82), above and beyond the ability to translate visual symbols into their verbal equivalents. The traditional system of rote learning seems to have been largely responsible for the reluctance amongst pupils to ask questions (and amongst their instructors to present class material in such a way as to elicit questions). Instead children tended to accept all they were told and tried as best they could to memorize it in order to repeat it during an examination.¹⁰ In his defense of the Revised Code before the Committee of Council on Education in 1869, school inspector Mr. Du Port makes repeated use of the concept of the child's "intelligence" and blames the old traditional method of instruction and examination for a failure to call up this all-important quality: "the weaknesses of that exclusive use of the simultaneous system of oral teaching is, that as all are to reply in chorus all must use the same words; hence arises a stereotyped form of question and answer which may succeed in developing memory but which must fail to awaken intelligence" (qtd. in Goldstrom 136).¹¹ Though he disagreed with Du Port about the means through which they were to be achieved, Arnold was also looking for intelligence and mental activity in the children he examined. His unfulfilled hopes for the mental processes of elementary school children – "the animation of mind, the multiplying of ideas, the promptness to connect, in thought, one thing with another" – correspond to the definition of intelligence that Vincent associates with Victorian education. As important as it was in the elementary curriculum, intelligence seems not to have been defined in any specific way in educational circles. It was

¹⁰ Cf. Galbraith 129.

¹¹ Also blamed for stunting the intelligence of students were the harsh requirements of the successive Codes, cramming children with information rather than developing their intellectual faculties. See Richard A. Armstrong, "The Overstrain in Education," *The Modern Review* 4 (1883): 282-317.

most clearly aligned with the concept of comprehension, so that students were expected to be able to understand and use the information that they read.¹²

To meet the requirements of intelligence that Victorian school inspectors set out, children needed to be able to incorporate their lessons into their own life-experience. The refusal or inability of educators in the middle decades of the century to facilitate this assimilation accounts partly for the prevalence of complaints about intelligent reading and writing. The revision of teaching methods and the creation of new, more ambitious readers in the 1860s began to remedy some of the problems of earlier decades, and by accepting rather than rejecting the knowledge that children had acquired before they entered the doors of the elementary school, teachers found that they were better able to draw out the intelligence of their students.¹³ To some extent, a willingness to accept as valid and to work with the knowledge that children brought to school with them is evident in the requirements set for teachers in the colleges that trained them from the 1870s to the 1890s. According to Hurt, who refers to reports on teachers being trained at St. Peter's College in Birmingham between 1876 and 1896, elementary school teachers were no longer expected simply to present a class with "a mass of half-digested information" (181). They were asked to help students make their own discoveries in science lessons and to question them in an attempt to lead them from one point to another in history lessons. In addition, examples from geography lessons show a particular concern amongst educational authorities "to wean teachers from a soul-destroying mechanical approach" (182). The syllabus for this subject was to start with pupils making plans of the

¹² Fletcher's *Cyclopaedia* suggests, "reading should include ... intelligent comprehension of the subject matter" (308), thus seeming to align the two terms.

¹³ According to David Vincent, the look-and-say method of reading instruction was largely responsible for the turn around. Rather than beginning with disconnected syllables, this method (which received official sanction by the Committee of Council in 1852) first introduced children to "complete, monosyllabic words, preferably in the context of short sentences" (84). As well, look-and-say "demanded that the teacher should make a positive response to the knowledge and skills that pupils brought into school" (84). Cf. White 14-16.

school and playground, and the school was to possess “good maps of the county and immediate neighborhood of the school,” while the teacher was “to know the exact distance of a few near and familiar places” (182-3). For many working-class children at the beginning of the century, on the other hand, geography lessons meant learning little more than the landscape of the Holy Land.¹⁴ How far the recommendations made to teachers in training really went towards affecting the actual conditions of lessons is hard to determine.

As new methods of teaching reading and other subjects were beginning to circulate, the definition of intelligence was evolving. Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, the association that intelligence had always had with comprehension remained, and “it was a formal requirement of the Code that children answer questions on the meaning of the text they had read” (Vincent 91). At its worst, this form of interrogation could be remarkably similar to the forms of catechistic instruction common to church schools of the early nineteenth century and described in Chapter 1. However, the “cognitive processes” involved in comprehension and retention “were being construed in an increasingly active sense” (Vincent 91), so that where educators and examiners had once been primarily concerned with their students’ abilities to acquire and retain a defined quantity of information, their emphasis shifted in the final decades of the century to abilities like those that Arnold had called for in 1874 – animation of mind and the ability to connect ideas. This new model of reading with intelligence was based on a child’s ability to make his or her own connections between the world and the page.¹⁵ For instance, the remarks of a school inspector for Finsbury, J.G.C. Fussell, suggest that the want of intelligence seen in the inspected schools was not a result of a particularly stubborn and

¹⁴ Cf. Rose 350-62. Rose argues that biblical education, so common in the early nineteenth century, “could produce a kind of Anglo-Zionism, in which children conflated contemporary England and ancient Israel to the point where they merged into a common homeland” (350).

¹⁵ Galbraith suggests that the model of intelligent reading in elementary schools of the late Victorian period was primarily contrasted with “accurate” reading. A child might read accurately, but do so without intelligence (125-6).

ignorant population of students, but of a failure of the system used to educate them. Fussell believes that the “failure of intelligence” in the children he inspects arises from “the want of a more intelligent system of training the children to observe and think for themselves” (qtd. in Major 2: 23-4).¹⁶ To address this failure, teachers need to encourage their children to “study the meaning of the entire sentence, as well as of its component words” (24).

If Fussell’s comments reflect a majority viewpoint about the methods used to teach reading and writing (and Vincent’s analysis suggests that they do), then it seems that a minor revolution had occurred in the theory of education since the beginning of the period. While elementary school students were once actively discouraged from thinking for themselves by persistent oral instruction and interrogation, they were now being asked to think for themselves and to show that they were doing so as signs that they had “intelligently” incorporated outside knowledge into their own mental networks. Fussell goes on to acknowledge that many children had been given the impression that written language was an enclosed signifying system or “an artificial game played to amuse the teacher” (qtd. in Vincent 91), when what they should have been shown was that the words they were taught “mean something” and that they “stand for things ... with which they are familiar”(91).

Adding to his comments from nearly a decade earlier, Arnold puts forward, in his report for 1882, a view on the requirements of instruction similar to Fussell’s. He reemphasizes the activity of the pupil, and claims that the mind is strained “the more it has to receive a number of ‘knowledges’ passively, and to store them up to be reproduced in examination” (Arnold et al 256). Arnold calls for more activity and creation in elementary schools and argues that exercises be used as a means of helping pupils to think for themselves. As long as language is taught as a form of passive knowledge to be received and then

¹⁶ Henry Major, *How to Earn the Merit Grant, An Elementary Manual of School Management and Method For Pupil Teachers, Assistant and Head Teachers*, 2 vols. (London: George Bell & Sons, 1883).

reproduced for a teacher or inspector, it will never become a part of the pupil's intelligence as it might if it were associated with what Arnold calls "a sense of pleasurable activity and creation" (257). Intelligent reading only becomes perceptible, Arnold believes, when children are able to make connections between what they are reading and the body of knowledge that they have built up before coming to school (and to which they continue to add to outside the schoolroom). By the end of the century, at least some children were finally being asked to create knowledge as they read, rather than to receive information passively.

The persistence of new views like those of Arnold and Fussell on the role of education in the lives of working-class children and the place of intelligence within the education system is evident as well in some of the official documents regarding elementary schools in the final decade of the century. At the forefront of the movement to do away with the earlier, utilitarian style of instruction and inspection was the Committee of Council on Education, and their views on what was required in elementary instruction show how widespread the opinions expressed by school inspectors were. In their report for 1897-98, for instance, the Committee members stated their approval of increased liberties for teachers and their belief that new methods of instruction would pave the way for more lasting intellectual advances amongst working-class children. By the time the Committee's report was released, payment by results had been abolished, and new ways of allocating money for schools had been established in its place. The Committee members affirm their support for these transformations and voice their displeasure with "the false standard of educational excellence which the old system of examination tended to set up":

The most permanent and valuable results of education are not those which can be elaborately displayed on an annual field day. It is misleading to attempt to measure a teacher's educational skill or the more lasting effects of his instruction on the faculties

and character of his pupils by a test which tends to throw the chief stress on the reproduction of a certain amount of knowledge on an appointed day. (qtd. in Goldstrom 161)

According to the Committee members, the goal of education and reading instruction at the end of the Victorian period was to foster the “slow but less showy processes of thorough intellectual discipline” (162). For administrators and inspectors alike, reading lessons that revolved around passive reception and reproduction of information constituted no education at all, and the views of these officials represent clear evidence of a new understanding in the final decades of the nineteenth century of what was involved in the activity of reading.¹⁷

Writing Instruction in Victorian Elementary Schools and Textbooks

As the requirements for displaying intelligence began to change in late Victorian elementary schools, children were more frequently called on to show an active engagement with the information that their readers presented them with. One result was that writing – that other side of the double-edged tool of literacy – began to take a more prominent role in elementary instruction. Educators had begun increasingly to recognize that “reading and writing [were] complementary processes” (Fletcher 306) during the latter decades of the century. However, while writing formed a greater portion of the elementary curriculum after 1870, the skill did have a history in elementary schools throughout the nineteenth century, and it is important to trace this development in order to understand the context of writing instruction’s later expansion. To take this look back, my discussion will break briefly from the

¹⁷ Galbraith shows that while the drive to improve the intelligence of working-class children was going on, with School Boards devising new techniques to prepare a portion of their students for secondary education, educators were also becoming more concerned with increasing the amount of practical and technical instruction children received in elementary schools. She argues that these two concerns – making the working classes more intelligent and making them more productive in the nation’s industries – competed for attention in the 1880s and 1890s (129-131).

late-Victorian period in order to show how writing evolved to become an important component of education.

It had long been acknowledged that writing was one of the abilities that working-class pupils *should* be taught, but the history of writing instruction in nineteenth-century Britain provides ample evidence that such an acknowledgement rarely led to practical results. For most of the nineteenth century, the definition of “writing” held by those involved in elementary education was very narrow. In fact, “writing” meant copying for most Victorian educators, and even when it was discussed in the first Revised Code, which made it one of the three central areas of instruction, “writing” still tended to refer only to penmanship and spelling: “The summit of a school’s ambition was to turn out children capable of setting down to the inspector’s satisfaction a ‘short ordinary paragraph in a newspaper, or other modern narrative, slowly dictated once by a few words at a time’” (Vincent 89).¹⁸ For many elementary school pupils, however, even this level of competency in writing was out of reach, as a large portion of the schools of the early Victorian period taught their students almost no writing at all. Basing his claims on surveys conducted by statistical societies in the early Victorian period, David Mitch shows that reading was almost always taught before writing in elementary schools, not simultaneously (xvii).

The vast majority of partial literates, a group that could be found in large numbers in the mid-Victorian period, were able to read a little but not write, and Mitch suggests that this was the case because “reading is a more passive skill ... generally easier to master than the more active skill of writing” (xvii). However, it is also true that because writing was often taught well after reading, and because many working-class children attended school so irregularly and for such short periods of time, these children may have been given almost no

¹⁸ Vincent is quoting the Revised Code of 1862.

writing instruction at all if their elementary schooling was completed before the adoption of the Revised Code.¹⁹ The comments of W. Noel – who although not one of Her Majesty’s Inspectors, was sent by the Committee of Council on Education to report on the state of schools in Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, and elsewhere in Lancashire in 1840 – suggest the deficiencies of writing instruction in the early Victorian period: “In some of the girls’ schools very few of the children could write, and the writing was very bad; while even in boys’ schools, where more attention was paid to this important art, there were very few boys, and in very few schools, who had attained a good running hand without the aid of lines” (174).²⁰ Pamela and Harold Silver note in their *Education of the Poor* that Noel’s “general summary is not untypical of the reports which were being submitted on both British and National schools” during the 1840s and 1850s (55-6).²¹

The problems of teaching writing to the children of labourers were also addressed in teaching guides and manuals from the early Victorian period. For example, in his 1837 teaching manual, *Principles of Teaching; or, The Normal School Manual*, Henry Dunn explains in a section on spelling some of the difficulties surrounding writing instruction. He cites the theories of two other educators, Parkhurst and Thayer, who each claim that the best way to teach spelling is through writing lessons because spelling is a visual rather than an oral skill. To Dunn, who well understood from his time as a schoolteacher the conditions of education for the poor in England, the method suggested by these men presented problems for

¹⁹ For a contemporary account of the differences in the attainment of reading and writing skills in England in the early Victorian period, see “On the Proportion of Persons in England Capable of Reading and Writing,” *Penny Magazine* 7 (1838): 319-20, 323-4. Here, in his examination of literacy in a few areas of rural England (parts of Sussex and of Lincolnshire), the writer finds that the ability to write is possessed by far fewer labourers than is the ability to read. For one mining parish in Cornwall, for instance, 75% of the population above the age of twelve are able to read, but less than half of the population can write (323).

²⁰ Great Britain Committee on Education, *Minutes of the Committee of Council on Education, With Appendices, 1840-1* (London: William Clowes & Sons, 1841).

²¹ Harold and Pamela Silver, *The Education of the Poor: The History of a National School, 1824-1974* (London & Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974).

the elementary schoolteacher because “spelling has to be taught not only in Sunday Schools, where writing forms no part of the instruction communicated ... but also to thousands in day-schools, who do not remain long enough to write with that freedom which is necessary in order to put down sentences from dictation” (75). As a result, Dunn explains, “we cannot do without distinct lessons for oral spelling” (75). Dunn’s concerns show how little a part writing instruction played in elementary education before 1862, even when “writing” is defined as narrowly as it was in the context of Victorian elementary schooling.

When Dunn does provide hints on writing instruction, they all involve elements of penmanship – how best to move from slate to pen and paper, whether or not to allow children to write in “what is termed ‘small hand’,” how best to teach “the current or running hand,” how to preserve the “right position of body,” and what kind of pen to use (89-90). He has almost nothing to say about composition. For Dunn, and the teachers who learned from his manual, writing was “merely imitative” (89), having nothing to do with creation or expression. When he does mention composition, Dunn says very little, but his statements provide some indication of why it made up such a small part of elementary instruction in the early and middle years of the Victorian period: “With us [composition] has been almost entirely neglected. I suppose it has generally been imagined that prejudice would be excited by an attempt to teach the children of the poor to express their thoughts on paper” (110-11). According to Dunn, writing that transcended simple copying and spelling – writing that was seen as a form of expression – was not taught in elementary schools of the early-Victorian period because the thoughts and experiences of the poor were often thought to be of little value.²² We have seen, as well, that a large portion of elementary education was purely utilitarian – a fact much lamented by men like Matthew Arnold – and it is likely that educators

²² Rose contends, as well, that in the schools that served the working classes in the early Victorian period, “writing, or any other form of self-expression, was not encouraged” (148).

saw little value in teaching the lower orders to communicate or record their thoughts in any lasting form. Reading (especially reading improving or religious material) would moralize the workers, and the ability to copy might help them get a better job, and so the benefits of writing were not considered as important for members of the working class to be able to access as were the benefits of reading.²³

Although writing continued to take a back seat to reading instruction throughout the 1840s and 1850s, educators and working-class parents began to see the skill as a more important aspect of elementary education by the time the Revised Code came to pass. The greater emphasis placed on writing instruction under the Revised Code was at least partially the result of pressures from the parents of working-class children. For instance, a section of the 1861 report of the Newcastle Commission on the management of Day Schools states that while the “general principle” upon which nineteenth-century educators and politicians endeavored to promote popular education was that “a large portion of the poorer classes of the population were in a condition injurious to their own interests, and dangerous and discreditable to the rest of the community,” parents themselves “cannot be expected to entertain the same view of the moral and social condition of their class” (Levi 192).²⁴ The report claims, furthermore, that these parental consumers “act individually for the advantage of their respective children,” so that they “attach a higher importance than the promoters and managers of the schools to the specific knowledge which will be profitable to the child in life” (192). One Commissioner, Mr. Cumin, claims in his Newcastle testimony that, as a result of attaching this higher importance to specific skills and knowledge, working-class parents

²³ David Mitch maintains that, regardless of the emphasis on reading instruction in Victorian elementary schools, many working men and women were more interested in “mastering writing and arithmetic than reading because they perceived that the former two skills were more valuable in the labor market”(12). The ability to write, Mitch believes, was one of the major ways in which literacy functioned in the workplace.

²⁴ Leone Levi, ed., *Annals of British Legislation*, vol. 11 (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1862).

“looked entirely to whether the school supplied good reading, writing, and arithmetic” (*Report* 159).²⁵ Cumin’s comments are also made in the context of a discussion of the religious content of elementary education. There was little objection to this content amongst parents as long as a solid curriculum of reading and writing was also provided. The emphasis on the three R’s and the simultaneous instruction of reading and writing under the Revised Code was a direct result of these discoveries, and it led to a greater incidence of writing classes because of the employment opportunities that writing was perceived to create.

Readers produced under the dictates of the Revised Code, such as J.M.D. Meiklejohn’s, encouraged the combination of the reading and writing instruction that the Code prescribed from the very beginning of a child’s schooling. This was not always the case with the other primers produced before the code. Mortimer’s *Reading Without Tears*, for instance, contains no writing exercises; her book is intended only for the teaching of reading, and it is Mortimer’s philosophy that reading be learned thoroughly – in a pleasing environment – before the skills of spelling and penmanship are acquired. In contrast, Meiklejohn advises teachers in the preface of his *First Primer* to “let their pupils begin to write and read script from the beginning” (3). The children using this book would have been approximately the same age as those using *Reading Without Tears*, so the advice suggests a change in educational philosophy between the two authors, and perhaps between the two periods.²⁶

Following Meiklejohn’s principle of simultaneous instruction in reading and writing, the book provides the words “cat hat rat” written out in manuscript at the bottom of the second lesson,

²⁵ *The Authorized Report of the Proceedings of the Church Congress Held at York, on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, October 9th, 10th, and 11th, 1866* (London: Rivingtons, 1867). David Mitch argues that these specific skills were amalgamated in the minds of parents with behavioural habits associated with education: “One possibility [for the dramatic increase in the literacy rate in the late Victorian period] is that not only public authorities but also many working-class parents perceived that schools did more than teach reading and writing. These parents may have valued habits of orderliness and discipline that they believed schools instilled in their children as well as instruction in reading and writing” (206).

²⁶ J.M.D. Meiklejohn, *The First Primer: Being the Alphabet in Pictures and Words* (London & Edinburgh: W. & R. Chambers, 1878). My citations refer to the 1881 Canadian edition, published in Toronto by W.J. Gage & Co.

nouns which are contained in the first set of sentences the First Standard students are asked to read in the lesson (7). Furthermore, two alphabets, one in print and one in script, precede the lessons. The use of script here is meant to initiate children in this form of writing so that they will be more familiar with it when they are asked, in later Standards, to write out words and sentences in script themselves. While almost every page of Meiklejohn's *First Primer* contains some lines in script, there are no exercises that ask for the pupil to write anything, though teachers might easily have employed the lines of script as models for early exercises in copying.²⁷

In Book II of Meiklejohn's series, designed for the Second Standard, writing takes a more central position, and students are asked to write out (that is, copy) complete sentences and lists of words that contain specific combinations of letters (12-13).²⁸ For instance, in the very first lesson of Meiklejohn's Canadian edition of the reader, entitled "Birds," children are asked to "write the line: The ostrich is the largest of birds" (13). The line is written out in script for the child to copy into an exercise book. A later exercise in the same lesson asks children to "write down all the words that have in them an *ea*; an *ai*; and *oa*; and an *oi*" (13). These kinds of writing exercises are present throughout the original British volume as well, and, according to the graduated nature of the lessons, the lines to be copied get increasingly longer and more complex. Many of the exercises in the latter half of the reader also incorporate grammar questions, asking children to identify parts of speech in the passages they have read. For instance, in the second lesson, based on a poem called "A Winter Morning," students are asked to write out lines of the poem in script, turn adjectives into

²⁷ Another series of readers produced after the passing of the Revised Code, *Chambers's Narrative Readers* (London and Edinburgh: W. & R. Chambers & Co., 1863), also contains a number of writing lessons. The books are adapted to the requirements of the Code, and dictation is taught in the reader for Standard IV "by constructing at the end of each prose lesson a sentence or two composed of the more difficult words in the lesson" (iii).

²⁸ J.M.D. Meiklejohn, *English Readers, Book II* (Toronto: Gage & Co., 1881). Again, this Canadian edition contains lessons identical to those in the original Chambers edition.

nouns, and construct sentences from phrases (15-16).²⁹ While these exercises would function as an introduction to composition, no exercises in Book II of the series call for the actual creation of sentences by the students themselves.

In his *Problems of Teaching to Read*, published shortly after the series of readers he produced for the Chambers brothers, Meiklejohn adds to his recommendations regarding elementary writing instruction as a method of teaching reading. There, the author explains that the fifth step of a multi-leveled process of teaching children to read consists of “REPRODUCTION BY THE CHILD on the WORD-MAKER” (55). This piece of “apparatus” is made up of “three wheels of cardboard – one on the left, one on the right, and one in the middle” (55). The two outer wheels contain initial and final consonants, while the center wheel contains vowel sounds. According to the author’s plan, the teacher uses a larger version of the Word-Maker, and asks children to form simple words – such as “bat,” “cat,” or “rat” – in what comes to be a rudimentary form of writing lesson, technologically mediated though it is. Why, one might naturally ask, does the introduction to writing need to be conducted in such a convoluted and technologically-mediated form? Meiklejohn recognizes that it would be better if children could avoid the Word-Maker altogether “and print the word upon their slates. But this few children can do; and it is well to enlist the labour of the hand from the very first in learning to read” (56). Alternately, another “very useful drill . . . which would interest the children, and also provide a good outlet for their bodily activity – would be *printing in the air*” (57). Such “gymnastic printing” provides another useful introduction to the work of writing, a skill to be learned in more detail later in a child’s education. That these readers were produced after composition officially entered the curriculum suggests that

²⁹ J.M.D. Meiklejohn, *Chambers’s English Readers, Book II* (London & Edinburgh: W. & R. Chambers, 1878)

copying and spelling continued to be central to writing instruction well into the final decades of the century.

The Role of Composition in Victorian Schools and Textbooks

One could expect to find lessons in penmanship and orthography in a number of early- to mid-Victorian schools, but composition was a blank spot in the elementary curriculum before the 1870s. Ian Michael notes, for instance, “there is less textbook evidence for the teaching of composition [before 1870] than for any other aspect of English” (315).³⁰ He believes that this is so because of the nature of composition itself: “The skill of interpretation is limited by a finite (even if unknown) number of ‘possible’ interpretations: the words are there. The skill of expression has no such limits: the words are not there” (315). Because of this limitlessness, the initiative to produce had to be with the pupils themselves, while their teachers would have had a hard time directing them with the few general ideas about composition they themselves possessed. In listing the three “handicaps” that children emerging from school both before and after the Revised Code had to overcome in order to take any part in the broader intellectual culture of the nation, Vincent includes the fact that “the pen was for copying the sentences of others, not inventing your own” (218). Like the interpretive skill of reading, penmanship had certain limited standards, making it easier than composition to teach in elementary schools.

Even after composition was admitted to the official curriculum in 1871, partly as a means of encouraging members of the working class finally to exploit the Penny Post (established nearly three decades earlier), the problems attached to teaching children to write down their thoughts and experiences persisted. The central problem seems to have been that,

³⁰ Ian Michael, *The Teaching of English: From the Sixteenth Century to 1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987).

for the majority of educators, composition was seen as a form of communication foreign to the masses. In the Report of the Committee of Council on Education in 1873, for instance, C.F. Johnstone expresses his views on the problems facing students when it comes to composition, pointing out that elementary school children “cannot write English because they do not understand English. They have had no homes, perhaps, in which they could associate with educated persons, and no familiarity with educated speech” (*Report* 92-3).³¹ According to Johnstone, this “want has never been made good by any training in their schools which could give them the understanding of their language and a facility in the use of it” (93). Those bold enough to try their hands at composition, he believes, are “unable to find their own voice” (93), and he accuses the pupil-authors of compositions he has seen in elementary schools of “affectation and bad taste” (93).³² Yet, the teachers themselves are to be blamed for the failings of their students, because they seldom attempt to teach composition: “They urge that the number who require it is small, and that they cannot afford to spend the necessary time on the instruction of so few scholars; but the excuse must often be set forward to cover an inability to teach” (93).

In some ways, although advances had been made in the methods of instruction in writing for elementary school children, little seems to have changed in the attitudes towards the self-expression of the lower classes in the nearly four decades that separate the comments of Henry Dunn and Johnstone on teaching composition in elementary school. Both educators suggest that some cultural deficiency on the part of the working-class child prevents him from

³¹ *Report of the Committee of Council on Education with Appendix, 1872-3* (London, 1873).

³² What Johnstone is witnessing in these composition lessons may be a product of how composition was traditionally taught. Ian Michael refers in his *Teaching of English* to the common belief in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that imitation of great writers was the best way to learn to express oneself (279-81). Although this emphasis seems to have lessened in the Victorian period, it is possible that traditional beliefs about composition persisted in schools for working-class children. Michael quotes a reader from as late as 1842 that advances imitation of great authors as the best instruction for composition.

expressing himself in writing. Ian Michael believes this is the case partly because “very few teachers ... believed that children had, in their own fashion, the power of authentic expression” (316), without which they were incapable of doing anything but imitate their betters. Such imitation would have seemed especially offensive when it came from the pen of a labourer’s son or daughter. In the examples provided by the claims of Dunn and Johnstone, however, it is the earlier educator who holds the more liberal view, as Dunn recognizes that the restriction of composition in charity schools is caused by the “prejudice” (111) of the middle-class men and women who conducted the schools.

It should be noted, however, that Johnstone’s dire views on composition lessons come from the point of view of the educational establishment at the supply end of the educational economy. His doubts about the possibility and quality of composition can be contested by contrary testimony provided by working-class autobiography. Some children who attended elementary schools in the final decades of the nineteenth century were impressed with the role that composition took in their school days. For instance, H.M. Tomlinson, who attended an East End Board school in the 1880s and ‘90s, credited his elementary education “with encouraging free expression in composition classes and giving him a solid literary footing in the Bible, Shakespeare, and Scott” (Rose 157-8). That Tomlinson, the son of a dockworker, went on to become a successful author complicates the views on working-class writing ability circulated by Johnstone and others like him. John Allway, an elementary school student of the next generation, recalled being given works of fiction to be read for their own sake and to be used as models in creative writing classes in his Edwardian school (Rose 159), a sign of how

educational policies of the late-Victorian period affected English school life into the twentieth century.³³

Given these sometimes conflicting views on the value and quality of writing instruction in elementary schools, it is important that we look more closely at the books used to teach penmanship, orthography, and composition in these schools in order to judge more directly the theories that supported the practice of writing instruction. Just how, and with what tools, were elementary school children taught to express themselves in writing? Can we assume, based on Heathorn's findings regarding the habitual use of readers in the Victorian elementary schools, that the writing skills children managed to pick up came from these popular schoolbooks? Indeed, as the passages above from Meiklejohn's primers suggest, penmanship and spelling were frequently taught through general and widely used readers in the latter half of the Victorian period. If these books were published after 1871, they might also contain exercises that called for composition for students in higher Standards. For example, in Meiklejohn's readers for the Chambers Brothers, children using Book III of the series are asked for the first time to write lines from dictation. In the next book, they are asked for the first time in the series to write something themselves. For the lesson entitled "Game-Birds," the pupil is asked in the final exercises to "write a short composition on 'The Partridge'" from a series of "heads" or suggestions (51).³⁴

Composition exercises like this continue, sporadically, for the remainder of the reader, and pupils are asked in one of the final exercises to transcribe into prose poetic narratives they have read. In the fourth volume of Meiklejohn's Canadian edition of the series, the literary

³³ Galbraith maintains that educational policies of the early twentieth century, especially those concerning literacy, "must be viewed in the light of an earlier generation of educators' faith in reading's power to unlock the doors of knowledge and of curricular changes spawned by compromises that had some unintended consequences" (122).

³⁴ J.M.D. Meiklejohn, *Chambers's English Readers, Book IV* (London and Edinburgh: W. & R. Chambers, 1879).

selections are increased and composition appears as part of the exercises from the first lesson on. Composition also takes on a more creative aspect in this reader. For instance, in a lesson based on a passage from “The Taking of Roxburgh Castle” by Walter Scott, students are asked in the eighth exercise to “write the story of ‘Douglas’s Black Cattle’ from the following outline” (52).³⁵ However, there are no instructions in the readers regarding how a composition is to be created, and the shift between writing from dictation and writing as a form of self-expression occurs very quickly. If children were expected to be able to tackle exercises in composition in Standard IV, it appears that by the time they had reached this level of education, their readers needed to be supplemented with other kinds of textbooks that provided further insight into the relationship between reading and composition.

Like Dunn’s *Principle of Teaching* in the early-nineteenth century, manuals for the administration of elementary schools from later in the century also presented models of composition and writing instruction, expressing individual philosophies towards this form of education. Thomas Morrison published a variety of education texts for English schools in the second-half of the nineteenth century, producing texts for both Collins’s and Nelson’s school series and editing another school series for Gall and Inglis in the 1870s and 1880s. In his *Manual of School Management*, first published in 1859 but later revised and reprinted in 1863 as a response to the Revised Code, Morrison has a number of hints and recommendations for teachers and pupil-teachers regarding how to teach writing. In the manual’s long chapter on writing, Morrison deals entirely with the physical aspects of the skill, answering questions about the height of letters, the inclination and distance of letters, what kind of pens to use, how to hold the pen, and how best to position the body for the work of writing. The absence of

³⁵ Ian Michael notes in his discussion of composition in *The Teaching of English* that it was believed by some educators that composition was disliked by pupils because it required a plunge into abstraction, and that “it was ... quite common practice to start pupils on retelling or paraphrasing a story” in order to interest them and to allow them to focus on the particular (312).

information on composition is fitting, considering the manual is trying to prepare teachers for the pre-1871 world of education. Morrison recognizes, however, that while the essential aspects of teaching writing are matters of penmanship, some method of teaching these skills is required even though “the mere blind imitation of examples” might possibly produce good writing from a boy gifted with “a good eye and a steady hand” (167). In the case of this gifted boy, good writing “will be the result of an accident,” so that such exercises will only go to develop the boy’s power of imitation “without calling into exercise any of the higher faculties of his mind” (167). Morrison’s statements suggest that the emphasis on intelligence that is evident in discussions of reading in the latter decades of the century also made its way into other parts of the elementary curriculum. While the ability to imitate was highly prized by educators of the early nineteenth century, more was required of pupils later in the century, as the result of new theories about education born of the reappraisal of elementary education in the 1850s and 1860s. Morrison advises against exercises in imitation in his *Manual* because he believes that for children who do not possess the skills of scriptural mimicry, the hour set apart for writing becomes “dull and monotonous,” and writing itself becomes “only so many unmeaning lines” (167). “Nor can it well be otherwise,” the author writes, “when we remember that work, which does not exercise the understanding, possesses no charms for the young” (167). Here, Morrison emphasizes the necessity of mental activity in the process of becoming literate.

When composition was first included in the Revised Code of 1871, it was in a redefined Standard VI, which stated that students were to learn how to compose “a short theme or letter or an easy paraphrase” (qtd. in Vincent 89).³⁶ Although exercises in

³⁶ Vincent, citing the *Report of the Committee of Council on Education* published in 1884, notes that by 1882, with compulsion in full effect and with a vast number of English children in Board Schools, “only 1.7 percent of [children enrolled] had taken the first steps towards using a pen to make up their own sentences” (90).

composition would eventually permeate some of the lower Standards throughout the final decades of the century (Vincent 93), the ability to compose remained a skill associated with older children.³⁷ This was partly the case because “it was generally assumed that children could do only what they were taught to do, and that children’s learning, in so far as it was more than memorization, was an intellectual activity that required from the teacher correspondingly analytic methods” (Michael 316). For the older children that learned composition, a number of books were available specifically for lessons in written expression. For instance, chapters on composition regularly show up in grammar texts. These texts became more common in elementary schools when grammar became a grant earning “class subject” in 1875. While some textbooks professed to teach composition in the early-nineteenth century, “they had few successors” (Michael 316), and having moved from the “strictly regulated apartments of rhetoric” the teacher of composition was more likely to find “shared accommodation with grammar” (316). Some of the grammar books that Meiklejohn produced in the 1870s and 1880s contain chapters on composition, versification, paraphrasing, and punctuation; for instance, *A Short Grammar of the English Tongue; with Three-Hundred and Thirty Exercises*, which the author published with the Canadian publisher W.J. Gage in 1891, contained an appendix on composition for Canadian schools with a number of exercises for the classroom. These composition exercises are similar to those contained in his readers, the

³⁷ The curriculum of one elementary school, Clifton Road School in Norwood, suggests this trend. A timetable for the school drawn up for the Cross Commission shows that boys in the first five Standards all received one and a half hours of instruction in writing or composition weekly (compared to three hours and twenty minutes of reading lessons). However, boys in the sixth Standard received an extra forty-five minutes of writing instruction, the time being made up by reduced lessons in geography and mapping. See Anne Digby and Peter Searby, *Children, School, and Society in Nineteenth-Century England* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981) 144.

main difference being that they are preceded by lessons on the creation of sentences, paragraphs, essays, and letters.³⁸

When Thomas Morrison finally mentions composition in his *Manual*, it is at the very end of a long chapter on teaching grammar. He points out that while all the lessons in grammar he has just discussed will teach children to use language correctly, a study of “actual composition will be necessary to give them complete mastery over forms of expression” (230). It is not enough to understand the rules of expression to be able to express oneself, just as it is not enough to learn models and forms of composition in order to give one the ability to form compositions oneself. Morrison condemns composition textbooks for reducing “the whole art of composition ... to a set of dry formal rules” that children are compelled to follow (230). In this way, the author shows his preference for a style of teaching composition that does not rely on imitation but on the *authentic voice* of pupils. We have seen, however, that as a school inspector, C.F. Johnstone (the inspector who believed that elementary children could not write English) considered the level of originality in compositions that Morrison hopes for here to be uncommon – if not impossible – because of the upbringing and lack of culture that working-class children were afforded. Yet, the concept of “authenticity” in expression was present in educational discourse throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Michael explains that “to judge writing authentic is not to claim for it any originality; it is authentic through being personal; its language is powered by the writer’s own feelings and interests, not by obedient imitation of a model. If the writing is authentic, it is argued, it will be structurally and stylistically better (even when ungrammatical) than if the topic had been prescribed and governed by rules” (306).

³⁸ J.M.D. Meiklejohn, *A Short Grammar of the English Tongue: with Three-Hundred and Thirty Exercises* (Toronto: W.J. Gage, 1891).

Morrison is more optimistic in his manual than Johnstone was, and he makes it clear that he is against imitation in composition lessons just as much as he is against it in writing lessons. He believes that it is “the teacher’s great aim in composition to ... educe the individuality of each child” (230). Because writing is “merely the garb of thought,” two individuals whose thoughts move in different channels, cannot be expected to write in the same voice and with the same style (230). Because of this, Morrison suggests that pupils be encouraged “to embody in writing their own ideas in their own way” (230). Morrison believes that educators may “rest assured that if a boy has got anything to say, he will find some mode of breaking the silence, and, inasmuch as that mode will be the product of his own individuality, it will contain a charm and a freshness which it never could have attained had it been stretched on the Procrustean bed of stilted pedantic rules” (230). Because he believes in the possibility of eliciting the authentic voice of child writers, he does not include any critical examination of style in the composition text that he published for Collins’ School Series in 1873. Any attempts at training children in style, he believes, would be “a waste of precious time” (3).³⁹ No boy of fourteen or fifteen can be expected “to write with the purity and the grace of an Addison; it is enough for him to be able to express his thoughts in plain, unvarnished, grammatical English” (3-4).

By advocating this level of writing in elementary schools, Morrison distances his teaching philosophy from many other nineteenth-century models that advocated imitation as a model for learning composition. In his reluctance to discuss style in his writing primer, Morrison also distinguishes his book from composition books intended for middle-class students in secondary schools and grammar schools, textbooks such as John Nichol’s *English*

³⁹ Thomas Morrison, *Text-Book of English Composition for English Schools* (London and Glasgow: William Collins, Sons & Co., 1873).

Composition (1878).⁴⁰ Nichol, the chair of English Language and Literature at the University of Glasgow in the 1860s, never intended his book to be read or used by a popular audience. His *English Composition* contains a section on the general laws of style as well as long chapters on purity, strength, and grace in writing. For Nichol, style is “the architecture of thought” (15), making it particularly difficult to remove from a composition textbook. His analysis of style is based on modern and classical rhetoric, a subject that would rarely, if ever, have entered an elementary classroom.

Other educators and authors tried to combine the practicality of Morrison’s approach with the stylistic analysis of Nichol’s study. In a textbook that Meiklejohn produced for the training of pupil-teachers (the majority of whom were taken from the working and lower-middle classes), the author steers a kind of middle course between advocating the imitation of models and advocating authenticity.⁴¹ For instance, he declares that “reading the best and most vigorous writers” is the second rule of good composition – second only to “clear thinking” – (159), and that by reading “diligently in the best poets, historians, and essayists” in order to “get by heart the most striking passages in a good author” a student will be able to build up “a large stock of appropriate words and striking phrases,” thereby ensuring that he or she is “never at a loss for the right words to express our own sense” (159). However, he also suggests in a later section on general cautions that writers allow their authentic voices to come out: “Be simple, quiet, manly, frank, and straightforward in your style, as in your conduct. That is: Be yourself!” (169).⁴² Although his comments may sound contradictory in this

⁴⁰ John Nichol, *English Composition* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1878).

⁴¹ J.M.D. Meiklejohn, *The English Language: Its Grammar, History, and Literature, with Chapters on Composition, Versification, Paraphrasing, and Punctuation* (London: Blackwood, 1886).

⁴² The instruction to write in a “manly, frank” style might have been difficult to follow for students in “Ladies’ Colleges,” another possible audience Meiklejohn suggests in his preface (3).

discussion of style, the main focus of Meiklejohn's advice to writers is closer in spirit to Morrison's than it is to eighteenth-century educators who recommended imitation before all else. While Meiklejohn's textbook also contains a section that, similar to Nichol's, provides hints on style, it also dissuades students from using foreign words and phrases in favour of "pure English," pointing out that "affectation of all kinds is disgusting" (161).

There are a number of important ideas clustered around the concept of style in debates on Victorian working-class education. Galbraith's discussion of post-1870 education decisions by the Department of Education (later, the Board of Education) helps to draw these ideas out. In 1902, she points out, an act of Parliament made it necessary for the first time that the state contribute to the funding of secondary schools. The Education Act passed that same year, which represented the biggest change to English education policy since Forster's Act in 1870, "forced the government to mark the boundaries between a terminal elementary education for working-class students and a secondary education for middle-class students and a minority of working-class scholarship students" (121). Basing her arguments on Jacqueline Rose's study of attempts made by the Board of Education to turn J.M. Barrie's *Peter and Wendy* into an elementary reader, Galbraith shows that as a result of the Board's determination of the boundaries between elementary and secondary education, it began using "two different forms of language to distinguish between classes of children after 1902" (121).

While these distinctions were being drawn in the first decade of the twentieth century, Galbraith argues that they should be viewed in the light of decisions made by educators after 1870. Quoting Rose, she argues that in the last decades of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, state educational policy "rigorously distinguished between a 'language of elementary experience and one of cultural style'" (Galbraith 121). The simple language that working-class children were to be taught to use needed to be distinguished from the "literary"

language taught to middle-class children in secondary schools, and to do so the language taught in elementary schools focused on the ordinary world of students – “the sights and sounds, the thoughts and experiences of everyday life” (Rose qtd. in Galbraith 121). Galbraith explains that this “new functional, ‘natural’ language would be taught through visual images and concrete objects. Its literature, based on physical actions ... should be read for the story, not for the form” (121). On the other hand, the ‘literary’ language taught to middle-class children “would place more emphasis on cadence and quality in children's speech and structure and style in their writing” (121). Distinctions of this nature took a central place in the educational landscape after 1870, a period in which the requirements of working-class pupils were constantly in question. The discussion above about the changes to readers and the advent of intelligent and expressive reading in the latter decades of the century provides evidence that reading lessons and the books used to give them were key in these debates. However, texts used to teach writing and composition show that the majority view during the period was that elementary education ought to furnish the children of the lower-classes with “the concrete facts necessary to enter the working class,” and not “with critical skills and imaginative powers” reserved for the middle and upper classes (122).

In the context of these debates, we should see the comments Thomas Morrison makes in the preface to his composition text in an altered light. He explains in his *Text-Book of English Composition* that in constructing the book he “has kept steadily in view the fact that the school life of the great majority of children is short, and that much has to be done in little time, and, frequently, with very imperfect appliances” (3). Recognizing the terminal nature of elementary education, the fact that working-class children will attend school only until their early teens before being let loose into the world of work, Morrison chooses to “familiarize the learner, in a *practical* way” with the basics of composition, including sentence structure,

paraphrasing, and the creation of letters, narratives, and essays (3).⁴³ He believes that “anything more than this cannot, with reason, be expected from the pupils attending ordinary elementary schools” (3). As in his comments on the analysis of style, Morrison distinguishes in these remarks between a simple, natural, and practical writing ability for working-class children and a capacity for culture and style that might be found in pupils attending secondary schools.

The Place of Writing in Late-Victorian Educational Debates

Although it might appear that the term “practical” is used in an offhand way in Morrison’s preface, the cultural context of his textbook makes the term more revealing of the ideology behind the author’s comments. Even more than the heightened ability of reading called for by the new Codes in the 1870s and 1880s, the advanced skills in writing and composition could be seen as extraneous to the minimum requirements of elementary education. Galbraith and Vincent both show that educators began increasingly to question the ultimate ends of education for the working classes and to try to determine if the advanced, intellectual education that pupils were receiving under the Education Codes after the 1870s was in the best interest of either the pupils themselves or the nation in which they lived. The “basic skills” and “concrete facts” that Galbraith identifies as one potential current of popular education are in line with the “practical” abilities that Morrison intends to develop in the pupils that use his textbook. Similarly, Victorian educators in Church and Board schools were “consciously attempting to create new types of intelligence for new modes of production,” and believed that the goal of teachers was to “produce young men able to approach the task of earning a living, whether in an established trade or in an industrializing sector, in an entirely

⁴³ Emphasis mine.

new frame of mind” (Vincent 104). Although it was not universal, this drive was far more widespread in the 1880s and 1890s than it had been in earlier decades.

The urge to instruct the children attending elementary schools, and by so doing to assist them in their entry into the labour market, competed with the urge to improve their intellectual education and further open their minds to culture, with the latter movement represented most obviously by Matthew Arnold. Pitted against Arnold’s views on culture were other fears – voiced most often by conservatives – that the working classes might easily be “overeducated” by their Board School educations. To these conservatives, the level of instruction that elementary pupils received in reading and writing was beginning to appear far too “clerky” (Galbraith 130).⁴⁴ Concerns about what this “advanced” intellectual education was doing to the nation’s youth are voiced in a letter to *Punch* from “Another Indignant Ratepayer” in 1887, for instance.⁴⁵ In this letter to the editor, the correspondent calls the plan of education adopted by the School Board since 1862 “not only worthless but absolutely mischievous” because it “unfits both boys and girls for the serious business of life” (169). It teaches boys to despise all manual labour and girls to despise domestic service. The writer explains the result of modern education this way: “The boys all want to be clerks; what the girls want to be we are not informed, but domestic service is not to be thought of, so the sooner my wife and daughters take to such work the better. And for this have I paid treble rates” (169). The writer resents, furthermore, that his taxes have been used to injure the health of half the poor children of London, and injure the morals of the other half.

⁴⁴ Kate Flint has shown in *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) that, when it came to girls in Board Schools, the fear was not that they would become too much like clerks, but that they would ignore their ultimate domestic role in favour of less traditional occupations (119). She argues that the “practice in working-class schools bore out, even more forcibly, the existence of [the] prevalent assumptions” about the domestic role of women advanced by educators in schools that taught girls of the upper and middle classes (119).

⁴⁵ “All in the Wrong,” *Punch* 42 (1887): 169.

As a result of these complaints, one of the key questions concerning elementary education in the 1880s and 1890s was, in Galbraith's words, "How could elementary education cultivate children's intelligence and be made less bookish, more relevant to children's future in manual labour?" (129). In his history of nineteenth-century elementary education, Frank Smith points out that because questions like this were asked throughout the final decades of the century, schools faced increased criticism about their curriculum. "The plea for a less bookish and more practical kind of instruction, led by Herbert Spencer and Thomas Huxley at an earlier date," he explains, "was finding more and more advocates" in the 1880s (Smith 321).⁴⁶ The two figures most closely associated with this debate were John Lubbock and Phillip Magnus. Besides being the compiler of the famous "100 Best Books" list, Lubbock was an amateur scientist and self-professed "scientific" MP, who believed that an earlier generation of educators had demonstrated through their arguments "the truth that instruction in reading was helped by the inclusion of practical subjects in the curriculum" (Smith 321-2). He believed scientific training was essential, and pointed out that even Arnold himself thought that teaching the science of the natural world in the classroom was a good idea. Phillip Magnus was an educator who had a long association with technical instruction, having in 1880 been installed as the first secretary for the City and Guilds of London Institute for the Advancement of Technical Education. He was also a member of the royal commission on technical instruction appointed by Parliament in 1881.⁴⁷ Magnus believed that instruction in technical drawing and in the use of tools for working iron and wood "stimulated the intelligence, and improved the physique of the children; that the discipline was pleasant to the

⁴⁶ Frank Smith, *A History of English Elementary Education, 1760-1902* (London: U of London P, 1931). Cf. Altick (1957) 163-5. For more on the debate on scientific education between Huxley and Matthew Arnold, see Walcott 27 ff.

⁴⁷ Bill Bailey, "Magnus, Sir Philip, first baronet (1842-1933)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Online*, (Oxford UP, 2004), 15 June, 2009.

learners, and that, while it gave reality to much of the abstract teaching of the school, it endowed the young workers with manual skill and adroitness, which remained with them a permanent possession for life” (Magnus 149).⁴⁸ While Magnus claimed that practical and technical instruction were beneficial as a means of developing and extending the intelligence of children, and a welcome departure from the bookish curriculum of more advanced reading, writing, and composition that had previously been known in elementary schools, Smith suggests another motivation: “There was in all this a fervent belief in the educational and moral values of handwork; there was also a fear that foreign nations were developing in their systems of elementary technical instruction in such a way as would imperil English manufacturers” (Smith 323).

Writing had an important role in debates over the future of the nation’s workers because the manner in which it was taught had changed so dramatically. Since writing was once rarely taught to the children of labourers, with composition almost never discussed, it was much easier for critics to question the value and ultimate educational ends of writing instruction than it was those of reading. In an environment influenced by concerns over the industrial and economic wellbeing of the empire, teaching twelve- and thirteen-year-old sons and daughters of mechanics and miners how to appreciate and mimic the style of England’s literary greats must have seemed counterproductive to those lacking Arnold’s faith in the humanizing power of poetry and art. At the same time, the ability to write could be very valuable in some of the nation’s industries – much more so than some of the specific subjects that children were regularly taught (such as geography or physiology) – making it a

⁴⁸ Philip Magnus, *Educational Aims and Efforts: 1880-1910* (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1910). Cf. Charles Alpheus Bennett, *History of Manual and Industrial Education, 1870-1917* (London: Chas. A Bennett Co., 1926).

potentially practical skill for members of an educated working-class.⁴⁹ Writing's perceived practical utility heightened the focus placed on it in these debates. While Thomas Morrison does not believe that composition is a skill alien to the children of the working classes, judging by his text, he clearly held that this kind of writing was a skill that should be taught with a practical goal kept clearly in view. Elementary school students were not entirely barred from composition by any natural or cultural deficiencies, his comments suggest, but their capabilities in the subject were restricted by the circumstances of their education. His composition text is therefore a balance between material that will interest pupils and material that will help them in their upcoming roles in the world of work.

Sir Philip Magnus claimed to believe that further technical instruction in schools would do much to stimulate pupils' intelligence – that all-important quality and measure of ability in discussions of reading and education. However, composition seems to have been taken even more than other technical skills – even more than reading, in fact – as a sign of intelligence and mental activity in elementary schools. The fact that it was most often taught to older students provides some evidence of this view, and comments throughout manuals and composition textbooks cited above further reveal the role that written composition had to play as a test of a student's mental activity and ability. Ian Michael goes so far as to suggest that it was educators' understanding of composition as an advanced “intellectual activity” requiring “analytic methods” from teachers that kept composition from being taught as often as reading, spelling, or penmanship in nineteenth-century English schools (316).

⁴⁹ Even in the mid-nineteenth century, the Post Office (which would become the largest single employer of labour in the country by the time of the First World War) asked for written reports on job candidates accompanied by writing specimens (Vincent 122-3). Although literacy skills were ranked behind attitude in other industries for much of the Victorian period, Vincent admits that “by the end of the century efforts were being made to enhance the formal qualifications of the elites of the industrial workforce,” with those who sought further education tending to do so in hopes of “escaping the shop floor altogether” (128).

The basis for judging the extent of a student's intellectual activity in writing exercises differed from that of reading exercises. As we have seen, when questions about reading as a measure of intelligence were asked, "intelligence" was most closely associated with understanding or comprehension, as well as a child's ability to incorporate knowledge he or she learned in school into the body of prior experience. In contrast, the mental activities most closely associated with intelligence in composition were inventiveness and the ability to recall stores of knowledge. In Morrison's view, writing is "merely the garb of thought," and by studying a student's composition, a teacher will be given a useful view of a child's mental activity. Morrison suggests that students ought to be encouraged to "embody in writing their own ideas in their own way," free from "stilted pedantic rules" (230). Allowing for a degree of freedom in expression will offer teachers a better opportunity to observe the distinct mental processes of the writer. Problems for students might arise out of the freedom afforded to them, however, because "in all composition exercises ... the prime necessity is to see that the pupil has something in his mind which he desires to express in words" (230). In this way, a fluency in composition could be seen as a sign of the kind of mental activity Matthew Arnold had called for in his *Report* for 1874: "the animation of mind, the multiplying of ideas, the promptness to connect, in thoughts, one thing with another." Meiklejohn also emphasizes mental activity and inventiveness as important aspects of composition in his textbook. He makes the possession of knowledge a prerequisite of written expression, asserting in his *English Language*, "we must know the subject fully about which we are going to write" (176); he also claims that good writing results primarily from "clear thinking" (175).⁵⁰

Educators such as Morrison and Meiklejohn did not always have complete faith in the mental powers of the children they set out to instruct, however. They seem to have believed

⁵⁰ Similarly, Nichol's composition primer says, "to express ourselves we must first have something to say. If we have not been able to come to any definite conclusion about a subject, we should be silent" (5).

that the clear thinking and inventiveness required for composition could present major problems to young authors. As Morrison explains in his manual, the biggest problem for composition in elementary students arises from an absence of thought: “‘O that my tongue could utter the thoughts that arise in me,’ should be the composer’s motto. Too often it happens that the complaint might be reversed - the tongue has the power of utterance, but there are no *thoughts* to utter” (230). Pushed to the extreme, the dictate that clear writing comes from clear thinking suggests that there can be no writing at all without clear thoughts. Children might learn how to write grammatically and coherently, but without the power to recall knowledge or produce and connect ideas, that ability is wasted. Other educators felt the same way. A.E. Fletcher explains in his discussion of composition in the *Cyclopedia of Education* that without some essential “preliminary training” in grammar, syntax, rhetoric, and figures of speech, “it is venturesome to embark on any of the larger forms of English composition” (115). Considering, however, that “the time of the pupils is so limited,” these necessary preliminary exercises may not be possible (115). Fletcher examines the problem of inventiveness in essay writing especially, declaring, “the composition exercise is hampered by the totally extraneous exercise of finding the necessary material and mastering it for use. In this form of English exercise more than in any other it is necessary to discriminate the several elements of performance, and to relieve learners as far as possible from work that cannot reasonably be regarded as entering into training in English style” (115). Like Morrison, Fletcher calls the essential inventive abilities of children into question.

In order to contribute to the production of thoughts to express in composition classes, Morrison advises teachers to encourage their students with simple exercises – summaries of short stories that have been read out in class, abstracts of lessons from reading books, and “short biographies real or imagined” (*Manual* 230-1). According to Ian Michael, activities like

these were common in composition texts throughout the nineteenth century.⁵¹ He looks specifically at a composition primer by John Carey from 1817, in which the author explains that students need hints and suggestions in the form of skeletons and outlines in order to be able to compose narratives or essays. Carey's "props" for young writers, Michael claims, "illustrate the general, if not universal, belief that children's inventiveness, which Carey recognizes, could neither order itself, nor express itself, without continual adult help" (Michael 312). While Carey's composition primer predates the Victorian period, the kinds of skeletons and exercises he provided for students were still being used in composition texts in the final decades of the nineteenth century, as we have seen in Meiklejohn's readers.

Like Meiklejohn and Carey, Morrison provides what he calls "heads" for students to aid them in the creation of essays, recognizing while he does so that too much information provided for the student will "tend to cramp his efforts at the independent handling of a subject" (*Text-Book* 148). A fine balance is required to manage the inventiveness of children without insisting on uniformity, which Morrison believed would "prove fatal to the healthy growth of the mind" (147). Morrison's comments here show that he judged writing to be an important sign of mental activity and development, even if educators were not always secure in their faith that pupils in elementary schools would pass the mental test that composition set for them. Yet, outside the schoolroom the skills and abilities that Morrison associates with composition may or may not have been so highly prized.

The importance Morrison's composition text and his manual place on individuality and freedom of expression suggests a reason for the lack of training in composition in elementary schools. While one line of thought in Victorian pedagogy encouraged increasing the higher intellectual capabilities of working-class children to make them more able to express

⁵¹ Similarly, Fletcher suggests that instruction in composition begin with simplified exercises in pure narration, description, or exposition (115).

themselves, another – illustrated by the calls for practical and technical education by men like Spencer, Huxley, Lubbock and Magnus – aspired to have the nation’s Board schools turn out an ideal workforce — productive, respectable, and obedient — to power its industries as it headed into the twentieth century. Whether or not elementary education was really the best means to accomplish this, the perception amongst educators that it was influenced the way reading and writing were taught.⁵² Galbraith argues that part of the debate about what kinds of skills working-class children should learn was rooted in the recognition that the “critical skills and imaginative powers” that an enhanced intellectual curriculum would provide them with were “tools that could potentially be turned against a political and economic system built upon class and gender divisions” (122).⁵³

Individuality and an enhanced ability to express oneself hardly seem to correspond to the attitudes of deference and obedience that many industrial employers were looking for. In fact, in some industries, mastery of the skills associated with literacy was seen as “subordinate and dependent upon the larger matter of attitude” (Vincent 121). This is not to say that the ability to read and write would not help the average worker in his chosen occupation, especially in the century’s final decades. But it does suggest that the ability and willingness of a worker to work were more important than the freedom with which he could express himself in writing. If an employee’s individuality was expressed in an attempt to organize workers into the trade unions that became more and more a fixture of the economic landscape around the turn of the twentieth century, the skills that Morrison hoped to inculcate in the children

⁵² Vincent insists that “while it was hoped that teachers, acting in conjunction with or in place of the clergy, would strive to instil new habits of deference and obedience” in working-class children, employers in the period actually put more faith in “the force of heredity” than in the socializing power of schools (122). He finds it striking that “however much employers welcomed the extension of elementary education as an aid to the creation of a disciplined workforce ... only at the very end of the period did they begin to turn as a matter of course to schoolmasters to nominate suitable candidates and provide testimonials” (123).

⁵³ Vincent says of relations between labourers and employers in the first few years of the twentieth century, “the emptiness of the employers’ dream of achieving a pliant workforce in the era of mass education was exposed at just the moment when full nominal literacy was attained” (153).

using his textbook could actually turn into a liability for employers.⁵⁴ Despite its potential to threaten the social and economic order, however, instruction in composition, and in writing more generally, did see modest growth during the late-Victorian period, reaching an increasing number of students.

Conclusions

What can we say about the apparent advances in popular literacy and changes in the delivery of elementary education over the course of the Victorian period? It seems naïve (as well as remarkably Victorian) to speak of wholesale improvement in the way working-class boys and girls were taught to read and write, despite the statistical increase in those deemed to be literate during the period. It is true that historians such as Roger S. Schofield have argued that the second half of the nineteenth century saw what appears at first glance to be a remarkable reduction in the levels of illiteracy across England and Wales: the percentage of men unable to sign the marriage registry fell from 30% in 1850 to just 1% by 1911, and the percentage of women unable to sign fell from 45% in 1850 to 1% in 1913 (204).⁵⁵ At the same time, however, other historians remind us that these numbers represent only those men and women able to sign their names on the official registry on the day of their wedding.⁵⁶ As such, these statistics tell us potentially very little *qualitatively* about what the men and women signing these registries were able to accomplish with the skills of reading and writing they had

⁵⁴ For a discussion of the role of elementary education in the lives of workers' leaders in the Victorian period, see Hurt 62-8; cf. Vincent 141-53.

⁵⁵ Roger S. Schofield, "Dimensions of Illiteracy in England, 1750-1850," *Literacy and Social Development in the West: A Reader*, ed. Harvey J. Graff (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981) 201-13. Richard Altick puts male literacy in 1900 at 97.2% and female literacy for the same year only slightly lower, at 96.8%. Thus the largest gains seem to have been made during the nineteenth century, not the twentieth (*Common Reader* 171).

⁵⁶ Those who are included in these figures, mostly men and women between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five, Altick notes, "constituted only a fraction of the total population, and side by side with them lived the older men and women who had been entered into the 'illiterate' column at the time of their own marriages and whose status presumably had not changed in the interval" (*Common Reader* 172).

been taught and how much of their abilities had been developed in elementary schools rather than elsewhere, in the home or in the workplace for example. While Board Schools are often taken as symbols of the nation's dedication to elementary education in the Victorian period, Gillian Sutherland and others have noted that less than half the children in England and Wales recorded as attending school in 1895 were attending the much celebrated Board Schools.⁵⁷ Richard Altick is also critical of the quality of popular education throughout, finding it "surprising that literacy made the headway that it did" in the nineteenth century because of the circumstances under which elementary education was delivered to pupils. For Altick, Forster's Act was a "mopping-up operation" designed to reach very poor children in remote regions of the country as yet untouched by elementary education, and students who attended school past the traditional three or four years, still a minority by the end of the century, would, according to Altick, "merely have undergone further stretching of their powers of memory; no attempt would have been made to arouse their critical or creative intelligence" (166).

Although these statements caution us away from making laudatory statements about Victorian popular literacy, it seems equally naïve to deny that advances were made in the number of men and women capable of using the technology of communication and in attitudes towards the education of the lower classes.⁵⁸ According to Jonathan Rose, the almost universal condemnation of the schools that served the British working classes in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries is flawed because it is based on "information and impressions culled

⁵⁷ Cf. Gardner 45-76.

⁵⁸ Barry Reay suggests in his article "The Context and Meaning of Popular Literacy: Some Evidence from Nineteenth-Century Rural England" (*Past and Present* 131 [1991]: 89-129), that the ability to sign one's name on a marriage document, though an imperfect measure of literacy, may not be as bad a standard as critics such as Altick suggest. Reay points out that because "writing for much of recorded Western history, was treated as a rather technical skill, acquired after a person had learned to read," most of those men and women who could write their names had likely been at school long enough to learn how to read as well. In addition, signature rates will give a minimum figure of those able to read because "those who cannot sign may be able to read, but they will not be able to write" (111). Of course, these arguments do not answer Altick's misgivings about the *quality* of literacy held by signers.

from official sources – from educational bureaucrats rather than their pupils” (146). Drawing on autobiographical sources and oral histories, Rose suggests that improvements to Victorian elementary schools, though moderate, were real, and that the literacy statistics that we have for the end of the Victorian period may give us a more accurate view of the quality of elementary education than has otherwise been argued (147-8). While Rose does not wish to suggest that Board Schools and other institutions “provided a wholly adequate education,” his findings do imply that by the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth most schools “did a fair job of teaching the basics, and often something more than the basics” (186). These findings, Rose hopes, will break the habit of historians of viewing Victorian schools “through the dark glass of *Hard Times*” (186). I believe that the primary documents I have reviewed in this chapter confirm Rose’s view.

What we can say unequivocally, without invoking notions either of progress and improvement or decline and degeneration, is that the way reading, writing, and popular education were conceived of changed dramatically throughout the Victorian period. The attitudes towards popular literacy and the teaching of reading changed significantly between the 1830s and the 1860s, with the focus of reading instruction shifting from the religious and moral concerns of the early nineteenth century to the broader intellectual concerns of the mid-century. These models continued to evolve during the century’s final decades, with writing and invention assuming a more important role in literacy and the notions of intelligence and expression redefining the standards by which a child’s ability to read were judged. As I will show in Chapter 3, the models of reading and writing proposed by educators and disseminated in elementary readers and textbooks continued to evolve – especially after 1860 – as they were discussed in popular and more widely available publications, such as reading guides and periodical articles. Read by men and women representing a large portion of the social

spectrum, these popular sources give us an indication in their discussions of reading and writing of how the discourse on education and the skills of literacy worked itself into the consciousness of the Victorian public during the latter part of the century.

Chapter 3

Consumption, Addiction, and Disease:

Some Models of Literacy in Victorian Reading Guides and Periodicals

In *The Order of Books* (1994), his study of reading models and their relationship with power and sociability, Roger Chartier observes that reading never occurs in the abstract, divorced from social practices, but always as embodied in “acts, spaces, [and] habits” that give meaning to the reading experience and to the text itself (3).¹ In Chartier’s opinion – and in the opinion of Michel de Certeau, whose theories of reading inform Chartier’s work – the power that texts possess to signify depends on the situation of their reception or consumption and on the cultural conditions of their creation. Much of Chartier’s study looks at the historical spaces of reading in particular – both real and ideal – and he observes that the cultural conditions that have informed reading practices over time have had the power to create idealized and metaphorical spaces in which reading is imagined to take place. For a long time, Chartier claims, an idealized universal library was the most common “imaginary” reading space for Western readers. “The dream of a library (in a variety of configurations) that would bring together all accumulated knowledge and all the books ever written,” he declares, “can be found throughout the history of Western civilization”(62). In this reading fantasy, while reading might physically occur within the walls of the home or the academy, or even amongst the public in a busy coffeehouse or park, on a *conceptual* or *fantastic* level the reader finds him or herself within a great library – a place of retreat, serenity, learning and

¹ Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994).

comprehensive knowledge. Investment in this imagined space of reading, in turn, influences the reading experience and the text's impact on the reader.

When we look at discussions of reading in England during the latter decades of the nineteenth century, however, we find signs that this guiding image of the reading experience had begun to break down, with Chartier's idealized library being replaced by other figurative spaces of reading. These changes occurred as responses to the much-publicized growth in population and literacy rates and to advances in the technology of print and transportation that had been steadily transforming the composition of the reading public since before the beginning of the nineteenth century. Certainly, the comments of Frederic Harrison suggest that it was these changes to readership and production that were reshaping how reading was conceptualized. As England's leading positivist philosopher and a man very interested in the accumulation and employment of comprehensive knowledge, Harrison believed that reading no longer took place in the virtual library of the past but "in a marketplace," or, perhaps more accurately, "in some large steam factory of letter-press, where damp sheets of new print whirl round us perpetually - if it be not some noisy book-fair where literary showmen tempt us with performing dolls, and the gongs of rival booths are stunning our ears from morn to night" (13).² Harrison's statements throughout *The Choice of Books* reflect the degree to which changes in the technology of print and publication were altering models of reading that had persisted for years in the popular discourse on reading and education.

If we are to accept Harrison's view of the contemporary reading situation, it would appear that the metaphorical space of reading shifted in Victorian Britain, with the image of the "universal library" to which Chartier refers being replaced, at least for some, by more

² Frederic Harrison, *The Choice of Books and Other Literary Pieces* (1886; London & New York: Macmillan & Co., 1887). The title essay was originally published as "On the Choice of Books," *Fortnightly Review* ns. 25 (1879): 491-512. The republished 1886 version, to which I refer here, is a much expanded version of the original, which was first given as a lecture at the London Institute.

dazzling and potentially threatening reading situations. The shifting metaphors used to conceptualize the act of reading in the period are, in fact, products of new means of literary production in the real world. The extension of Chartier's claim that reading is always embodied in "acts, spaces, [and] habits" that give the reading experience and the text meaning is that the circumstance of a literary work's production inform the meaning of that work. When a text is transferred from a codex to a book, from an expensive three volume collection to a series of magazines, or to a monitor screen, Chartier claims, "the 'same' text is no longer truly the same because the new formal devices that offer it to its reader modify the conditions of its reception and its comprehension" (90). If, according to Chartier's arguments, mass production and the promise of mass literacy have the potential to change the meaning of reading and writing, they did so in the Victorian period because the advanced methods of production and dissemination that permitted the explosion of print were also able to change the meaning of texts themselves.

Addressing these alterations to the meaning of reading and writing in the early Victorian period, Edward Jacobs examines the phenomena of penny fiction, penny "gaffs," and London street culture from the 1830s to the 1870s. He argues that changes in the technology of production had a major impact on reading and writing practices and suggests that "industrial print technology" was capable of "bolstering street culture's autonomy" (322).³ Jacobs explains that social critics of urban street culture, such as Henry Mayhew, were most concerned with the way "street culture had ironically transformed mass-produced literature into a weapon against hegemonic, literate culture" and the way that the skills of reading and writing that poor Londoners had been taught in elementary school were being turned against the improving and "rational" use their middle-class educators had intended for

³ Edward Jacobs, "Bloods in the Street: London Street Culture, 'Industrial Literacy,' and the Emergence of Mass Culture in Victorian England" *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 18 (1995): 321-47.

them (322), thus producing new models of reading.⁴ At the same time, mass culture and mass production were also changing the texts themselves, and both P.R. Hoggart and Louis James have studied the ways in which the cheap presses run by “blood” publishers Reynolds and Lloyd “inaugurated their businesses by plagiarizing mainstream authors like Dickens” (324).⁵ In the light of Chartier’s theory of reading and Jacobs’ study of Victorian street literature, Harrison’s complaint about the situation of Victorian reading practices suggests how the mass production of texts and the growth of a popular press were changing the definitions of reading and writing.⁶

Returning to Harrison’s *Choice of Books*, I would like to suggest that the circumstances of its publication are also significant in the context of Victorian popular literacy. The essay was first delivered as a lecture to an audience of working-class and lower-middle-class readers – “general readers” (vi) Harrison calls them – at the London Institute. Published shortly afterwards in *The Fortnightly Review* in 1879, and then in an expanded version by Macmillan in 1886 as the first essay in a volume devoted to Harrison’s literary writings, the essay’s dissemination is itself an indication of the enlarged role of the popular press in the production and diffusion of reading and writing models. Like other essays on reading and literacy by writers such as Thomas Carlyle, John Lubbock, and Stafford Henry Northcote, Harrison’s study of books and reading was published in a number of different

⁴ Furthermore, Jacobs argues, “the early bloods of Lloyd and Reynolds and the street culture surrounding London gaffs *conventionally* equated literacy with industrial work-disciplines, and subjected this ‘industrial literacy’ to traditional forms of ‘festive misrule’” (323), thereby transforming the meaning of literacy for their lower-class audience.

⁵ P.R. Hoggart, “Edward Lloyd, ‘The Father of the Cheap Press,’” *Dickensian* 80 (1984): 33-38; Louis James, *Fiction for the Working Man, 1830-1850* (London: Oxford UP, 1963).

⁶ While Chartier’s model of textual transformation is based on the translation of a text from “the *codex* to the monitor screen” (90), his observations are equally relevant to texts published in expensive bound volumes as opposed to those published in cheap editions or in periodicals. Chartier uses the example of the French “Bibliothèque bleue” of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to make this point. This popular catalogue of canonical works, he explains, “dipped into the repertory of already published texts and picked out ones that seemed most likely to meet the expectations of the broad public [the series] sought to reach” (13). This process entailed making “editorial changes” to texts in order to make them “readable by the wide clientele that the publishers were aiming at” (13).

places to meet the requirements of different classes of readers, reflecting the presence in the market of readers from widely different social and economic positions.⁷

I have suggested in my first two chapters that conceptual models of the skills of literacy were developed, explored, and challenged in a Victorian educational discourse composed of readers and other textbooks, teaching manuals, examiner's reports, and pamphlets. However, some of these documents and sources had only a small audience, and while a large number of Victorian children were exposed to the models of reading put forward by readers and other textbooks, they would have remained unaware of the philosophies of reading and writing behind the models that these works transmitted, experiencing only the practical end results (and usually under circumstances that were not conducive to abstract or philosophical thought). Likewise, while much of the debate underpinning the models of reading and writing reproduced in educational texts would have been off limits to a large portion of the reading public, these models continued to be developed in the more accessible realm of the popular press where they were available to a broad audience that spanned Victorian social categories. While journals and magazines such as the *Fortnightly* (priced at 2s.) would not have been affordable for a working-class or even lower middle-class audience, many of the men and women who made up this audience would have been able to consult them in the country's free libraries. In these situations, reading models could be transmitted to a group of readers "cast on the world in possession of a gift, the gift of reading, which may, under proper guidance, prove the greatest of blessings, or without guidance one of the greatest

⁷ Thomas Carlyle's *On the Choice of Books* (London: J.C. Hotten, 1966) was first published as "University of Edinburgh. Installation of Mr. Carlyle as Rector," *The Times* 4 Apr., 1866: 10; Sir John Lubbock's "On the Pleasure of Reading," *Contemporary Review* 49 (1886): 240-51, was later published as *Sir J. Lubbock's Hundred Books* (London: G. Routledge & Sons, 1891); and Stafford Henry Northcote's *The Pleasures, the Dangers, and the Uses of Desultory Reading*, (London: Kegan Paul Trench & Co., 1885), was also published in *The Times* 4 Nov., 1885, as well as in *Littel's Living Age* 54 (1885): 131-40.

of curses” (Collins 196).⁸ At the same time, articles on reading and writing in magazines and journals also concerned themselves with reading more generally, so that models of reading intended for middle-class audiences were also made available through these sources. While the education and literacy of the lower classes was the focus of many discussions of reading and writing in the Victorian period, the way that the rest of the nation used the skills that they had learned in childhood was also a topic of debate.

This chapter examines the models of reading circulated in periodical articles and popular guides to books and reading. A number of recent works in the field of Victorian studies have addressed the transmission of reading models through these kinds of readily available publications. Many have been undertaken by feminist critics and deal specifically with models of women’s reading. The most thorough of these is Kate Flint’s *The Woman Reader*, which examines a variety of literature on the topic of women’s reading practices, including novels, conduct books, and other educational works. In a chapter on the periodical press, Flint argues that, to some extent, reviews and magazine articles served to consolidate Victorian and Edwardian assumptions about the habits of women readers circulated in other sources, but that towards the end of the period (that is, in the first and second decades of the twentieth century) writers in some of these periodicals “attempted to establish for themselves evidence which confirmed or challenged generalized perceptions of the subject” of women’s reading (137). Rather than simply reproducing the conventional models of feminine literacy as they were represented in other kinds of literature, journalists of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries turned to physiological and later psychoanalytic theory to confirm or challenge dominant attitudes about reading for women (182). In the majority of the periodical sources Flint studies, the act of reading is represented back to women as a conventionally

⁸ John Churton Collins, “The National Home Reading Union and its Prospects” *Contemporary Review* 58 (1890): 193-211.

passive form of consumption. Accompanying this representation is a warning against engaging with “unsavoury” reading material based on the belief that women readers would be “automatically influenced by what they read” (147). At the same time, Flint points out that a minority of “other reviewers acknowledged that women read in an active search for exempla and role models” (147). This dichotomy between passive reading and active reading is one of the major sources of discussion in the discourse on reading in the Victorian press and in popular reading guides, leading to the creation of other, more nuanced, models of reading.

Margaret Shaw also examines the models of reading presented by the popular press. Shaw examines in her article on nineteenth-century reviews and their impact on literacy “how writers of ... [literary] reviews worked, wittingly or unwittingly, to ‘construct’ an image of the ‘literate woman,’ of her appropriate habits of reading and writing, and, by guiding an emerging literacy in this manner, contributed to the shaping of literary culture in England” (196).⁹ Whereas Flint focuses almost exclusively on *reading* models, Shaw looks at literacy in a broader, double-sided sense, inclusive of writing. She shows that other groups, besides the lower classes, were advised how to read. For instance, she suggests that the connection made in a number of reviews between women and novel writing, in which women are considered to be the best-suited and most “natural” novel-writers, constituted the use of gender “to mark a difference between types of writing” (199). The use of gender in this way, Shaw explains, “to regulate who can write, about what, and in what manner became a powerful way to regulate as well the social and economic positioning of women in the culture” (199). Shaw also investigates the models of reading that were set up in nineteenth-century reviews, and she pays special attention to articles on the topic of women’s reading written by literary men, such as Henry James, George Henry Lewes, and R.H. Hutton. These writers, she suggests, asserted

⁹ Margaret Shaw, “Constructing the ‘Literate Woman’: Nineteenth-Century Reviews and Emerging Literacies” *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction* 21 (1992): 195-212.

the existence of competing forms of reading for men and women, positioning women (along with children and members of the lower to middle classes) as “inarticulate,” “uncritical,” and “instinctive” readers in contrast to the intelligent and critical readers found amongst middle- to upper-class men (199-200).

Jennifer Phegley has also commented on the various ways that models of literacy were transmitted to women through Victorian magazines and reviews, focusing specifically on literary journals, such as the *Cornhill Magazine* and *Belgravia*.¹⁰ In contrast to Shaw and Flint, however, Phegley argues that some literary periodicals broke away from more traditional models of women’s reading, transforming “the literary debate surrounding woman readers by insisting that women could read critically and productively” (107). Though less has been said about how models of popular reading were established by periodical sources and guides (a relative silence that this chapter breaks), Kelly Mays addresses the journalistic discourse on reading in the late-Victorian period, arguing that while many twentieth (and twenty-first) century studies of the period have “focused on the question of who was reading what, the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of reading practices became much more vital questions by the second half of the nineteenth century” (166). She also examines the definitions of readings set up by working-class autobiographies, drawing special attention to the political connotations of literacy for members of labouring communities.¹¹ Like Jonathan Rose’s study of mass literacy in Britain, Mays’ essay draws on the nineteenth- and twentieth-century working-class autobiographies and diaries compiled by John Burnett, David Vincent, and David Mayall in

¹⁰ Jennifer Phegley, “‘I Should Think No More of Dictating... What Kind of Books She Should Read’: Images of Women Readers in Victorian Family Literary Magazines” *Reading Women: Literary Figures and Cultural Icons from the Victorian Period to the Present*, eds. Jennifer Phegley and Janet Badia (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2005) 105-28. For a more in-depth discussion of this topic, see Phegley’s *Educating the Proper Woman Reader: Victorian Family Literary Magazines and the Cultural Health of the Nation* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2004).

¹¹ Kelly J. Mays, “When a ‘Speck’ Begins to Read: Literacy and the Politics of Self-Improvement in Nineteenth-Century British Working-Class Autobiography,” *Reading Sites: Social Difference and Reader Response*, eds. Patrocínio P. Schweickart and Elizabeth A. Flynn (New York: MLA, 2004) 108-34.

The Autobiography of the Working Class.¹² While the texts that these studies examine may not be considered “popular” in the same way that, say, Lubbock’s list of the “100 Best Books” or an article in *The Saturday Review* are popular, they do show us how often and in what diverse forms ideas about reading and advice on how to read and write were transmitted.

Recent studies like these are clearly vital to our understanding of how Victorian authors and critics defined the practices of reading and writing, especially because the reading habits of women, members of the lower classes, and other similarly marginalized groups held as much fascination for the Victorian intellectual community as they do for critics today. Articles on the reading of the working classes, children’s reading, and the popularity of free libraries published during the Victorian period, which I will address in the chapter that follows, provide evidence of this fascination; the fact that discussions of reading and writing practices seem always to be intersected by debates about power, agency, and social structures, I believe, accounts for the continuing interest of today’s critics in this area.

I examine the claims of feminist critics like Flint, Shaw, and Phegley and the studies of working-class literacy by Mays, Rose, and others in this chapter. However, I also look at the manner in which Victorian writers defined the tools of literacy and their application in a broader sense, taking into account not only the real and imagined practices of marginalized groups whose communicatory abilities were perceived as restricted, but those of a wider range of readers to whom reading guides, reviews, and magazines were available. In examining these representations, I pay particular attention to several reading models put forward by the writers of popular works. The reading guides, manuals, magazine and journal articles examined in this chapter are not concerned with the inculcation of distinct reading practices

¹² John Burnett, David Vincent, and David Mayall, *The Autobiography of the Working Class: An Annotated, Critical Bibliography* 3 vols. (New York: NYU Press, 1984-89). See also Martyn Lyons, “New Readers in the Nineteenth Century: Women, Children, Workers,” *A History of Reading in the West*, eds. Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier (Amherst, Mass.: U of Massachusetts P, 1999) 313-44.

and writing skills in the same way that Victorian educational texts were. Instead, popular works tend to devote themselves more specifically to the regulation of reading and writing practices. At times, the models constructed seem to be distinct from one another and from the models created in educational literature, but a close analysis reveals that there is a considerable amount of overlap between them. While particular models of reading were defined and handled differently by individual authors who alluded to them in their works, similar traits can be found in, say, Frederic Harrison's definition of desultory reading and the definition provided by Stafford Henry Northcote, even if the two men held contrasting opinions regarding its potential benefits or dangers.

Rather than chart the development of reading and writing models in a chronological manner from the beginning to the end of the period – as I did with the development of models of reading and writing in Victorian schools and educational literature in my first two chapters – I look at several of the more prominent models of reading and writing in this chapter, in order to show how they interacted with each other and with the standards developed in elementary school literature. As Mays has observed, journalists and other men of letters applied themselves most vigorously to defining reading and writing and to establishing “a common vocabulary of terms and assumptions that are crucial to understanding the shape and meaning of literacy and reading for nineteenth-century readers” between roughly 1860 and 1900 (“Disease” 165). Certainly, the Revised Code of 1862, with its new emphasis on reading and writing, contributed to this special focus in the mid- to late-Victorian period. Drawing on sources predominantly from this period, I first address the models that posit reading – chiefly but not exclusively for marginalized groups – as a form of consumption and as a destructive vice or disease. In my analysis of this pervasive reading model, I outline its relationship with the “overpressure crisis” of the 1880s, at which time a number of educators and parents began

to raise concerns that too much reading in elementary school was damaging, sometimes even killing, working-class children. I also endeavour to explain how the notion of the reading *habit* transformed between the mid Victorian period and the end of the century, to the extent that what was once seen as a respectable custom began to be represented as an addiction or a vice akin to drinking or gambling.

Literary Gluttony and Mental Repletion: Reading as Eating

Even in Victorian essays and articles about books and reading not specifically concerned with establishing conceptual models of literacy skills, the use of eating as a metaphor for reading is ubiquitous. In his *Making of English Reading Audiences*, Jon Klancher provides one account of this model's origins in his discussion of Romantic reading audiences between the 1790s and the 1830s. He argues that during this period, a traditional model of reading as *reception* began to give way, to be replaced by a new model of reading as *consumption*. While reception was associated with high culture, Klancher argues, and with "the symbolic giving and receiving of texts between great writers and singular, sensitive readers," consumption was associated with an emerging mass culture, based on "supply and demand among innumerable writers and vast, faceless audiences" (13). The basis for this distinction, Klancher claims, is found in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, in which Kant discusses aesthetic judgments and taste. While the act of reception by wealthy, cultured, and educated classes is associated with an active acceptance of information or knowledge and the processing of that knowledge – perhaps in order to retransmit it into what we now call, following Jürgen Habermas, the public sphere – consumption by a mass audience holds connotations of blind and careless ingestion of printed material, without a thought as to how that material might later be made useful. Consumption in this abstract sense was easily

translated into consumption in a physical sense in Victorian literary reviews, magazines, and reading-guides, becoming synonymous with eating in the process. In these sources, the over-consumption of books was most often linked to physical forms of consumption, so that “the reading habit ... represented the perversion of the natural urges of thirst and hunger, an unyoking of the relation between such appetites and material needs and a disruption of the boundaries and balance between mental and physical impulses and acts” (Mays, “Disease” 173). Writers were encouraged to associate consumption in the abstract sense with consumption in the physical sense by the perceived sensual nature of the reading experience.

Building on Klancher’s arguments about British readers in the early nineteenth century, Patrick Brantlinger finds ample evidence of the consumption model in the discourse on novel reading within Victorian novels themselves. He points out, for instance, that both Thackeray and Trollope compare reading in their novels to the eating of sweets and cakes (Brantlinger 121).¹³ That being said, Trollope is alone, Brantlinger claims, in asserting that because members of the upper classes tend to derive their sense of life from novels, it is important for readers to pay attention to something more than the “jam and honey” they contain (122). In this context, Brantlinger associates the model of reading as eating with a popular “*caveat lector*,” a warning to the reader that implicitly states, “you are what you read and what you are reading may not be good for your mental health” (9). That the use of this model should represent a warning is fitting, as the essays and guides that employ it almost always figure reading as the consumption of something harmful. Writers seem rarely to associate reading with eating nourishing food. According to Flint, the metaphoric model of reading as eating was especially powerful when applied to women readers and what critics perceived as their particularly vulnerable minds and bodies. All readers were advised to read

¹³ Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998).

wisely, not gluttonously, as both physical and mental health depended upon digestion, not just consumption (51).¹⁴

While Klancher's attribution of the reception/consumption dichotomy to Kant seems plausible, Victorian commentators themselves tend to turn to a philosopher closer to home when they link reading with physical consumption. In a number of articles, it is Francis Bacon rather than Immanuel Kant whose comments on reading and books writers allude to. For instance, in an article entitled "On Readers in 1760 and 1860," published in *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1860, Francis Turner Palgrave uses the reading as eating trope in his discussion of changes to the reading public over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁵ Palgrave, best known for his extremely popular verse compilation, *The Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language*,¹⁶ reprinted frequently after its first publication in 1861, declares in this article that there existed in the eighteenth century a more obvious line between those who counted as readers and those who did not. Although there were fewer readers in 1760, "men read and wrote then, though not on such deep and earnest subjects altogether as now, yet in deeper and more earnest spirit" (487). Commenting further on the democratization of literacy, Palgrave mentions the connection Lord Bacon makes between eating and reading, that some books are to be tasted, some chewed, some swallowed, and others digested.¹⁷ In Palgrave's opinion, the first class of books – those that should only be tasted – seems to be absorbing all the other classes in the literary market. Thus, Palgrave's article is a warning against the lightness and triviality of modern reading, which tends to make

¹⁴ Flint explains, furthermore, "many Victorians wrote of reading as an activity as natural, as essential, as eating, supplying the food of the mind Characterized as a physical appetite, reading became a form of ingestion to be carefully controlled, in order to avoid temporary indigestion or more long-term damage to the system" (50).

¹⁵ F.T. Palgrave, "On Readers in 1760 and 1860" *Macmillan's Magazine* 1 (1860): 487-9.

¹⁶ On the popularity of this book see Phillip J. Waller, *Readers, Writers, and Reputations: Literary Life in Britain, 1870-1918* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006) 63-4; cf. Rose 43, 49, 89, and 128.

¹⁷ The analogy is made in Bacon's essay "Of Studies."

reading “only another kind of gossip” (488). Echoing Harrison’s concerns about the stunning effects of the virtual marketplace in which Victorian readers are supposed to read, Palgrave warns that “it is in a marked degree the mere number of new books, or the over-influence of advertisements, which renders good books scarce and good readers almost scarcer” (488). These concerns also seem to have been in the background when Palgrave set out to publish his verse collection in 1861, and the *Times* obituary for Palgrave in 1897 claimed for him a major role in the improvement of the nation’s taste for reading: “while himself not a great poet, [Palgrave] had done more than anyone else of his time, with the exception of Mr. Matthew Arnold, to guide the public taste to what was best in poetic literature” (10).¹⁸ Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury*, a book commonly found in working-class and middle-class homes, is a “good book” that seems intended to produce “good readers” by reforming popular taste with a hearty injection of England’s best verse.

Also in the 1860s, the author of an unsigned article in *Sharpe’s London Magazine* entitled “Reading as a Means of Culture” refers to Bacon’s metaphor in his discussion of the best kind of reading to undertake.¹⁹ He looks to “Lord Bacon’s rule” as the best policy for reading: “Read, not to contradict and confute, nor to believe and take for granted, nor to find talk and discourse, but to weigh and consider” (316). Here the author is suggesting the reading of books for digestion, rather than mere taste. He adds, however, that it often happens that “one might have a great appetite and a poor digestion. He may read much and think little. Hence, what he reads, not going through the process of assimilation, instead of invigorating, burdens the mind. Thus addicted to mental gluttony, thus suffering from mental repletion, he

¹⁸ “The Death of Mr. Palgrave,” *The Times* 26 Oct. 1897: 10.

¹⁹ “Reading as a Means of Culture,” *Sharpe’s London Magazine* 46 (1867): 316-23.

is incapacitated for high achievements" (317).²⁰ The prescription to ensure that anything read can be digested appears again later in the century in an 1894 piece by Arnold Haultain in *Blackwood's*.²¹ For Haultain, the best rule of reading is, "Avoid what you cannot assimilate": "Since the object of all reading is, or should be, mental acquisition and mental development, to adapt a natural law to the intellectual world, that reading should be eschewed which we are unable to convert into a portion of our own mental fibre" (253). As all food *ingested* should also be *digested* to become a part of one's physical fibre, so all information should also be digested to become part of one's mental fibre. Articles like these are addressed to a range of readers from across the social spectrum. While Palgrave's piece and the essay in *Sharpe's* are concerned with "self-culture" and associate the eating model of reading with the expansion of reading and education into sectors of society that would have once been deemed illiterate and incapable of study, Haultain's article addresses itself to a middle-class audience whose ability to read would not have been marvelled at. This is obvious from statements Haultain makes on "systematic reading," which he deems necessary in one's teens "especially if one is going up for examinations" (262). Working-class readers, made to be content with a terminal elementary education, would rarely have had the opportunity to sit for university examinations even in the 1890s.

An examination of the reference to this reading model in popular Victorian sources shows that Klancher's suggestion that consumption is associated with mass reading and culture tends to hold, even if the philosophical basis for the model is attributed to Bacon instead of Kant. While the model of reading as consumption applies in some degree to the entire social spectrum, the most graphic images of reading and eating are created when this

²⁰ Northcote also refers to Bacon's thoughts on reading in his "The Pleasures, the Dangers, and the Uses of Desultory Reading," 133, as does J.E.C. Weldon in "The Art of Reading Books," *National Review* 23 (1894): 217.

²¹ Arnold Haultain, "How to Read," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 159 (1896): 249-65.

model is applied to the labouring classes directly. For instance, the author of an unsigned 1878 article on working-class reading practices in the *Saturday Review* depicts “artisans” as voracious and promiscuous in their appetites for reading material, and though they prefer sensational or adventure narratives, “they will swallow a geological treatise as certain savages eat earth when they cannot get slugs or opossums” (125).²² In the indolent and untrained majority of this class, the writer claims, “mental emptiness produces a morbid hunger” that leads to a relentless search for reading matter.²³ This model of reading was most often invoked when the reading matter in question was the novel, a genre the popularity of which had long been a sign of the “the corrupt ‘taste’ of the ‘reading public’” (Brantlinger 12).²⁴ The increased educational opportunities for women and for the working class in the nineteenth century made the perceived problem far more widespread than it had been a century earlier, when (as Palgrave notes) the “reading public” was smaller and more socially cohesive.

The association of novel reading, specifically, with unhealthy eating can be found throughout the Victorian discourse on reading, both in England and overseas. The statements of Noah Porter, author of a popular reading guide entitled *Books and Reading: or, What Books Shall I Read and How Shall I Read Them?* (1870), provide a good example of what critics of the novel were afraid of, especially when those marginalized readers (youth, women, and the working-class) were involved:

²² Reprinted as “The Habit of Reading,” *Littell's Living Age* 139 (1878): 124-27. Returning briefly to educational literature, we also find a reference to “Bacon’s aphorisms on reading” in the “heads” provided by Thomas Morrison for an essay “On Reading” in his 1883 composition text (*Text-Book* 151). The presence of this reference here assumes that students would be familiar with this aphorism and suggests the inculcation of the reading as eating model from elementary school on.

²³ Some contemporary commentators associated this relentless drive with a quest for narrative. Edward Jacobs notes, for instance, that Henry Mayhew claims “street people would customarily inspect the paper in which their cheese and other goods came wrapped, to see if it might be an old broadside or blood instalment” (Jacobs 323). Publications of the Religious Tract Society, on the other hand, were “typically used, unread, as toilet paper” (323).

²⁴ Cf. Flint 24-6.

It is not easy to turn to a history or scientific essay when an attractive novel is lying by its side, particularly for one to whom novel-reading is new. There is no fascination connected with reading to be compared with that experienced in youth from the first few novels. The spell-bound reader soon discovers, however, that this appetite, like that of confectionery and other sweets, is the soonest cloyed, and that if pampered too long it enfeebles the appetite for all other food. (231)²⁵

The novel reader, Porter feels, will produce within himself “an incessant craving for some new excitement” (231). In this way, novel reading produces more novel reading in a seemingly perpetual cycle, and inexperienced readers are the most susceptible to this form of mental insatiability. Frederic Harrison makes a similar warning in his *Choice of Books* when he suggests reading verse rather than fiction. Reading novels will ruin the “appetite” for a poetic “masterpiece,” he suggests, even though a few volumes of poetry contain more that is “fascinating” than “the bulk of that mountain of literary husks, wherewith men fill themselves as Mudie’s cart comes round, chewing rather than reading, careless of method, self-restraint, and moral aim” (47).²⁶ Like Porter, Harrison’s concern is that consuming fiction will ruin the intellectual “palate” for better material. Mays notes in her study of the perceived problems of reading as articulated in the English press that the kind of circularity of novel reading that Porter and Harrison discuss could for many critics also be applied to reading in general; “reading produced nothing beyond more of itself,” Mays explains, and the confusion of the

²⁵ Noah Porter, *Books and Reading: or, What Books Should I Read and How Shall I Read Them?* (1870; New York: Charles Scribner & Co., 1881). While Porter is an American himself, and his book was published in America, the vast majority of the books he mentions throughout his guide are classics of English literature. Because of this, and because of the similarities between his statements on reading and those of other, English, critics and authors, I have chosen to include him here despite his nationality. The British Library contains several copies.

²⁶ Here Harrison loses focus on the “popular audience” of general and untrained readers that he is trying to address. The working class and lower middle class men and women attending lectures at the London Institute would not have been able to afford membership in Mudie’s circulating library and would have been much more likely to make use of free or public libraries.

“proper mind-body relation” that this form of reading produced was seen as “permanent rather than temporary” (“Disease” 173).

While the model of reading as eating was primarily a popular model, prevalent in literary reviews, magazines, and reading guides, there are some, less explicit, references to it in the Victorian educational discourse. In most cases, of course, when “burdens” are mentioned in the introductions to primers they are the burdens of overly intense and rational reading material and teaching methods, rather than the burden of poorly digested (or undigested) fictional or miscellaneous literature.²⁷ In such cases, narrative and light reading materials are presented not as burdening, as the novels and other ephemeral works are in the examples above, but as capable of relieving children from the encumbrances imposed on them by repetitive and uninteresting instruction. There are times, however, when perceptible overlaps between the journalistic discourse and the pedagogical discourse are evident. For one thing, it was the increased availability of elementary education and the expansion of literacy throughout the nineteenth century that made the reading/eating metaphor so widespread. Palgrave’s fears about the mass of light literature or “literary gossip” on the market are the direct result of a more democratic reading and writing public. Educational opportunities are at least partially responsible for what Palgrave sees as dilution of that “more earnest spirit” that could once be found in books, and he alludes to the increasingly demotic state of literature when he suggests that once the “line ... drawn between the studious and the world was traced by the knowledge that those who wrote were more or less the separate class who were qualified and trained to educate others” (488). As other statements from later in the century – like the unsigned *Saturday Review* article on working-class reading mentioned above – suggest, the rise of a class of inexperienced, lower-class readers (here characterized as

²⁷ See, for instance, Mortimer’s *Reading Without Tears*: “While parents are urged not to *oppress* their children by early burdens of learning, they cannot be too much entreated not to *neglect* their children” (ix).

“artisans”) led to the increased use of the consumption model of reading. Therefore, it is clear that while this model can be applied to individual readers and general audiences that span the social range (as Trollope’s allusion to the “jam and honey” ingested by upper- and middle-class novel readers attests to), the new prevalence of the reading as eating model in the Victorian period is the result of popular literacy and the acknowledgement of increased educational opportunities for the lower classes. Reading practices that are depicted as examples of conspicuous and indiscriminate consumption of printed material can be seen, therefore, as another one of the “threats” of mass literacy.

“I can’t do it! I can’t do it!”: Reading, Eating, and Overpressure

The concept of “overpressure” in elementary schools is also linked to the destructive, consumption model of reading that circulated in popular sources, despite the fact that the authors who employed this model in literary reviews made no direct connection between overpressure and the reading as eating trope. Overpressure was a topic of discussion in educational circles throughout the late-Victorian period. The concept may have appeared in the late-1870s and early 1880’s, but it became a major topic of discussion only in 1883, with concerns about the problems of overpressure reaching crisis levels in the spring and summer of 1884.²⁸ Gretchen Galbraith claims in her study of overpressure in *Reading Lives* that the phenomenon was seen as a predicament primarily of the School Board of London, and that 1883 saw “London’s state-fuelled elementary Board schools ... plunged into crisis” as a result of “young working-class students ... allegedly dying from the effects of educational overpressure” (101). However, the problem was considered large enough and well known

²⁸ In J.H. Gladstone’s “Over-pressure in Elementary Schools,” *Nature* 31 (1884): 73-5, the author says that the “cry of over-pressure was raised some years ago with reference to middle class schools” (73). By 1883, however, elementary schools were the main targets in discussion of overpressure.

enough to merit a sizable entry in Fletcher's *Cyclopaedia of Education*, which defines overpressure as "the name now commonly given to the overwork in connection with school life" (256). Other accounts of overpressure also suggest that the problem was more widespread, and Richard A. Armstrong's 1883 article, "The Overstrain in Education," compiles accounts of overwrought teachers and children from across the nation.

The idea behind overpressure was that students and teachers, driven to meet the high standards set by the New Educational Code and "payment by results," were being physically devastated by their efforts, facing ailments that included "brain-fever, loss of eye-sight, and bodily depression and weakness" (Armstrong 296).²⁹ A writer for *Chambers's Journal* in 1884, discussing the most publicized overpressure deaths in London, explained the "singular question" of over-education in more graphic terms:

Two children have lately suffered miserable deaths in consequence of over-work, in other words, over-education. One of these children, in the delirium of brain-fever, continually cried out, with every expression of pain and distress: 'I can't do it! I can't do it!' alluding, of course, to the difficult sum or long lesson that had been given her; and so the poor little overtaxed brain gave way, fever set in, and death speedily put an end to her sufferings. (366)³⁰

As a result of the oppressive Educational Code, critics argued, which insisted that all working-class children (regardless of the specific differences in their backgrounds) meet the same educational requirements and that a vast majority of them pass their governmental exams,

²⁹ Though Armstrong is not specific in his reference to which New Code he is referring (the Code was revised several times between 1875 and 1883), he is likely referring to one of the most recent drafts, either 1882 or 1883. Stephen Heathorn suggests that there was little difference between the New Code of 1882 and 1883 (11).

³⁰ "Over-Educating Children," *Chambers's Journal* 5th ser. 1 (1884): 366-7.

children were being forced to learn more than they were capable of learning.³¹ As Galbraith explains, many members of a coalition of concerned people (made up primarily of the champions of voluntary and Church schools) that formed to address the policies believed to have caused the death of the two young children (and possibly more) “viewed overpressure as proof that some poor children were hereditarily unsuited for education and that the state was overstepping its educational mandate” (Galbraith 103).³² The views of this group were strengthened by the work of Dr. James Crichton-Browne – a medical doctor, former superintendent of one of the country’s largest asylums, and coeditor of the journal *Brain* – who published an article early in 1884 arguing that homework and other elements of the education system were harmful to children. Crichton-Browne later published a report on the state of education and the health of children in London’s Board schools.³³ He argued that there had been a considerable increase in lunacy and in mortality from diseases of the nerves and brain in children since the induction of Forster’s Education Act of 1870. These studies strengthened the argument that, as the *Chambers’s* writer put it, “children are not all constituted alike, and it is certain that all should not be treated in the same manner in the training either of their bodies or their minds” (“Over-Educating” 366).³⁴ J.H. Gladstone adds

³¹ In fact, the majority of statements on overpressure looked to the too-strict requirements of the New Code as the cause of the health problems associated with elementary education. For instance, Richard A. Armstrong writes in his article that “it is the *driving* [of children to meet the Code’s requirements], then, which is the major evil in the educational working of the Code. A horse spurred up a steep hill will stop dead before it gains the top” (301). Galbraith points out that Lord Reay, too, blamed the burdens of the Code for the overpressure deaths (104).

³² Those concerned with overpressure were also critical of the curriculum of the Education Department. Quoting an article in the *East London Leader* for August 9, 1884, Galbraith explains that “given that the ‘great bulk’ of the nation was not intended to read or write, and that inequality was a ‘law of nature,’” Lord Reay (who presided over an education conference in 1884 and denounced the New Educational Code), “declared that one educational standard could never meet the needs of all individuals and localities” (Galbraith 104). Cf. “Is the Education Act of 1870 a Just Law?” *Nineteenth Century* 70 (1882): 958-68.

³³ Sir James Crichton-Browne and Sir Joshua Girling Fitch, *Report of Dr. Crichton-Browne to the Education Department upon the Alleged Over-Pressure of Work in Public Elementary Schools*, (London: H. Hansard & Sons, 1884).

³⁴ As Dr Forbes-Winslow put it, when he dedicated his professional knowledge as a doctor to the problem of overpressure in schools, payment by results ensured that “all the children were ground upon the same grindstone, without reference to their capacity; and accordingly as they were ground up or ground down to the very same level, so was the percentage of public money handed over” (“Over-Educating” 367).

to this discourse of hereditary dullness in his 1884 article on overpressure in *Nature*, writing that, along with bright and healthy children, there will also come to school “dull children – descendents of a wholly uncultured race” (73).³⁵

While critics of the education system argued for a number of different sources for overpressure, with the overly ambitious requirements of the Code cited most often, some commentaries on the overpressure crisis singled out reading in particular as a dangerous elementary subject.³⁶ In an 1884 letter to the editors of *The National Review*, for example, a correspondent who identifies himself as “An Educator, Not a Teaching Machine” attributes overpressure to the New Educational Code’s tightening of the “strain applied by its predecessors” (860).³⁷ Unlike some other educators and the majority of school inspectors, the author of this letter is convinced that overpressure is a real problem and that it is caused by adjustments that the New Code has made to the syllabus of subjects for the various Standards; each adjustment, he claims, “is a distinct demand for more cram” (860).³⁸ The writer’s first example of these adjustments is the new requirement of “Reading with Intelligence” in every Standard. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the Codes of the early-1880s asked for more from students learning to read in elementary schools than had previously been required by earlier educational codes. For the educator commenting on overpressure in *The National Review*, this new requirement is “the most prolific source of pressure or cram” (861). For one thing, the

³⁵ J.H. Gladstone, “Overpressure in Elementary Schools,” *Nature* 31 (1884): 73-5. For a comprehensive review of the political questions involved in the overpressure debate, see “Overpressure in Elementary Schools,” *The Westminster Review* 123 (1885): 1-20.

³⁶ Other potential causes included the prevalence of “mechanical” rather than “vital” instruction, which was also thought to plague reading instruction (“Some Dangers of Education,” *The Saturday Review* 59 [1882]: 369-70), or an unhealthy school atmosphere (Gladstone 73-4).

³⁷ “Elementary Education – Over-pressure and the ‘Mundella Code’,” *The National Review* 3 (1884): 860-63.

³⁸ See, for instance, an article called “The School Inspectors on Overpressure,” in *The Times* 21 Aug. 1884: 6. There, the reporter comments on the publication of the Educational Blue-Books for 1883-4, which contain, along with other materials, the general reports of twenty-four of Her Majesty’s inspectors of schools. Fifteen of the twenty English inspectors mention overpressure and “of these 15 reports it may be said at once, by way of relieving over-anxious minds, that with scarcely an exception they either deny that over-pressure exists or they show that reports of its occurrence have been exaggerated most unduly” (6).

new level of reading ability requires the use of two distinct reading books in the first two Standards, and three sets for Standards III through VII, “one of general literature, one historical, and one geographical” (861). The writer complains that “to read carefully through these three sets in the course of the school year, during the time which can be fairly apportioned to reading, is simply a physical impossibility, and yet all Standards higher than II are examined in each of them, and are required to give synonyms for all the difficult words under the requirement of ‘reading with intelligence’” (860). In order to accomplish all that the syllabus for each Standard requires, children, the educator claims, “for their evening tasks, have huge columns of words and meanings to learn by rote, and *to try* to remember” (861). English, a popular specific subject in the 1880s, also caused problems, according to the correspondent, as large portions of Milton and Shakespeare were set for memorization along with explanations of diction and allusions (861). Pushed to achieve a high number of “passes” under the governmental examinations, teachers continue “grinding and administering to the Juggernaut of the Code” (862), the educator suggests, forcing what turns out to be evanescent knowledge into the heads of pupils (862). He believes that only a loosening of the requirements of the Codes and a more realistic appraisal of how many children can actually be expected to pass the examinations given by inspectors will end the cramming and overpressure.

While statements about the hereditary inability of some working-class children to learn show that a belief in natural class-divisions was present in the overpressure debate,³⁹ writers also frequently enlisted the assumptions about reading common to periodical articles that associated the practice with eating. The law of reading that Arnold Haultain espouses in his

³⁹ Not every commentator believed that overpressure was based on the hereditary dullness of some working-class children. For instance, J.H. Gladstone believed that overpressure was an even more common problem in middle-class or higher schools (73).

Blackwood's article – “Avoid what you cannot assimilate” – applied equally to education for some of the commentators on overpressure. Adapting “a natural law to the intellectual world,” Haultain advised that we avoid reading when we are unable to convert what we read into “a portion of our own mental fibre.” Similar statements can be found in the *Chambers's* article on overpressure. For instance, language suggesting cramming or force-feeding is evident throughout the essay, and the writer asks, “is not the present system of ‘cramming’ very young children not only inexpedient, but dangerous to the brain and life, in trying to force too much ‘book-learning’ into small minds ill fitted for its reception?” (“Over-Educating” 366). The link between digestion and reading is made all the more clear by claims that the author makes later in his article. “The body of man,” he writes, “acted on by the unerring laws of Nature, plainly rebels against all overdosing, whether it be in food, drink, exercise, heat or cold, and clearly indicates a limit – ‘Thus far, and no farther.’ So it is with the brain” (366). Keeping the consumptive model of reading in mind, we might see the deaths supposedly caused by overpressure as tragic and extreme cases of the burdens of “mental gluttony” that the writer for *Sharpe's London Magazine* associated with the wrong kinds of reading. Just as they would if they were consistently fed burdening and unhealthy food, working-class children forced by the requirements of the Educational Code to cram themselves full of information are met with “utter breakdown” (366). With overpressure, however, it was not fiction and ephemeral literature that caused the problem, but an overdose of rational and solid literature given to minds not capable of assimilating it.

In fact, another of the major causes of overpressure and overstrain in elementary schools had to do with digestion on a more literal level. As Galbraith explains, the problem of overpressure derived, in part, from what children attending board schools were *actually* eating and in what quantity. Progressive members of London's School Board moved to remit fees for

attending schools “in all cases where family income was below 16 shillings a week,” suggesting that “overpressure resulted from poor families having to pay school fees out of their limited food budgets” (Galbraith 116). The school inspector T. Marchant Williams held this view as well, and he explained in a series of letters to *The Times* in 1884, “if there be overstrain or overpressure of education in the London elementary schools, it is mainly, though indirectly, due to the overpressure of poverty and drink” (3).⁴⁰ Again in his first letter Williams claims that his district of inspection comprises the whole of the City division, nearly the whole of the Finsbury division, and the greater part of the Marylebone division. After running through the details of housing and poverty for each of the parishes under his purview in this first letter, Williams explains in the second that the high levels of overcrowding, poverty, and drunkenness in these areas detract from the children’s ability to learn in the elementary schools they attend. The lack of nutrition that these children face is especially problematic, with “17.5 per cent occasionally [coming] to school dinnerless, and 23 per cent breakfastless” (6). Williams believes that “the hungry little boys and girls who fill the board schools are not fit, either physically or mentally, for the strain that the passing of the Government examinations and the earning of high percentages generally imply - hence the overpressure” (6).⁴¹ According to Williams and those progressive members of the London School Board that Galbraith mentions, the literal problems of eating that some working-class children were faced with created figurative problems of mental digestion, making these

⁴⁰ T. Marchant Williams, letter, “The School Board for London and the Overpressure of Poverty and Drink,” *The Times* 22 Feb. 1884: 6, and 1 Mar. 1884: 3. The author of “Overpressure in Elementary Schools” in *The Westminster Review* claimed that to ask the School Board, and thus the government, to feed and clothe children will lead to a problem of “over-government,” which is “worse than overpressure” (17).

⁴¹ Alfred Fletcher seems to have been in agreement with Williams on the nutritional causes of overpressure. In his overpressure entry in the *Cyclopaedia of Education* he explains that combining work and recreation is the best way to avoid undue strain, and that educators must always remember, “that the brain requires abundant food and fresh air” (243). He explains, “It is only in exceptional cases, where children are insufficiently fed, or are of a peculiarly nervous and excitable temperament, or the hours of study are unduly prolonged, that this result is likely to occur” (243).

children unable to assimilate properly the information that the requirements of the Education Code set out for them. Just as their bodies would if they were ever given the opportunities, so their brains rebel against overdosing, saying “Thus far, and no farther.”

The “Morbid Hunger” for News: Reading as a Habit or Vice

Other models of reading that circulated in popular sources have a more direct connection with the language of Victorian popular education, and at least one of these models is closely related to the consumption model of reading. Many of the essays that present readers – and especially working-class readers – gorging on dangerously rich or sweet literary fare also employ the model of reading as a habit. The use of this model is evident in the warnings against novel reading that Frederic Harrison and Noah Porter put forward. If novel reading destroys the reader’s intellectual “palate,” then that reader will be able to consume nothing besides novels, much like a habitual drinker will give up everything beside drink. These are the first steps towards addiction. A further example of this connection can be found in an unsigned article published in the *Temple Bar* in 1874, in which the writer looks at some of the problems facing readers in modern society.⁴² Like Porter, the writer singles out sensational novels as the most pernicious sort of reading matter.⁴³ These destructive books, he claims, are not meant to be read, but to be “devoured” (253). Building on this theme, the writer goes on to characterize this practice as “novel-drinking,” which, although not as dangerous as the consumption of alcohol, carries its own particular problems: “the individual is surely as enfeebled by it, his taste corrupted, his will unstrung, his understanding saddened” (253-4). Again, the reader who consumes literature in this way – oddly characterized as

⁴² “The Vice of Reading,” *Temple Bar* 42 (1874): 251-7.

⁴³ For more on the problems associated with sensational fiction, especially for women readers, see Pamela K. Gilbert, *Disease, Desire, and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997).

masculine here – is represented as over-burdened by his choice of book. However, the writer takes his tirade on reading further than some, characterizing reading as a *vice* “just as real, just as imminent, and, we fear, far more deadly since more insidious” (251) than “dram-drinking, tea-drinking, and tobacco-smoking” (251).⁴⁴ Reading, the critic believes, is “a vulgar, detrimental habit, like dram-drinking; an excuse for idleness; not only not an education in itself, but a stumbling-block in the way of education; a cloak thrown over ignorance; a softening, demoralizing, relaxing practice, which, if persisted in, will end by enfeebling the minds of men and women, making flabby the fibre of their bodies, and undermining the vigour of nations” (251). Here, the association of reading with physical consumption leads to a model of reading as a bad habit or addiction. Using obviously provocative language, the critic associates the reading habit not only with the downfall of the individual but also with the far more serious downfall of the nation, making the creation and maintenance of reading audiences a national problem, not unlike education itself.

Similar models of reading are presented throughout literary reviews from this period. For instance, specific concerns about the “disruption of the boundaries and balance between mental and physical impulses and acts” in habitual readers, which Mays associates with the addictive reading model, seem to be present in “The Habit of Reading,” the unsigned *Saturday Review* article from 1878 mentioned above in the discussion of reading and eating. This article begins by pointing to yet another item on reading in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, which, much like the *Temple Bar* article just discussed, suggests that the new “vice of the working classes” is that they are reading too much: “reading tells on artisans (we are to believe) like drink, or

⁴⁴ Alexander Innes Shand (“The Novelists and Their Patrons,” *Fortnightly Review* ns 40 [1886]: 23-35) uses a similar metaphor in an article on novels in the literary market some years later. Discussing the desirability of a cheap and attractive series of new novels, Shand asks, “What well-to-do admirer of Mr. Besant, Mr. Black, or Mr. Payn, with a spare three shillings and six-pence in his pocket, could resist the temptation of securing the company of his favourite author to beguile the hours of solitary travel? When once he had been reconciled to the new extravagance the practice would grow upon him, like the habit of smoking or the vice of drinking” (34).

rather like opium” (125). The reported concern of the *Gazette* writer, one with which the *Review* writer concurs, is that working-class readers tend to use adventure and romance narratives to escape from reality. Both writers believe “that life in their artificial paradise is ruinous to the poor men who seek this refuge from care” (125), and invoking the language of addiction once more, the *Review* correspondent suggests that such readers “may become as useless, shiftless, and forlorn as drunkards or opium-eaters, if they once abandon themselves to this habit of indiscriminate reading” (125). Like other addictive substances, books are shown to allow habitual readers to escape temporarily from a painful reality, but that urge for escape becomes an all-consuming hunger that feeds on itself.

In this article, although the writer’s initial warnings against excessive reading tend to hinge on the inferior quality and sensational or fantastic nature of the chosen reading material, other statements suggest that it is reading itself, not the reading of any particular type of literature, that forms the basis of the perceived problems of habitual reading. These problems are not exclusive to the lower classes either. Anything on “printed paper” draws the habitual reader “mechanically” to his substance of choice (125), regardless of social position – be it “the newspaper sheets which are devoted to advertisements,” random “tracts,” or “the scraps inserted in bindings of old books” (126).⁴⁵ Here as elsewhere throughout the discourse on reading in the Victorian press, the practices of the lower classes become worst-case scenarios of reading problems that actually affect a large range of readers. While this habit might run rampant amongst “confirmed reader[s]” (126) across the social spectrum, the writer argues that the “mentally dissipated mechanic” is the worst off: “in everything [the mechanic] reads he finds grist for the mill that works up the solid literary vestments of old times into the

⁴⁵ Confirming that the reading habit can be found throughout society, the writer later claims, “many men of active minds, even when refined taste is combined with activity, many judges, barristers, scholars, find rest and solace in the very poorest novels. As long as there is a plot, and a narrative, and a mystery, they are content” (126).

marketable shoddy which is the raiment of the modern spirit" (126). Here the writer associates the mechanic's daily employment with his reading practices, and while he toils daily, manufacturing "marketable shoddy" – or low quality products made to look like those of superior quality, specifically inferior forms of fabric made from waste fibre – he is translating raw material into cheap consumer goods through his labour. In a similar manner, his few hours of rest are spent turning pieces of canonical literature ("the solid literary vestments of old times") into a debased hodgepodge.⁴⁶ Through such a process, the writer claims, "he is working at his trade, not neglecting it" (126). The mechanic's habit of reading degrades the literature that he reads just as his occupation adds degraded goods to the market.

There is a similarity between the language this writer uses to show the effects of habitual reading on the literary market and the language Frederic Harrison uses in his *Choice of Books*. Both invoke the pressures and products of a culture of mass production and consumption. Thus, the reviewer here sees the mechanic's reading habit as productive of literary "shoddy," while Harrison complains that the increased production of books means that they are entitled, "*a priori*, until their value is proved, to the same attention and respect as houses, steam engines, pictures, fiddles, bonnets, and other products of human industry" (10). The mass-produced books that feed the insatiable English reading habit should be given no more respect, Harrison believes, than the other mass-produced goods that inundate the market. In both articles, then, the effects of the reading habit are seen as destructive not just to the addicted reader, but to the rest of society as well.

⁴⁶ In the writer's use of the term "shoddy" here, we might also find a condemnation of social climbing or intellectual pride in the working-class. The *OED* gives as one possible meaning of the term, "the class of persons characterized by the endeavour to pass for something superior to what they really are, with respect to wealth, birth, culture, or refinement."

Following this line of thought, the author of an unsigned article in an 1886 number of *The Nation* makes similar claims about the state of modern reading practices.⁴⁷ Entitled “The Reading Habit,” the article (written by an American journalist, although it makes reference to reading habits on both sides of the Atlantic) opens with an account of a recent series of Senate meetings regarding a Copyright Bill introduced to stop American book pirating. He reports that one member of the committee, the publisher Henry Holt, thinks that the reading problem is larger than the simple difficulties posed by cheap, pirated reprints of English books glutting the book market. The reporter agrees with Holt that “cheap reading matter which a man can pick up and throw away ... is ruining the sale of all books” (92). In truth, he writes, the reading of serious and substantial literature is in decline (92). However, while he seems to suggest that the “habit of reading” is not being “kept up” (92), he means, in fact, that the habit of reading is transforming. While the habit of “continuous reading” that requires “sustained attention or mental effort,” such as the reading of quality novels (he cites George Eliot’s novels as an example), is waning, the habit of lazily reading cheap, periodical literature has taken hold of the public: “The newspaper is fast forming the mental habits of this generation, and, in truth, even this is getting to be too heavy, unless the articles and extracts are very short” (92). In this sense, the habitual reader and the mentally dissipated mechanic are contributing not only to their own intellectual and moral downfall through their reading practices, but to the downfall of serious literature as well, demanding as they do a continuous flow of cheap, superficial literature to feed their addictions.

It is not surprising, considering the connection that Harrison and the reviewers draw between the habit of reading and the degraded products of mass consumption, that modern newspapers and magazines are often singled out as particularly dangerous and addictive forms

⁴⁷ “The Reading Habit,” *The Nation* 43 (1886): 92.

of reading material. This type of literature had the most explicit relationship with mass production and consumption. The censure of critics fell “mainly on the kinds of reading practices or habits that [fiction and periodicals] seemed to encourage” (Mays, “Disease” 170-1). For Frederic Harrison, reading sensational and low-quality fiction is bad enough, but he fears even more the “remorseless cataract of daily literature which thunders over the remnants of the past” (16), because the modern addiction to this kind of reading material has the ability to impede “systematic knowledge and consistent powers of thought” (16).⁴⁸ Similarly, the *Saturday* reviewer who writes about the habit of reading finds that such a habit is “only noxious when it becomes, as it often does among indolent people, a disease. Their mental emptiness produces a morbid hunger; they must forever have a tattling paper in their hands” (“Habit” 127).

While there are some redeeming qualities to be found in the “bookworm,” nothing respectable is to be found in “the newspaper worm” (127). This “devourer of the flying leaves of literature” – a kind of “butterfly or locust” – is characterized by the reviewer as “indolent, ignorant,” and possessed of “a confused memory of gossip” (127). In this way, the addiction to reading is most dangerous when it is directed towards the consumption of newspapers and magazines.⁴⁹ For the *Temple Bar* writer too, reading periodical literature is just as dangerous and addictive as novel-reading, and he claims that “the modern newspaper is to the full as noxious as the modern novel; but it, too, is ubiquitous and universal” (“Vice” 254). Even though there is nothing of worth to be gotten from the daily press, “you will see a roomful of people set in a flutter by the arrival of the newspaper, and they pounce upon it with all the

⁴⁸ The writer for the *Temple Bar* concurs with Harrison on this point: “It is the art of printing that killed [the art of conversation]; the art of printing is rapidly killing something that is even more precious than good conversation, - namely, thinking” (“Vice” 255). This declaration comes, not surprisingly, in a discussion of periodical literature.

⁴⁹ The reviewer adds, “no honest bookworm would willingly share the habit of the newspaper devourer; he would rather consort with the depraved mechanic who lives in a fantastic world of romance” (127).

eagerness, – we must again use the only analogy that fitly represents the case, – of confirmed drunkards” (255).

While these articles show that a belief in the destructiveness of reading newspapers, magazines, and other ephemeral works was present in the critical discourse on reading in the 1870s and 1880s, an article by Leonard Courtney in a 1901 issue of *The Contemporary Review* shows that concerns about the addiction to periodicals persisted into the early twentieth century.⁵⁰ Courtney begins his article, “The Making and Reading of Newspapers,” by discussing how ubiquitous the newspaper has become. Employing the now customary language of habit and addiction, the writer remarks that “sober folk” receive daily “some account of the movement of the world outside his own personal experience, coupled with some doses of instruction as to the way he should view what is going on” (365). For these kinds of readers, consulting the newspaper is fine, “a proper part of the life of the 20th century” (366). Courtney’s concerns are for “the intemperate” readers:

the taste may grow on them until, if their means afford it (or, perhaps, don't afford it), they seem to be reading newspapers all day long. Morning papers, evening papers, mid-week papers, week-end papers, magazines, containing newspaper articles a little prolonged, at home, in the club, in the railway carriage, or tramcar, they are always reading or talking of what they have just read. Such men’s lives get newspaperised, and if these are examples of excess no one escapes a little saturation. It is no wonder that some have sought to deliver themselves from a habit leading to possible thraldom, and have thought they could find protection in total abstinence. (365-6)

Like the critics previously mentioned, Courtney explicitly invokes the language of addiction in his discussion of reading periodicals, employing the related notions of “thraldom” and

⁵⁰ Leonard Courtney, “The Making and Reading of Newspapers,” *Contemporary Review* 79 (1901): 365-76.

“abstinence.” The difference is that, unlike his fellow critics in previous decades, Courtney is not content to advise total abstinence from newspapers and magazines. Therefore, while the *Temple Bar* writer claims to “unhesitatingly assert that it would be an exceedingly good thing if all printed matter could be withdrawn from the hand of grown-up people for ten years, if the only alternative be that this superabundance of it is to continue” (“Vice” 255), Courtney “will not even speak of newspapers as a necessary evil” (366), and looks to regulate the limits of newspaper reading rather than “dispensing with it altogether” (366). While the opposing visions of these two critics might easily be the result of different individual views and personalities, it is also possible that two decades worth of the onslaught of periodical literature may have habituated Courtney himself to their presence and necessity in modern life.

The Reading Habit and the Decline of the Educational Ideal

It seems odd that such a change could have taken place in the perceived value of the “habit of reading” in the few decades that separate the creation of the 1862 Revised Code and the expressions of concern over addictive reading registered by Frederic Harrison and writers in *Temple Bar* and *The Saturday Review*. When the habit of reading was considered in relation to elementary education, the creation of such a habit was seen as overwhelmingly beneficial. As I pointed out in the first chapter of this dissertation, the trend in school readers produced around the 1860s – by authors such as Favell Lee Mortimer and J.S. Laurie – was to include illustrations and secular, narrative material to interest readers, and the role of interest was to encourage reading and to make it a habit. Later in the century, attempts to arouse children’s interest and to produce habits were taken up by J.M.D. Meiklejohn in the 1880s as well. When the educator and activist W.B. Hodgson discusses reading and writing in his 1867 paper before the Social Sciences Association, he is strongly against reading and writing being the

only education offered to the children of the working classes, but he believes, nonetheless, in the importance of creating a habit of reading in these children. In fact, his fear is that the traditional methods of teaching reading, beginning and ending with the New Testament, ensure that “the power to read is gained at the cost of the desire to read” (390).

If Hodgson sees this desire to read as a fatal or compulsive one he gives no such indication, but he is concerned, as Matthew Arnold is, that the ability to read without training in what to read could lead to the exclusive reading of popular, ephemeral literature. The power of reading, he feels, “should be associated with such training and guidance as will tend to ensure its beneficial employment” (390). Regardless, the desire to read is still something to be cultivated and made into a habit, and Hodgson regrets that “the great mass do not ... persevere sufficiently to surmount those hampering difficulties [in learning to read] and earn the reward which such persevering brings” (387). The “reward” is the habit of reading and with it the cultivation of the most important means for acquiring knowledge (387).⁵¹ For Matthew Arnold, too, the achievement of a habit of reading was seen primarily as a benefit of elementary education. In “The Twice-Revised Code,” Arnold’s attack on Robert Lowe’s “payment by results,” he claims that the ability to read needs to be “a power which is a real lasting acquirement for the whole life” (171). Reading needs to be made into a habit, or a “lasting acquirement,” so that it can put an end to the “general want of civilization” that Arnold sees amongst working class children and the men and women with whom they pass their lives (171).

We find the habit of reading put forward as a benefit for members of the working class in mid-century discussions of the press as well. For instance, in an unsigned 1852 article in

⁵¹ Since his article is dedicated to showing that reading and writing are not all that children need to learn, and that as an education in themselves they are insufficient, he admits that “reading is but one means, if, in the long run, the most important, for acquiring knowledge” (387). He argues that children may learn just as much by observing and asking questions.

The British Quarterly Review (reprinted in *The Eclectic Magazine*) on the comparative strength of the British and American newspaper industries, the writer argues that cheap newspapers are influential in creating a taste for reading that is “the foundation of all intellectual progress” (501).⁵² Discussing the Parliamentary Report from the Select Committee on Newspapers, appointed to “inquire into the present state and operation of the law relating to newspaper stamps” and into “the regulations relative to the transmission of newspapers and other publications by ‘post’” (499), the writer cites testimony from the committee proceedings that he feels will be “read with much interest by the friends of education” (501).⁵³ Brought before the committee was Mr. Horace Greeley, the editor of the *New York Tribune*, who was questioned by a committee member named Mr. Rich, representing the small village of Richmond. Mr. Rich is opposed to allowing more cheap newspapers and periodicals onto the market. He believes that education creates a demand for newspapers that governs the supply and that “in the present healthy state of the periodical press ... there are no signs of an obstructed demand,” and thus no need for the government to take steps allowing for more newspapers to fill the market (500). Arguments against the repeal of the newspaper tax often hinged on the idea that “if papers became cheaper, they would necessarily become more radical” (Altick 349), and this may have been in the background of Rich’s argument, though it is not stated explicitly in the commentary provided by the article. Education, Rich believes, creates a demand which governs supply, but the testimony he elicits from Greeley before the committee essentially undermines his point, suggesting as it does to the article’s author that, in

⁵² “The British Newspaper Press,” *The Eclectic Magazine* 25 (1851-2): 499-505.

⁵³ Richard Altick (1957) discusses the drive to repeal the newspaper tax in detail (348-54).

fact, cheap newspapers tend to “promote popular education” and a healthy habit of reading (“Newspaper Press” 501).⁵⁴

While Rich hopes the Committee will agree with his proposition that “the limited circulation of newspapers in England, compared with the United States, is owing to the want of education among the working classes of [England],” and not to any legislative restrictions placed on newspaper publication, Greeley’s testimony suggests that Rich’s claim is inaccurate. Responding to questions put to him by the Committee Chairman, the editor of the *Tribune* asserts that “newspaper reading is calculated to keep up a habit of reading,” and that it is, in fact, “worth all the schools in the country” (501). Greeley believes that the newspaper “creates a taste for reading in every child’s mind, and ... increases his interest in his lessons” (501). If this is indeed the case, Rich’s claim that want of education prevents the wide circulation of papers appears to be faulty, as Greeley argues that newspaper reading represents an extension to the limited education provided by elementary schools. This exchange depicts the reading habit as overwhelmingly beneficial, and another Committee member, encouraged by Greeley’s assertion that “the difference would be very great between a population, first educated in schools and then acquiring the habit of reading journals, and an uneducated non-reading population,” asks, “If a man is taught to read first, and afterwards applies his mind to the reading of newspapers, would not his knowledge assume a much more practical form than if that man read anything else?” (501). Greeley’s response is that “every man must be practical,” and that “the capacity to invent or improve a machine, for instance, is greatly aided by newspaper reading, by the education afforded by newspapers” (501). Thus, Greeley argues, the prevalence of newspapers encourages men and women to keep up a habit of reading that

⁵⁴ It is worth noting here that men like Greeley and the writer of the article were clearly biased towards the repeal of the newspaper tax and the wider circulation of periodicals.

they learned in their elementary schools, ensuring that they become more practical as they feed their habit.⁵⁵

Elsewhere in this article, the habit of reading is presented as a simple pleasure for members of the working class, and the writer quotes William Edward Hickson – editor of the *Westminster Review* from 1840-1852 – who claims that without newspapers to keep up the habit of reading, boys educated in the National and British Schools were often found to have lost all the knowledge they had acquired there. Hickson observes, “all the knowledge acquired at school was just to spell painfully through a chapter of the *New Testament*, and nothing had been afterwards put into their hands that had sufficient novelty to induce them to keep up the habit of reading, till they had overcome the mechanical difficulty, and found a pleasure in the art” (502).⁵⁶ While these views on the positive effects of the reading habit were prevalent amongst advocates for freedom of the press in this period, however, Altick points out that “events did not substantiate the liberals’ contention that it would be the working class who would profit most from the lowering of the price of daily papers” (355). He suggests that members of the working class did not begin to buy dailies in large numbers until “some thirty or forty years after the penny daily came into being” (355). This article stands out especially because, as we see in the comments on reading as a vice or mental disease later in the century, it is often cheap newspapers and other periodicals that critics argue are most harmful to men and women in the throes of the reading habit. There is no fear amongst the men who are

⁵⁵ Eventually this view won out when in 1855 the proposal to abolish the newspaper tax reached the House of Commons and was passed, bringing daily newspapers down in price.

⁵⁶ Hickson was not included in the Committee proceedings, so the writer must be citing comments he has made elsewhere. Altick (1957) also provides an account of the proceedings. He points to the view of one “old educationalist,” whose testimony before the committee is recorded, that cheap local papers and the reduction of newspaper prices in general would actually improve the reading ability, and thus the intelligence, of the masses. The educationalist “submitted that only access to newspapers could insure that boys who had learned the rudiments of reading at school would not soon relapse into total illiteracy” claiming, “The only effectual thing to induce them to keep up or create the habit of reading was some local newspaper. If you began in that way, by asking them to read account of somebody’s rick that was burnt down, you would find that you would succeed” (353).

represented debating the issue here that a greater availability of newspapers and magazines will “newspaperise” the reading public, as Leonard Courtney argues in his article on the production and circulation of daily papers.

In regards to reading, then, the notion of “habit” seems to have possessed sometimes-contradictory meanings in the debate on literacy and education. While educators and commentators in the middle of the century tended to associate the concept of a reading habit with customs and routines that they hoped to develop in their working-class pupils, making reading an intellectual way of life to counteract the decidedly *unintellectual* traditions in which they had grown up, critics and journalists throughout the late 1870s and 1880s tended to use the term “habit” in an inflammatory way, associating it with addiction or obsession, thus linking the habit of reading to other compulsions common to the working-class. Although it is true that the expansion of British publishing and the popular press between the 1850s and the 1880s contributed to what appears to have been a dramatic transformation in definitions, to argue that the reading habit simply transformed over time oversimplifies the nature of the debate and fails to take into account the fact that some educators continued to refer to a habit of reading in a positive way into the 1880s.⁵⁷ Thus, while laudatory references to the reading habit were more common in the 1850s and 1860s as educators tried to remedy the low literacy levels of the previous decades, it is not clear that these references disappear in the century’s final decades. They existed side-by-side with other, disparaging definitions of the reading habit.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Alec Ellis (1971) notes, for instance, that a circular sent out to Inspectors in 1881 recommended that “there should be ‘a full and well-defined amount of content’ in reading books, which would be sufficient for a year’s work; [and] an attractive style which would encourage children to form a habit of reading” (118).

⁵⁸ See Frederic Harrison in *The Choice of Books* for the ambiguous use of the term “habit” in the 1880s. Harrison first quotes Lord Sherbrooke, who says, “Form a habit of reading, do not mind what you read, the reading of better books will come when you have a habit of reading the inferior.” Harrison next suggests, however, that there is no need to accept Sherbrooke’s “*obiter dictum*”: “A habit of reading idly debilitates and corrupts the mind for all wholesome reading; the habit of reading wisely is one of the most difficult habits to acquire, needing

How then are we to account for this inconsistency in the representation of the reading habit? We first need to understand that, although it does not account completely for the transformed definition of the reading habit, the growth of publishing and of the press in Britain between the 1850s and the 1880s and the public perception regarding what kinds of literature enjoyed the greatest popularity in the market had significant roles to play in the redefinition of the reading habit. According to Altick's *English Common Reader*, a mass reading public became increasingly possible after 1860, as "literacy, leisure, and a little pocket money ... became the possession of more and more people" (306). While rising levels of literacy combined with rising incomes (and falling prices for other commercial goods) to increase the demand for books amongst members of the lower classes, changes in publishing practices and print technology made the production of more books possible for those supplying them, making these books even more affordable for a mass audience. In the fiction market, for instance, while the traditional, triple-decker edition remained the norm for new novels until the mid-1890s, usually priced at about 31s. 6d., many publishing houses (such as Bentley's) also began to produce cheap libraries of previously published books from the mid-nineteenth century on, selling these editions for between 1s. and 6s. (Waller 26-30). Non-fictional and educational books also came down in price and were printed in much greater number, a response to greater demand from consumers (Raven 268).⁵⁹

strong resolution and infinite pains; and reading for mere reading's sake, instead of for the sake of the good we gain from reading, is one of the worst and commonest and most unwholesome habits we have" (5-6).

⁵⁹ James Raven, "The Promotion and Constraints of Knowledge: The Changing Structure of Publishing in Victorian Britain," *The Organisation of Knowledge in Victorian Britain*, ed. Martin J. Daunt (Oxford: Oxford UP for the British Academy, 2005) 263-86. Raven also explains that "Victorian publishing ... was dominated by questions of capitalisation, centralised production and control, technological constraints (and breakthroughs), and the efficiency of distribution networks. Within this structure, mass popular publishing responded to growing consumer demand, advanced by the continued expansion of part-issues, periodicals, and newspapers, circulating libraries, public libraries and in late Victorian Britain, by new demand for educational literature and schoolbooks" (264). For changes to print technology, see Raven 276-8 and Altick 306-7.

The figures that Alexis Weedon has compiled in her recent study of Victorian book production show a reasonably consistent growth in the total numbers of titles published in Britain during the nineteenth century, taking into account a series of reversals in the book trade that occurred between 1826 and 1869 (47).⁶⁰ Relying on figures from Chadwyck-Healey's *Nineteenth-Century Short Title Catalogue* and the statistics recorded by the nineteenth-century trade journal *The Publisher's Circular*, Weedon shows a dramatic overall increase in the number of titles published annually, "rising from under 2000 titles at the beginning of the nineteenth century to around seven times that number by the advent of the First World War" (47). The swiftest rise in productivity can be found in the last quarter of the century, the same period that saw the delivery of elementary education change so dramatically. Weedon shows that by 1900, the British publishing industry was producing approximately 300% more books annually than it had when Victoria took the throne (50). Obviously, the majority of these books were novels and other works of literature, but Weedon demonstrates that, while they never reached the level of sales achieved by novels, books on languages, religion, geography and history also made sizeable contributions to the total number of books published, with scientific works becoming increasingly popular in the 1890s (90-5).

Kelly Mays notes that in response to the obvious and much publicized growth of the publishing industry, a number of writers insisted that the physical quantity of printed works constituted an "assault on readers" (169).⁶¹ The sheer choice of books could be overwhelming and frightening for those used to a simpler library with obvious standards, for, as Frederic Harrison notes in his *Choice of Books*, "the incessant accumulation of fresh books must hinder

⁶⁰ Alexis Weedon, *Victorian Publishing: The Economics of Book Production for a Mass Market, 1836-1914* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003). For Weedon's explanation of the changes to print technology, see 70-9.

⁶¹ Mays cites Frederic Harrison's comments about reading in a steam factory, with which I began this chapter, as an example of the language of assault she has located.

any real knowledge of the old; for the multiplicity of volumes becomes a bar upon our use of any” (3).⁶² As the articles discussed above on reading addictions suggest, however, concerns about the effects of the wrong kinds of reading on the public focussed not as much on books – not even novels – as on newspapers and other periodicals. Therefore, even more important than the real increase in printed literature was the general perception that a certain type of publication was taking precedence in the marketplace. In comments that echo those of Frederic Harrison and the anonymous writers in *Temple Bar*, *Blackwood's*, and *The Saturday Review*, the celebrated Victorian autodidact and author of *Self-Help*, Samuel Smiles, outlined what kinds of works he thought were becoming increasingly common towards the end of the nineteenth century. Writing in the 1890s about the changes that had occurred in publishing over the course of the century, Smiles explains, “cheap bookselling, the characteristic of the age, has been promoted by the removal of the tax on paper. This cheapness ... has been accompanied by a distinct deterioration in the taste and the industry of the general reader. The multiplication of Reviews, Magazines, manuals, and abstracts, has impaired the love of, and perhaps the capacity for study, research, and scholarship on which the general quality of literature must depend” (517).⁶³ According to Smiles, then, the removal of the paper tax – one of many “taxes on knowledge” that liberals fought to abolish in the first half of the nineteenth century – had actually become a stumbling block on the path of knowledge by facilitating the proliferation of scanty and scrappy publications capable of dissuading general readers from comprehensive study and research.

⁶² Interestingly, these statements are set out as questions in the original version of “The Choice of Books” in *The Fortnightly Review*, suggesting that the seven years between editions left Harrison even surer about the debilitating effects of increased production (492).

⁶³ Samuel Smiles, *A Publisher and his Friends: Memoir and Correspondence of the Late John Murray*, vol. 1 (London, J. Murray, 1891) 2.

Writing in the *Nineteenth Century* three years later, Joseph Ackland makes a similar estimation regarding the predominance of periodicals and newspapers.⁶⁴ Ackland looks at the relationship between the rise of elementary education, using the Education Act of 1870 as a starting point, and the annual output of books, gauging the type and quantity of books produced in Britain annually by referring to the *Publisher's Circular*. His analysis shows that despite the increased availability and quality of education for the masses the “drift has been away from the solid and instructive works” (419), and the greatest increases have been in fiction and in “the subsection of literature ‘Miscellaneous, and Pamphlets, not Sermons’” (419). The greatest increase, then, has been in miscellaneous reviews and periodicals, and Ackland specifically mentions *The Review of Reviews* and *Strand Magazine* as representative of this class of publications, noting that magazines of this sort have a “general tendency to stimulate superficial, cursory, and scrappy reading,” and through this a tendency to “swell the force of the current which appears to be undermining the growth of solid literature” (421).⁶⁵

The collective views of Harrison, Smiles, Ackland and the anonymous journalists mentioned at the opening of this chapter suggest that a number of commentators late in the century believed that growth of the popular press was outstripping even the impressive growth of book publishing. The statements of these writers point to fears that periodicals were crowding out more substantial works in the minds of readers. Mark Hampton's *Visions of the Press in Britain* (2004) provides us with an idea of how dramatically newspaper publication escalated after 1860, thanks in part to the gradual repeal between 1855 and 1861 of the taxes

⁶⁴ Joseph Ackland, “Elementary Education and the Decay of Literature,” *The Nineteenth Century* 35 (1894): 412-23.

⁶⁵ Ackland also mentions the “rise and extraordinary growth of weekly papers of a scrappy character and of very various degrees of merit or demerit” in order to explain the lowering of the nation's intellectual capacity, referring specifically to *The Illustrated Family Novelist*, *Modern Society*, *Tit-Bits*, *Cassell's Saturday Journal*, *Illustrated Bits*, *Scraps*, *Great Thoughts*, *Answers*, *Pick-Me-Up*, *Comic Cuts*, *Funny Cuts*, *Illustrated Chips*, *Pearson's Weekly*, and *Pearson's Society News* (421).

on transport and paper that restricted newspaper production.⁶⁶ Although Hampton is quick to point out that circulation records are not infallible guides to readership – largely because of the popular practice of newspaper sharing, which was particularly common among the lower classes – his outline of the expansion of circulation provides us with a rough historical background to the anxiety that a number of writers were registering. In London, the centre of news and of the newspaper industry, there were “nine morning and six evening dailies” in 1860, a year before the paper tax was removed (Hampton 28). In the provinces in 1860, there were sixteen dailies, sixteen semi-weeklies, and one paper published thrice weekly (28). In contrast, by the 1880s and the 1890s, one hundred and fifty daily papers were being published across England.⁶⁷ The per-capita estimates of circulation and purchasing also suggest cause for concern among those who saw in the popular press a threat to solid and instructive works. In 1850, Britons over the age of fourteen bought six copies of the newspaper per capita (yearly), compared to one hundred and eighty-two by 1920 (28). Richard Altick points out, too, that the repeal of the paper duty in 1861 “benefited all periodicals alike,” and that the “greatly expanded mass audience and lower costs threw the publishing and printing trades into a happy uproar,” with the establishments that produced mass-circulation magazines and journals taking on increasingly industrial appearances (357).

With these figures in mind, it appears that the sheer volume of reading material and the difficulties in selecting substantial and useful books out of this vast library led to a questioning of the value of the reading habit. If a reader now acquired such a habit, there would be no foreseeable end to his search for more print and it would be far more difficult for

⁶⁶ Mark Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850-1950* (Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2004). Cf. Altick (1957) 348-54; Weedon 68.

⁶⁷ Hampton's figures here agree for the most part with those of Lucy Brown, whose *Victorian News and Newspapers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) puts the number of dailies in existence in the 1880s and 1890s at “about a hundred and fifty” (4).

him to decide what kind of reading matter might aid his intellectual development and what might harm him. Accompanying the growing volume of newspapers and periodicals available to readers between the 1860s and the end of the century, and compounding these concerns, was a changing definition of the role of newspapers in English culture. Hampton documents this transformation, arguing that “discussions of the press between 1850 and 1950 generally were products of elite culture, and they focussed on the effects of the press on the behaviour of the non-elite” (5). Although I would not characterize every anonymous writer who took on the topic of the reading habit during the second half of the nineteenth century as “elite” in the sense that Hampton does, I do believe that these writers stood on the social scale above the readers they discussed.⁶⁸ Basing his conclusions on the statements made by this elite group, Hampton argues that the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed the peak and eventual decline of what he refers to as the “educational ideal” in discussions of the popular press, whereby the press was presented to readers as “a powerful agent for improving individuals” (9).⁶⁹ In representing this ideal of improvement, those who sought to promote the power of the press and the benefits of developing a habit of newspaper reading were thinking along the same lines as mid-century educationalists such as Matthew Arnold and Sir James Kay Shuttleworth, writing under what Hampton calls “the prevailing notions of self-help and improvement” (50). Under these prevalent ideals, the press was seen as a tool for “conveying established wisdom” from the elite to readers of the lower classes, thereby facilitating

⁶⁸ Hampton defines the elite as “overwhelmingly those who wrote in mainstream periodicals and books, participating in a self-selected ‘conversation’ about the press from the assumed perspective of insiders” (6). He maintains that the elite subjects of his book would have been eligible to vote in 1850, the historical starting point for his study.

⁶⁹ In his definition of the educational ideal, Hampton is building on the work of Alan J. Lee, whose *The Origins of the Popular Press in England, 1855-1914* (London: Croom Helm, 1976) defines the theory of the press that has historically prevailed in Britain as a “liberal’ theory” (Lee 15). Hampton explains that the notion that newspapers could educate lower-class readers is part of a “liberal ethos” that upheld the notion of press accessibility and ownership (9).

“politics by public discussion” (50).⁷⁰ The view that the primary role of the press was to educate was common during the 1850s and 1860s, and it still managed to find proponents after 1880, although by then it was facing a growing number of challenges.

The educational ideal was challenged during the final decades of the nineteenth century, and because critics and commentators believed that a growing majority of reading was done in the period's newspapers and magazines (which outnumbered books), its decline goes hand in hand with the definitional transformation of the reading habit. Challenges in the press were registered as challenges to the notion of a beneficial habit of reading. Hampton locates a number of sources for the objections to the educational ideal, the first of which is the changing pattern of newspaper ownership. Ownership of the press was distributed quite widely between the 1850s and the 1880s, allowing a considerable degree of editorial independence and promoting the transmission of a diverse spectrum of political views. The diversity of these views combined with the belief that the “right” and “true” views would always succeed meant that it was easier to see working-class readers as preparing themselves to join the electorate by reading from the daily press (10). In the 1880s, however, newspaper ownership became progressively concentrated, leading critics to believe that the free expression of conflicting political and social ideas was under threat.⁷¹ With this commercialization came the obvious desire to turn a profit through appealing to a mass readership, so that newspapers began to be characterized by headlines, shorter stories, simpler prose, and photography (10).⁷² These new formal developments made it less possible to

⁷⁰ The confidence of the elite that true and “right” ideas would prevail in any contest, Hampton explains, resolved the apparent conflict in this view of the press between “process and results” (50). The working-class reader would always be educated in the “right” principles because these principles would always win out.

⁷¹ Hampton explains that this concentration occurred because of “the emergence of a mass readership, the reliance on ever more expensive machines, and the increasing dominance of advertising revenue” (10).

⁷² For those who rejected the educational ideal of the press, however, the same factors at work in popularizing late Victorian journalism for a mass audience also affected the character of books. As one writer puts it, more

imagine the press as a tool for initiating the lower classes into the serious business of running the country.⁷³ Hampton also credits broader cultural and political changes with the decline of the educational ideal around the 1880s. The economic depression that gripped England between 1873 and 1896, the rise of more militant unions that incorporated unskilled labourers, and the expansion of casual labour, Hampton argues, all made the “social and political elites ... less willing to think of workers becoming ‘fitter and fitter’ to join the political nation” (11). If we add to this the perception amongst Hampton’s elite that the Second and Third Reform Bills were major changes to the nation’s system of political representation (even if universal male suffrage was not a reality until almost twenty years into the next century), then it is easy to see why newspapers and other popular periodicals began to look less and less likely to educate and improve the masses.

Conclusions

Understanding the educational or liberal ideal as a belief that waned without disappearing entirely in the final two decades of the nineteenth century allows us to better appreciate all of the reading models discussed in this chapter, partly because many of these models were so closely connected to the situation of the press. Those who still approached questions of the press’s role and the nature of the reading habit from the ideological position

and more books are written so as to be “palatable to the ‘general public.’ Thus they teach, not what ought to be taught, but what the writer thinks the reader will consent to be taught,” so that “Histories are made ‘diverting,’ Biographies scandalous, Travels sensational” (“Vice” 252). In this way, even books could be non-educational and thus open to the same criticisms that periodicals were open to.

⁷³ Both Mark Hampton and Lucy Brown point out that the emergence of a mass readership was “commonly but inaccurately” (Hampton 10) credited with the formal transformation of newspapers. Brown suggests, for instance, that in contemporary discussions of the success or failure of newspapers, “illiteracy is never mentioned as a factor to be considered” (Brown 30). She argues, moreover, “newspapers made no attempt ... to adjust their presentation of the news to people of limited education” (30). Brown believes that “the main emphasis, in explaining the progress of circulations, should be on price” (30). However, keeping the shortening of articles and the inclusion of more photography and headlines in mind, it seems hard to believe that these changes happened only coincidentally to occur as a larger section of the nation began to receive some instruction in the skills of literacy.

of self-improvement, like those involved in elementary education, would be far less likely to see reading – whether it took place in a newspaper or a “solid” book – as detrimental. Surely a large proportion of school inspectors and authors of school readers remained optimistic, even when faced with the new political realities of the 1880s and 1890s, about the possibility of integrating the lower classes into the nation’s political discussions, and for these men and women, reading would retain the potential for self-improvement.⁷⁴ It also seems possible to interpret the comments of those who no longer subscribed to the educational ideal, who no longer presented the reading habit as a beneficial custom but as a destructive addiction to the wrong kind of literary “food,” as constitutive of a reaction to the increased political agency of the masses. As Hampton notes, even though universal male suffrage did not exist in Britain until 1918, many elites “experienced” political developments such as the 1867 and 1884 Reform Bills as major changes to the political realities of the nation (11). Depicting the mass of readers not only as uninformed, but as *uninformable* because of their addiction to scrappy, scanty, and superficial reading material, elites could defend their privileged positions in the political nation by denying that those below them were capable of participation, even if many of them had been given a legal mandate to participate. For those rejecting the educational ideal, reading in a habitual and addictive manner, whether from magazines, newspapers, or sensational novels, was depicted as a form of idleness instead of intellectual activity.⁷⁵ Some commentators saw such idleness as capable of “undermining the vigour of nations,” and statements about reading and idleness can be seen as warnings to the middle-class audience of

⁷⁴ Although the educational ideal was overtaken by what he calls a “representational ideal” after 1880, whereby the press was seen as a tool for representing rather than improving “the people” (102), Hampton argues that some critics still believed that the educational ideal was compatible with the New Journalism (87-9). Even liberals displayed a sense of wariness towards these journalistic developments, however.

⁷⁵ See, for instance, “The Vice of Reading,” where the anonymous author explains that the reading of “bad books,” that is, books that do not provide information which is worth having, that do not refresh the mind, and that do not spiritually elevate, “is invariably idleness, and not unoften the most dangerous kind of idleness” (251).

journals like *Temple Bar*, *The Nineteenth Century*, *The Saturday Review*, and *Blackwood's* that the misuse of reading will sink them to the level of the masses and hinder their abilities to guide the nation. In this way, depicting the reading habit of the lower classes as a destructive vice was another way of distancing "them" from "us" in the increasingly fractured political atmosphere of the late Victorian period.

Chapter 4

Aimless Reading and Natural Writing:

More Models of Literacy in Victorian Reading Guides and Periodicals

The final decades of the nineteenth century proved to be a fertile time for the creation of new models of literacy skills. While the models examined in Chapter 3 were designed, for the most part, to dissuade readers from forms of reading that were considered destructive, there were also reading models in circulation that were presented as beneficial to those who adopted them. My first goal in the present chapter is to analyse two contrasting methods of reading discussed in detail in the press: desultory reading and systematic reading. The ability to read systematically was often positioned as the ultimate end of a thorough education by the writers that advocated it, and although desultory reading was frequently associated with other unhealthy reading habits and with ephemeral literature, some critics were also willing to dwell on its instructive possibilities and to suggest tactics that common readers could make use of to improve their limited educations.

After outlining the definitions of desultory and systematic reading provided by Victorian commentators, I will investigate the expectations about social class and gender that contributed to their construction and examine how they fit into the historical categories of reading methods established by contemporary historians of reading Roger Chartier and Rolf Engelsing. The work of these theorists, particularly that of Chartier, provides a framework within which we can reconsider the apparent dichotomy between desultory and systematic reading. As well, because it calls for active engagement with texts, the topic of systematic reading provides a useful segue into an analysis of the models of writing that emerge from periodical literature. In discussing these models, I will examine what seem to me the two most

popular ways of figuring the activity of writing. When writing is discussed in the press – and it was discussed much less frequently than reading was – commentators seem to fall into two main camps, with one camp depicting writing as a natural process that could give voice to the writer's inner self, and another depicting it as a technological process that could alienate men and women from an intimate understanding of the natural world. Throughout the discourse on writing in scientific and philosophical journals and middlebrow magazines there is a tendency for writers to look back to an earlier time in the history of writing, before the technological advances that made print so ubiquitous in the late-nineteenth century. This nostalgic tendency, along with the urgency with which writers attempt to define the practice of writing, provides further evidence of the degree to which popular literacy was thought to have altered contemporary culture.

“Ballooning” and “Navigating”: Desultory and Systematic Reading

Desultory reading is implicated in the view of reading as a vice discussed in the previous chapter and associated with the increased proliferation of the popular press between the 1860s and the end of the century. In addition to being identified as the drug of choice for confirmed reading addicts, newspapers, magazines, and other periodicals were thought to encourage a desultory mode of reading that critics often characterized as leading to intellectual weakness and an aversion to real study. In simple terms, to read in a desultory manner is to read aimlessly and superficially, passing from one book, article, or subject to another in a seemingly haphazard fashion. Critics believed that miscellaneous periodicals encouraged this kind of reading with their short and sometimes sensational discussions. Statements about the dangers of desultory reading and against the forms of periodical literature thought to promote it increased during the 1880s and 1890s, so that, by the turn of the century, it was possible for

H.V. Weisse to write of the “desultory and aimless skimming of a thousand things in magazines” as an absolute threat to the health and freedom of men and women: “It is destructive of individuality and character, of personality in relation to occupation, and of the power of reading, marking and digesting what great men have thought upon great questions of cosmopolitan interest” (835).¹ In fact, in the inflammatory tone common in those addressing problematic methods of reading in this period, Weisse expresses his heartfelt hope that it will be as possible, through further education, “to nourish the growing mind, and build up its defensive forces, as to enable it to repel the pestilence that walketh in the magazines, just as a healthy system repels the omnipresent factors of disease and corruption of the body” (838). At the same time, there were those who argued, in response to critics like Weisse, that a regulated form of desultory reading could be beneficial for readers of all classes. At the heart of the distinctions made between desultory reading and its “antidote” – systematic reading – were Victorian assumptions about the relationship between class and gender and the skills of literacy.

While the notion of desultory reading was not new to the Victorian period, advances in the scope and quality of elementary education and the increased productivity of publishing and the popular press seemed to renew critical interest in the intellectual consequences of loose reading habits. Although most major statements on the topic of desultory reading were made in the final two decades of the century, when the proliferation of miscellaneous periodicals was for some commentators the stuff of national panic, the critical debate about desultory reading actually began in the 1850s, well before the educational ideal that Mark Hampton discusses had even begun its decline. Because of the period of its publication, James Stephen’s *Desultory and Systematic Reading: A Lecture* stands out amongst the publications

¹ H.V. Weisse, “Reading for the Young” *Contemporary Review* 79 (1901): 829-38.

comprising the Victorian discourse on systematic reading.² Like so many Victorian statements on books and reading, Stephen's book was a public lecture before it was ever printed, having been delivered to the YMCA at Exeter Hall in November, 1853. A professor of Modern History at Cambridge, Stephen begins his lecture by speaking of the responsibilities and duties, mostly political, of British citizens in the face of political changes that have occurred over the last hundred and twenty-five years.³

One need only look to France, Stephen claims, to see the relationship these political responsibilities have to reading. As Stephen puts it, the "master-spirits" and philosophers of the age before the French Revolution sought to converse with the majority of French people in order to evoke change in the political system, but because the people were "labouring under a profound ignorance," they were unable to take part in this conversation (5). The sluggish growth of literacy in France meant that the poorly educated French population needed a "royal road to learning" (5) to take part in such a discussion, initiating them into political and philosophical discourse. This need was addressed, Stephen claims, by propaganda, with important subjects being made gay and ephemeral in periodical productions so that "reading became a favourite recreation instead of an arduous and self-denying study," as it should generally be (6). A further consequence of this lightening of study, even more destructive to the French nation, was that an alliance was made between this easy, epigrammatic literature and "whatever was arrogant, disloyal, impious, and impure" (6). Therefore, according to

² Sir James Stephen, *Desultory and Systematic Reading: A Lecture* (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1853).

³ Stephen seems to be one of those elite Hampton speaks of whose perception of the political and social changes of the nineteenth century was more severe than the reality. For instance, Stephen is writing well before the Second Reform Bill, but he seems to believe that even the First Reform Bill made the country utterly democratic. In a display of concern over the new "power" of the masses, Stephen asks, "since to Englishmen collectively now lies the final appeal from every human authority in England, on every question affecting our national welfare and our duties as a people, is it unreasonable to desire, or unwise to express the desire, that the vast apparatus of instruction now happily at our command, may be so contrived, and so employed, as to train us all for the right discharge of this most grave responsibility, by training each of us in at least one branch not of superficial, but of sound learning?" (9).

Stephen, the excesses of the revolution can be at least partially blamed on this desultory propaganda.

Stephen has greater hopes for Britain, believing that the British will never find a “mass of falsely pretended knowledge” amongst themselves (like that provided by pre-revolution French propaganda) as long as they stick to their “legitimate intellectual rulers” (6). However, it is getting harder and harder to stick to these important, canonical writers, because readers face more opportunities for desultory reading everyday. As a consequence, and because they are endowed with what Stephen calls the “augmented responsibilities attendant on the vast and sudden increase which has been made both in our political franchise, and in our collective and individual authority in the State” (7), it is even more imperative that British readers choose self-denying study over superficial and entertaining reading. To demonstrate the threats to study and genuine improvement, he runs through the myriad opportunities that are provided daily for desultory reading (the morning and evening paper, the free library, and even the British Museum) and points out that little of the reading one does throughout the day puts any strain on an individual’s “thinking powers” (7). He goes so far as to wonder whether

this confederacy of the newspapers, the magazines, the clubs, the reading-room, the railways, not unaided by us lecturers, to render all men knowing and wise at the smallest possible expenditure of mental labour, will really qualify us for any of the serious duties of life, and especially for the vigilant, the humble, and the self-denying exercise of the new powers which we have derived from the English revolution of the nineteenth century? (8)

The only way to counteract these agents of desultory and superficial reading, and thus to take a proper part in the discharge of the “grave responsibility” of political participation (9), is to be trained in “at least one branch not of superficial, but of solid learning” (9).

For Stephen, then, reading correctly is both a personal and a national responsibility because the misuse of reading skills for desultory reading from newspapers and other periodicals might lead, as it did in eighteenth-century France, to revolutionary violence.⁴ In this way, Stephen's estimation of the importance of correct reading is a precursor to the model of reading as a vice observed in the periodical press from the 1870s onwards, which at least one critic accused of undermining "the vigour of nations" ("Vice" 251). Like Frederic Harrison, Stephen sees desultory reading as destructive to the accumulation of systematic knowledge and powers of thought.⁵ He believes that the *correct* use of reading will be productive of sound, or solid, learning and wisdom for those who practise it, and he provides a useful definition of this category of learning. Sound learning can be defined as the acquisition of "knowledge as relates to useful and substantial things, and as it itself is compact, coherent, all of a piece, having its several parts fitted in to each other, and mutually sustaining and illustrating one another"(9). Solid learning is, therefore, "that kind of learning which is the opposite of the loose, disconnected, unsystematic, gaseous information" (9). This latter kind of learning is the result of desultory reading, and to avoid it, Stephen suggests following a systematic plan of reading and study. His systematic plan, which involves focussing on one area of study only and approaching all other areas through this first, is to desultory reading as "navigating" is to "ballooning" (9).⁶ While the one is arduous and self-denying, the other is entertaining but ultimately fruitless. In Stephen's estimation, desultory reading is only useful

⁴ Stephen points out in his conclusion, for instance, that "as in the commencement of the French Revolution, the attempt to render all knowledge accessible to all readers disqualified the great body of the people of France for the grateful, vigilant, humble, and self-denying use of their new powers; so a similar attempt in England may, perhaps, be productive here of a not dissimilar result" (41).

⁵ Although much of Harrison's *Choice of Books* appears to be an excursus on the harmful nature of desultory reading, with Harrison often decrying the increase in periodical literature in the same way that Stephen had done thirty years earlier, only rarely does he employ the term "desultory." When Harrison does invoke this reading model, however, he shows clear animosity towards it, claiming, for instance, that one of the chief problems facing modern readers is their "impotent voracity for desultory information" (Harrison 1).

⁶ Throughout the remainder of the essay, the one area of study Stephen uses as a basis for the accumulation of valuable knowledge is, fittingly considering Stephen's position at Cambridge, Modern History.

under the command of systematic study. A system of reading will allow the reader to “carefully bind together into sheaves whatever he may glean to his purpose from ... desultory reading” so as to “accumulate those sheaves to his historical harvest” (15).⁷ The remainder of Stephen’s essay goes on to explain how reading literature in a systematic way – that is, from a fixed position and with a “certain unity and consistency of plan” (11) – will transform reading that could be seen as desultory and destructive into reading that is sound and systematic.

While *Desultory and Systematic Reading* is an important and relatively early statement on the potential problems of desultory reading, most of the writing on the subject can be found in the periodicals and treatises of the 1880s and 1890s. Many of these works voiced the same concerns as Stephen’s lecture, although the political (indeed revolutionary) implications of incorrect models of reading come through much more strongly in Stephen’s discussion than in the discussions of his late-century counterparts. As well, there is a variety of views concerning the relative benefits and dangers of desultory reading expressed in the century’s final decades, with some writers, such as Harrison and Weisse, taking the position that the desultory reading of periodicals is wholly destructive and should be avoided, and others claiming that regulated and transformed models of desultory reading could be compatible with serious study.

One of the most developed of the statements on desultory reading is Stafford Henry Northcote’s *The Pleasures, the Dangers, and the Uses of Desultory Reading*, published in 1885.⁸ Northcote, the first Earl of Iddlesleigh, begins his discussion of desultory reading by relating it, as Stephen had done, to travel. Like Stephen, who compares desultory reading to ballooning and serious study to navigation, Northcote likens desultory study to “a journey on

⁷ Stephen points out that “a man who has concentrated his reading on some one systematic pursuit, may indulge with advantage (if only he indulges with self-control) those desultory habits which would otherwise be fatal to his learning and to his wisdom” (19).

⁸ Stafford Henry Northcote [Earl of Iddlesleigh], *The Pleasures, The Dangers, and the Uses of Desultory Reading* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Co., 1885).

horseback” and close study to “a journey by railway” (14).⁹ While the railway journey will no doubt get the man of business to his “bank or warehouse” more quickly, a journey by horse will provide “occasional divergence from the hard road, and opportunities for examining the country” through which he is passing (14). However, Northcote is quick to point out that the enjoyment afforded the desultory reader or traveller is dependent on one condition – that he “has made good use of his faculty of observation” either of the country-side or of the books he is surveying (14).

Unlike Stephen, however, Northcote seems much more willing to celebrate desultory reading, not just when it is made to serve systematic reading, but as a productive model of reading in itself. For one thing, the analogy he uses for the practice associates it with the activities of the gentry and aristocracy; the middle-class businessman may have to rush to his urban place of employment, but the gentleman can afford to spend time surveying the country around his estate. Through this analogy, desultory reading takes on the patina of wealth and privilege, of large libraries and seemingly limitless time for the perusal of books. The associations Northcote makes are far different from those made by Stephen, who was quick to connect desultory reading with the undereducated members of the lower classes. Furthermore, when Northcote tries to define the practice of desultory reading and to strengthen its appeal, he does so once again by invoking the language of travel. In trying to delineate desultory reading in his own terms, he turns to the “Latin parentage” of the term desultory, claiming that “it was applied by the Romans to describe the equestrian jumping actively from one steed to another in the circus, or even, as was the case with the Numidians, from one charger to another, in the midst of battle” (15). This form of desultory pursuit was “energetic activity,” and certainly not the “idle loitering” that Stephen and other like-minded critics associate with

⁹ This connection seems slightly counterintuitive considering that railway reading was so often figured as desultory reading.

desultory reading (15). Rather, desultory reading is presented here as a kind of mental exercise intended to keep the mind alive and healthy, a much needed break from the “apparently deeper and severer method of study” (15). Indeed, desultory reading seems to Northcote to be the only way to make oneself acquainted with even “the hundredth part” of what he calls “the mass of our book heritage” (17). The choice for Northcote lies not, as it had for Stephen, between loose, disconnected, desultory study and solid learning, but between desultory reading and “ignorance of much that we would greatly like to know” (17). While Northcote and Stephen both see desultory reading as a product of the vast increase in printed information that readers were now faced with, only Northcote seems to recognize any innate value in reading under these circumstances.

In truth, however, a closer examination of Northcote’s discussion of desultory reading practices reveals that he was much closer to Stephen in his attitude towards it than might at first appear. While Northcote claims to be celebrating the benefits of desultory reading in the age of print’s greatest proliferation, he is, in fact, trying to redefine this form of reading as a practice with distinct resemblances to the form of systematic study that Stephen had already laid out. The first few pages of Northcote’s essay make his aversion to the more traditional model of desultory reading (that is, desultory reading as it is described by writers such as Stephen, Harrison, and Weisse) quite clear. For instance, he points out on the second page of his essay that the case of the desultory reader turns on the “proviso” that “he must not be a loiterer shuffling out of the trouble to which his more methodical comrades put themselves” (14). Furthermore, to be a successful desultory reader, Northcote’s subject “must have an object in view, and he must not allow himself to lose sight of it” (14-15); desultory reading

must not resemble “idleness” (15).¹⁰ Indeed, Northcote’s real distaste for the more traditional model of desultory reading is confirmed by his use of the same kinds of metaphors used by those critics in the 1880s and 1890s who sought to demean the habit of reading. He acknowledges that while the desultory reader may be “wise in not allowing himself to become a bookworm,” he must not allow himself to slide so far in the other direction as to become “what is much worse – a book butterfly” (15).¹¹ What Northcote is really insisting on is not that his audience become desultory readers in earnest, but that they “regulate and pursue a *seemingly* desultory course of reading as to render it more truly beneficial than an apparently deeper and severer method of study” (15).¹²

As a celebration of desultory reading, then, Northcote’s essay is limited. He envisions a form of desultory reading that draws solely from the acknowledged classics of world literature. One of his first examples of the correct use of desultory reading, for instance, involves his own reading of novels and of the *Arabian Nights* while studying for his degree (19), and his references throughout the essay are to authors such as Chaucer, Bacon, and Shakespeare. More importantly, however, Northcote’s warnings concerning the dangers of desultory reading refer to periodical literature, just as the warnings of Stephen and Weisse had. After discussing the question of whether modern or ancient books are more beneficial to young men, Northcote remarks that the real competition to modern literature comes not from classical writers but from “the daily, weekly, or monthly periodicals, which fall as thickly

¹⁰ Later in his essay, Northcote returns to this point, warning that while the freedom from system and rigid methodology that desultory reading provides is welcome for many, “it ought not be allowed to degenerate into laxity. The tendency of a great many young men – and of old ones too, for that matter – is not only to read widely, but also to read indolently” (23-4).

¹¹ The author of “The Habit of Reading” in *The Saturday Review* distinguished bookworms from “newspaper worms” (127), not quite book-butterflies, but sharing the qualities of ignorance, indolence, and confusion that Northcote would likely associate with the wrong kind of desultory work. The author of *Temple Bar*’s “The Vice of Reading” speaks of a room of free library patrons “set in a flutter by the arrival of the newspaper” (255), thereby associating these readers with some kind of flying animal.

¹² Emphasis mine.

round us as the leaves in Vallombrosa, and go near to suffocate the poor victim who is longing to enjoy his volume in peace, whether that volume be of Sophocles or of Shakespeare or of Goethe or of Burns” (43-4). In Northcote’s choice of simile, he exhibits some of the same concerns displayed by his contemporaries in their depiction of the rise of the press as a physical threat to the health of readers. These aspects of his argument show his model of desultory reading to be decidedly different from the models circulated by Stephen, Harrison, and Weisse.

In fact, acknowledging these key differences might lead us to ask if Northcote’s model of reading is really deserving of the term “desultory” at all. Can reading with a clear object—as Northcote’s model of desultory must have – really be desultory, since the term clearly implies randomness, superficiality, and aimlessness? And can reading that eschews periodicals – as Northcote’s model of desultory reading must – share any similarities to those models that treat newspaper and magazine reading as definitional of desultory reading? Northcote’s excursus on desultory reading is not a break from the critical Victorian discourse that sought to promote the systematic reading of well-known, canonical works of literature over the superficialities of the daily, weekly, and monthly press, but a reaffirmation of that position. For Northcote, as for Stephen and Weisse, valuable reading must have an aim and must distinguish itself from the thoughtless perusal of the press, a pastime associated more and more with the newly literate readers of the lower-classes.¹³

¹³ As W.M. Gattie explained in an 1889 article in *The Fortnightly Review* (reprinted in *Littel's Living Age* 183 [1889]: 105-12, from which my references come), the new social conditions of the country, which were placing artisans and other members of the working-class in a position to be entertained, had much to do with the new availability of reading material and the rise of desultory reading. “We have, then,” Gattie maintains, “a constant demand for new books; and this points to the conclusion that the popular taste favours ephemeral literature, produced very rapidly, and designed to fit the fashion of the hour, to afford a momentary excitement, or to gratify some immediate curiosity, rather than works of a solid character and more enduring interest, which cannot be either written or read at the same extravagant rate, and which do not need to be continuously replaced by fresh matter” (106). The lower classes simply want to be amused in a desultory manner, “they do not want anything that will give them the trouble to think” (107).

Class and Gender in the Desultory Reading Model

Even if Northcote's essay is not the dedicated statement of support for the practice of desultory reading that it might first appear to be, its publication (along with the publication, in 1886, of Harrison's *The Choice of Books*) further stimulated discussion of models of reading in English literary reviews during the last fifteen years of the century. In many of these articles, statements about the relationships between desultory reading, social class, and gender are central. The unsigned "Reading to Kill Time," printed in the *Spectator* in 1886, foregrounds the issue of reading and class.¹⁴ Its author takes the recent volume publication of Northcote's essay as his starting point, pointing out that Northcote has made an important omission in his discussion of reading practices both here and when the piece first appeared in *The Times*. He "has feared to injure the minds of the young" by telling them "what he must have felt, or we misunderstand his inner drift – that one of the grand charms of desultory reading is that it is a delectable, beneficial, even, if such a thing can exist under the modern conception of the laws of the universe, a virtuous waste of time" (314). According to this writer, desultory reading is beneficial just as it is – without the provisos and conditions Stephen and Northcote call for – because even the present accelerated pace of life at the end of the nineteenth century has not made "the heaviness of time of which our grandfathers used to complain so bitterly" any less acute (314). While other critics were quick to identify desultory reading as a mere form of mental idleness – acquisition of information "at the smallest possible expenditure of mental labour," Stephen called it – the anonymous author of this article sees desultory reading as a relief from idleness: "It is idleness which injures; and to prevent idleness, many men, mostly industrious men, must nowadays kill time" (314).

¹⁴ Reprinted in *Littell's Living Age* 168 (1886): 313-15. My references are to this American reprint.

It is here, in his discussion of idleness, that the social implications of desultory reading enter into the writer's argument. While the weariness of "unfilled leisure" (314) was once the possession only of "estate owners and retired merchants," it is now the case that "the workers have it also, and grow wearier still, because of the contrast between the vigorous life of their occupied hours, developed as that life is in passion and hurry, and the comparative lethargy of those hours laid upon their hands" (314).¹⁵ While pleasurable physical activity is a way to fill idle hours for those of the upper classes, this is not the case for the labourer or even the clerk because these men spend their days under physical strain. For these "intellectual industrials" (315), desultory reading fills the empty hours as no other kind of activity will. Here the writer employs the language of consumption and addiction, explaining that "to involve little work, and yet be pleasant, reading must be desultory; and it is for pleasure, and for pleasure simply, that so many hard workers take to it, till with a few of them, it becomes, no doubt, a stimulant hardly to be forgone. They read as drinkers swallow" (315). Remarkably, unlike his fellow critics, who often associate similar practices of reading with vice and disease, this writer has nothing bad to say about a model of reading that resembles the consumption of stimulants. His only stipulation is that the books read in this relieving and desultory fashion should be ones that excite the mind instead of wearying and depressing it (315). Even periodicals are not beyond the pale, and although the writer fears that readers will not benefit much from the reviews, newspapers, and magazines offered to them, he acknowledges that it is rarely possible to study any printed matter without taking something from it (315). In these statements, the writer reveals himself to be one of the rare, late-century advocates of the

¹⁵ Here the reviewer agrees with Edward G. Salmon, whose "What the Working Classes Read" (*Nineteenth Century* 20 [1886]: 108-17) makes similar statements about the changes to leisure time and the market for reading material. Salmon points out that a survey of the average stationer's gives the impression that "the working classes must be the most omnivorous devourers of mental food ever known. A market which a century since was exclusively controlled by the aristocracy is now open to the democrat or the socialist equally with the most blue-blooded of peers" (108).

educational ideal discussed in Chapter 3. He believes that some good can come of almost any kind of reading, and that desultory reading – whether from serious books, novels, or newspapers – is a “wholesome recreation” as good as any other (315).¹⁶

The author of “Reading to Kill Time” was just one of a number of late-Victorian writers quick to associate desultory reading with the reading habits of the lower classes. In his survey of working-class reading habits, for instance, George R. Humphrey acknowledges the susceptibility of the working-class reader to influence by examining what kind of literature should be recognized as the most harmful.¹⁷ Humphrey points to penny novelettes and miscellaneous periodicals as the most harmful kinds of reading material, noting that the latter consist chiefly of “a few doubtful tales, a column of indifferent recipes, an imperfect description of some town, miscellanea, advertisements, and answers to correspondents making up the balance” (693). According to Humphrey, this class of miscellaneous periodical literature – the same kind of “scrappy” and “scanty” reading matter that Joseph Ackland dismisses as worthless in his 1894 “Elementary Education and the Decay of Literature,” – “begets loose, desultory habits of reading, and the idea that the study of a given subject is the height of monotony” (693).¹⁸

¹⁶ While Edward Salmon is far less forgiving of popular periodical literature, referring to penny novelettes as “poison” (112) and to the products of New Journalism (*Tit-Bits*, *Cassell’s Saturday Journal*, etc.) as “old curiosity sheet[s]” (113), he seems to believe like the author of “Reading to Kill Time” that some reading is better than none at all. While he acknowledges that reading “the scraps” printed in magazines such as *Tit-Bits* and *Great Thoughts* may tend to “develop a habit of loose reading” (113), he also feels that these publications “discharge a very important function in educating the people” (113). Whatever habit such reading engenders, Salmon claims, “if the working class did not read these papers they would hardly read anything save the novelette or the weekly newspaper; and, even though gained in a disjointed fashion, it is surely better for them to acquire pieces of historical information thuswise than never to acquire them at all” (113).

¹⁷ George R. Humphrey, “The Reading of the Working Classes,” *Nineteenth Century* 33 (1893): 690-701.

¹⁸ In order to illustrate the effects of light, desultory reading on the mental habits of readers, Humphrey provides the following anecdote: “I once gave a few particulars of the life of Oliver Cromwell to a circle of journal readers, one of whom afterwards asked me ‘where he could get this information.’ I lent him a small biography of Cromwell. Some months later I asked him how he got on. He replied that I had better have it back; he had read thirty-six pages, but it was too dry for him” (693).

Humphrey is far less sympathetic to periodical literature than the author of "Reading to Kill Time," defining the perusal of miscellaneous magazines as a "waste of valuable time" and asking that the youth of the day be "delivered from this waste paper" (693). "This reading is not recreation in any way," he claims, "it is degradation" (693). These statements on desultory reading and periodicals make it all the more surprising that Humphrey should echo the sentiments of his colleague from the *Spectator* that some reading, no matter what is being read, is better than none at all.¹⁹ On this point, Humphrey agrees with Northcote, who maintains in his essay that Thomas Carlyle was wrong to insist that it was better to read nothing at all than to read bad books.²⁰ Northcote and Humphrey believe instead that "the most important question is not what, but how we shall read" (Northcote 28), and that almost any piece of writing can be made useful and pleasurable, as long as Northcote's earlier stipulations are kept in mind. For Humphrey's part, although he deplores the apparent reign of miscellaneous periodical literature amongst some audiences, he finds some assurances regarding the reading habits of the working classes, based on his twenty-year association with a factory library. While they may be prone to some desultory reading, Humphrey finds that "as a rule workmen read more solid books than clerks, as the latter read rather for recreation than study" (694). He also takes heart from the libraries of working-class friends of his, which are often filled with solid, educational works (698-9). Humphrey's essay intends to demonstrate that while desultory reading is a common enough trend amongst members of the working and lower-middle class, it is not the only form of reading practised in these communities.

¹⁹ "Nevertheless," Humphrey claims, "I would prefer that men read miscellaneous works rather than nothing. There is hope for him who reads something, but none for him who reads nothing" (693).

²⁰ In Carlyle's speech to the students of the University of Edinburgh on the occasion of his being made Lord Rector in 1866 ("University of Edinburgh. Installation of Mr. Carlyle as Rector," *The Times* 4 Nov., 1866 [10]), he declared, "We ought to cast aside altogether the idea people have that if they are reading any book, that if an ignorant man is reading any book, he is doing rather better than nothing at all."

Alongside the social aspects of the desultory model of reading, there were also implications for the discussion of sex and gender. James Stephen makes no mention of women readers in his essay on the political responsibilities of correct modes of reading in 1853. However, towards the end of the century, women frequently lurked in the background in examinations of reading models. Kelly Mays notes that the “feminization of the reading public” in the Victorian period was “quite literal,” and that “women readers were not only numerous, but also were understood to be desultory readers *par excellence*” (177). An article by Charles Alliston Collins in *Macmillan’s Magazine* illustrates Mays’ point.²¹ Collins begins his article by describing a recent omnibus ride that allowed him to observe for quite some time the reading habits of a woman in a brougham next to him who perused the recent number of a periodical in which Collins claims to have had a piece. The author is astonished by the reading practices of his subject, who is capable of “fixing one eye on the page before her, and of keeping a look-out with the other of what was going on in the street” (161). The lady manages to know just when a bonnet shop is approaching or when the brougham is passing a baby to observe. Without actually labeling this kind of behaviour desultory reading, Collins seems to define it as such, asking, “Was that miserable dipping and skimming the surface of that printed page to be called reading?” (161). Collins blames maiden-aunts as well as mothers for encouraging this method of reading, and finds that the practice of “reading and *watching* at the same time” is not only unfair to the writer whose work is being thus abused, but also “unbecoming to a British matron” (162). Desultory reading is positioned here as a threat to proper models of femininity *and* to proper models of reading. As Mays has it, “the particular worries about mothers” expressed in this article suggest “that the degenerative trajectory launched by reading habits was being passed along not only by descent ... but also through

²¹ Charles Alliston Collins, “Our Audience” *Macmillan’s Magazine* 8 (1863): 161-6.

the distinctively unexemplary example being set by women, the primary caretakers responsible for cultural reproduction” (177). That is, women whose sons will grow up to be readers or even writers are not taking the full responsibility of their actions to heart when they demonstrate desultory or otherwise unscholarly reading practices to their children.²²

Collins’s view on the relationship between desultory reading and femininity finds confirmation in the comments of the author of “Reading to Kill Time” that “nine-tenths of the women who read at all are desultory readers” (315). Unlike Collins, however, this anonymous writer is far more supportive of desultory reading practices and eschews mentioning the negative effects of reading on traditional models of femininity. Instead he asks in regards to women readers, “who, in a wearisome world, can talk like the woman who habitually reads, or who suffers less from that most deadly foe of happiness, the tired out mind?” (315). Here, desultory reading is presented as a distinct benefit to the mental well being of women. This view is rare, however, and when women are represented as desultory readers in an *All the Year Round* article in 1891, their mental capacities are called into question even though their abilities to mother are not.²³ While the article’s author never refers to desultory reading explicitly, the kind of reading he associates with women certainly fits that model as disseminated by his contemporaries. For instance, he asks readers to “think of the crowds of papers, penny papers, highly respectable penny papers, which cater for women, and cater only for women” (342), thereby associating feminine reading with cheap periodicals. The writer claims that “no man ever tries to read, and could not if he tried” these penny papers, “which pour out, for ever and ever” (342).²⁴ The writer describes women who “read seven novels a

²² The particular set of mothers that Collins addresses in his complaint here is those “who may have sons who will one day write books themselves” (162).

²³ “Writers – And Readers,” *All the Year Round* 3rd ser. 6 (1891): 341-4.

²⁴ On this point the author disagrees with Thomas Wright, whose “Concerning the Unknown Public” (*Nineteenth Century* 13 [1883]: 279-96) suggests that penny novelettes and miscellaneous periodicals are also read by men.

week,” but do so in such a superficial and desultory fashion that “it is two to one that they will not be able to give you the titles of them a fortnight afterwards” (342). “When they get half-way through the second volume” of some new fashionable novel, he supposes, “they think it is the book they read at Brighton, or when they were stopping with the Kites in Birmingham; or wasn’t it one of the Tauchnitz volumes which they purchased at Lausanne?” (342). In this way, the reading habits of the nation’s women contribute to the fact that books are, at the end of the nineteenth century, “playthings” and “the companions of our idle hours” (343).

According to Jennifer Phegley, it was these kinds of claims about women readers – that they were frivolous and superficial, lacking in taste, or somehow improper in their reading practices – that Victorian family magazines such as *Belgravia* and the *Cornhill Magazine* tried to counter in their editorial practices. Phegley argues that these magazines invited their female, middle-class patrons “to become active members of their middle-class reading audience, to exercise their critical thinking skills, to improve their literary knowledge, and to raise the entire nation’s cultural status through reading” (106). They sought to accomplish this project by presenting their readers with literature of a higher quality – realistic serial novels rather than purely sensational pieces– and by providing them with other articles about important social and cultural questions.²⁵ While she makes no direct reference to desultory reading, Phegley argues that magazines like *Cornhill* and *Belgravia* “transformed the literary debate surrounding woman readers by insisting that women could read critically and productively” and by refusing to portray improper reading “as a particularly feminine

Still, Wright draws distinctions between the circumstances of masculine and feminine reading. While youths and men of the lower-middle class read these magazines, Wright claims, they “can scarcely be accounted supporters of these journals” (282). Men do not read the stories, according to Wright, and when they do read from the journals they are only led to do so because they are brought into the home by “woman folk” (282).

²⁵ Eliot’s *Romola* was first printed in serial form in *Cornhill*, for instance, between 1862 and 1863.

malady” (107).²⁶ While insisting on the importance of critical reading skills for women and trying to produce those skills through the material it published, the *Cornhill* also “maintained that reading for entertainment was an acceptable practice, as long as the reader remained aware of its purely recreational purpose” (111). This attitude towards the pleasure that can be derived from reading resembles similar sentiments in “Reading to Kill Time” and displays a trust in the judgment and intellectual capacities of readers, combined with a resistance to the moral panic associated with dangerous modes of reading.

The representations of desultory reading in the periodical press and in reading guides make it clear that the habits of aimless, superficial and “omnivorous” reading were intimately connected to class and gender identities in the late nineteenth century. However, all readers were seen to be capable of committing improprieties when engaged with printed texts. It was this threat that writers such as James Stephen, Frederic Harrison, and Stafford Henry Northcote were addressing in their lectures and essays. Ultimately though, while desultory reading was a practice that could be associated with men and women of all social classes – even more so as the publishing industry and the popular press continued to reach new levels of productivity – marginal groups bore the brunt of the establishment’s concerns over desultory reading and came to represent negative examples for more typical (that is, middle-class and male) readers. As with the models that associated reading with eating and disease, women and working-class readers acted as warning signs in articles about the dangers of desultory reading. Discussing these kinds of improper readers became a way for journalists, critics, and editors to construct and solidify a form of literacy, which, according to Margaret Shaw,

²⁶ In her article on women readers and Victorian periodicals, Margaret Shaw argues that the habitual association of improper modes of reading with women and other groups that she classes as “newly literate” was a response to anxieties about mass literacy: “By the turn of the century, then, the threat of a mass literacy and what supposedly constituted it - the lower to middle classes, women and children - led to the association of such groups with reading and writing that was instinctive, provincial, without form, and amateurish (‘uncritical,’ ‘unconscious,’ and ‘absorbent’)” (199-200). Desultory reading, I argue, fits into the category of formless, “amateurish” reading.

“privileged ... a new ‘man’ of letters and his forms of literate behaviour” (196). This “superior” form of literacy, characterized by “intelligence, organization, and professionalism,” Shaw argues, was conventionally constituted as “metropolitan, middle to upper class, and male” (200).

You Too Can Read Productively: Systematic Reading

While Shaw’s estimation of the gendered definitions of reading methods is apt, it is also true that many reading guides and magazine articles on reading from the latter decades of the century insisted time and again that one did not necessarily have to be professional, middle class, or male in order to achieve the “superior” literacy that would set one off from the mass of indiscriminate, uncritical, or desultory readers. Many writers insisted, instead, that there was a program of reading that could make one’s time spent in reading productive and essentially improving. Like the warnings against improper modes of reading, guides to exemplary and systematic modes of reading had been available long before the nineteenth century. Indeed, Phillip J. Waller has observed that “probably ever since reading existed, certainly since the Renaissance and right through to our own day, the world has been full of guides convinced that readers are impressionable creatures and that without their advice readers will go to the dogs and civil society will be damned” (73). That which Waller refers to here as a “torrent of homily and instruction” was subject over the years to “seasonal swells” as particular categories of readers were addressed, and as I have been arguing throughout this chapter, the period between 1860 and 1900 certainly constitutes a kind of high water mark in literary advice. It is this period that produced Sir John Lubbock’s famous list of the “100 Best Books,” which “elicited so much (solicited and unsolicited) response that [the *Pall Mall Gazette*] printed upwards of thirty articles on the subject before publishing these and more in

an 'Extra' edition entitled *The Best Hundred Books*" (Mays 166). Indeed, Frederick Harrison's *Choice of Books* was also essentially a course of reading, because in it Harrison advises his audience to give up popular literature entirely and to read from the positivist library of Auguste Comte instead. The positivist library was designed, Harrison explains, "as one of the instruments by which education might be ultimately reorganized" (395).²⁷ Following the lead of these major publications by Lubbock and Harrison, Waller explains, "a wave of advice manuals ... washed over the public" (Waller 72).

As we have seen, approximately thirty years before Harrison and Lubbock had decided to tell the public what and how they ought to read, James Stephen was advising his audience on how to go about transforming desultory reading into systematic reading, thereby creating their own antidote to one of the more prevalent diseases of reading. For Stephen, systematic reading meant turning an individual's intellect to at least one branch of "solid learning" (9), and he hoped that, on a much larger scale, the "vast apparatus of instruction" (9) at the command of the masses in the mid-nineteenth century might be made to serve this end as well. The particular system that Stephen prescribes to his readers he outlines in both figurative and literal terms. I have mentioned already that Stephen likens desultory reading to ballooning and systematic reading to navigating, pointing out for his readers in this analogy the self-discipline required of systematic study and the essentially frivolous nature of desultory reading. However, Stephen goes further in his use of metaphor to demonstrate his definition of systematic reading, to the extent that he makes his plan for the acquisition of learning sound very much like an imperial exercise. The mass of human knowledge is "a world" (12) to Stephen, a world that all of us may have a glimpse of. He advises his readers, therefore, to "take the chart of human knowledge," and to "fix your own mental observatory on any spot in

²⁷ Frederic Harrison, *Among My Books* (London: Macmillan, 1912).

it which is the most convenient for yourself, and there draw your meridian" (11). If this imagined observatory is always kept as a point of reference while the reader makes forays back and forth to different regions of the figurative knowledge-world, then that reader's learning will always have "a certain unity and consistency of plan; countless and wide apart, and dissimilar, as may be the various regions comprised within its limits" (11). Thus, he presents reading here as a form of exploration, but one that unites and binds together widely dissimilar areas to a central point. The mental observatory that forms the core of the reader's "systematic pursuit" (19) becomes an imperial centre in this metaphor, the focal point from which the systematic reader can observe and record a number of other regions of knowledge. The regulation of this accumulation of data from various knowledge-regions, through the system Stephen prescribes, ensures that this data is converted into comprehensive knowledge instead of the "loose, disconnected, unsystematic, gaseous information" (9) it might otherwise be.²⁸

In a literal sense, Stephen advises his audience to pick one area of solid study and to stick with it, rather than moving from one department of knowledge to another. His own mental observatory, again, is modern history, and he endeavors to show that with this area of knowledge as a starting point and as a continual filter for reading, much can be read without descent into the desultory. As long as historical novels or biographies, for instance, are read with an eye to what they can tell the reader about modern history, then the indulgence in such

²⁸ For more on the regulation of the British Empire through the control and systematizing of information, see Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verso, 1993). Richards notes that by the middle of the nineteenth century, "people in Britain began to think differently about what it meant to hold onto empire" so that "the narratives of the late nineteenth century are full of fantasies about an empire united not by force but by information" (1). One of the more concrete methods of imperial appropriation, Richards explains, was "the steady extension into the colonial world of domestic institutions like the British Museum" (3). There seems to be a distinct similarity in the job of the British Museum on a national level and the job of Stephen's "mental observatory" on an individual level. We might also see the eventual universal acceptance of Greenwich as the prime meridian as an important symbolic moment in this process of Victorian standard setting. For the history of this process see Clive Aslet, *The Story of Greenwich* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1999) 261-8.

genres simply builds up the reader's solid knowledge. Again, reading that might appear to be aimless at first glance is transformed into the systematic as long as a reader is able to use it to add to his or her accumulation of historical knowledge; in this way, the reader is merely accumulating apparently random sheaves into a greater "historical harvest" (15). Although Stephen's system seems quite loose as systems go – especially in comparison to some of the more complicated sets of directions towards systematic reading published later in the century – he is keen to insist on the methodical nature of his course of study throughout his lecture. For instance, he reminds his audience, "learning *is* a world, and is not a chaos. The various accumulations of human knowledge are not so many detached masses. They are all connected parts of one great system of truth" (12). The practice of reading should therefore be made to coincide with this "one great system of truth," and through this coincidence create order out of potential chaos. If the British follow this plan, Stephen insists, they will be taking part in the "grateful, vigilant, humble, and self-denying use" of their intellectual and political powers and ensuring that the kind of disorder that arose in revolutionary France will not arise in Britain (12).

While Stephen's model of systematic reading allows its practitioners a large degree of freedom, so long as they adhere to a central area of inquiry in the course of their reading, other models of systematic reading are more exacting in the direction they plot out for those seeking educational advice. One of the more regimented courses designed for a popular audience can be found in the unsigned "Reading as a Means of Culture," published in 1867. The article's author claims to be writing in a country "where all may, if they choose, enjoy the advantages of popular education" (316), and insists, therefore, that all will be interested somehow in reading as a means of self-improvement or self-culture. With this assumption in mind, the author intends to answer several questions that he feels are likely to strike every newly literate

member of society repeatedly: "What end shall I aim at in reading? What time shall I spend in reading? What mode should I adopt in reading? What books shall I read?" (316). In the process of outlining his vision of the proper aim of reading, the author runs through a number of possible ends that he identifies amongst readers. Some read, for instance, because they feel attracted to the pages of a book "just as they are to a garden of flowers, or to a winding river" (316). Others read only to kill time and to pass the listless hours, and still others read simply to feel superior to their fellows, ostentatiously and pedantically showing off what they have learned. While such practices abound, however, the true end of reading for this author is "self-culture," or "the improvement of all the higher powers of our nature" (316). The improvement wrought by reading books is derived from what the author calls "holding intercourse with the great minds of the world as they still live in their works" (316).

The author's figuration of reading as a form of conversation brings us back to the statements Harrison makes on reading in his *Choice of Books*, specifically his claims that there ought to exist a "freedom of intercourse and a spirit of equality" in the "great republic of letters" (7). "Every reader who holds a book in his hand," Harrison suggests, is free to partake "of the inmost minds of men past and present" (7). He outlines in these statements a model of reading as an interaction – an "intercourse" – between author and reader.²⁹ John Ruskin makes similar statements on the ends of reading in the "Of King's Treasures" section of his *Sesame and Lilies*, yet another work to offer a system of reading to its audience.³⁰ Like Harrison, Ruskin believes that one may communicate with great minds through books, but that to

²⁹ This is obviously a popular attitude amongst advocates of systematic reading. For instance, much like Harrison and the author of "Reading as a Means of Culture," the Rev. R.F. Horton makes this claim in his 1890 article, "The Responsibility of Reading" (reprinted in *Littel's Living Age* 5th series 73 [1890]: 506-10). Horton claims that "in the power of reading we have admission to society of all ages; [...] our intercourse with men and women through the written page is often more intimate than that which we hold with living people" (507).

³⁰ John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1865). My references are to the 1892 edition, published by George Allen.

converse in this way with the moral and intellectual greats of the past, one must love them and show one's love for them "first, by a true desire to be taught by them, and to enter into their thoughts. To enter into theirs, observe; not to find your own expressed by them" (Ruskin 21-2).³¹

For Harrison and Ruskin, the equality of all readers and writers in this "republic" has a perilous side as well, as it tends to make readers indiscriminate in the literary company they keep. For instance, if we are, as Harrison implies we should be, "observant as to the friends [we] make, or the conversation [we] join in," then why should we not be as observant in the books we read? "Do we in real life take any pleasant fellow to our homes and chat with some agreeable rascal by our firesides," Harrison asks, "we who will take up any pleasant fellow's printed memoirs, we who delight in the agreeable rascal when he is cut up into pages and bound in calf?" (8).³² Ruskin asks similar questions about the choice of reading material in the age of popular literacy: "Do you know, if you read this, that you cannot read that - that what you lose to-day you cannot gain tomorrow? Will you go and gossip with your housemaid, or your stable-boy, when you may talk with queens and kings" (19). In Ruskin's and Harrison's statements and rhetorical questions, reading is presented as a form of interaction, a careful discourse between reader and writer.

"Reading as a Means of Culture" presents a similarly interactive and discursive model of reading by imagining that "by holding intercourse" with the authors of the past and present, "our hearts can be brought into harmony with their hearts by contemplating what awakened

³¹ The use of the masculine pronoun throughout "Of King's Treasures" is no accident as it is specifically and exclusively addressed to the men of the upper class. The companion piece, "Of Queen's Gardens" is directed to the education of the women of this class.

³² Harrison constantly draws connections between the relationship of reader to writer and man to man. He observes, for instance, "the difficulties of literature are in their way as great as those of the world, the obstacles to finding the right friends are as great, the peril is as great as being lost in a Babel of voices and an ever-changing mass of beings" (8). He also argues, "books cannot be more than the men who write them" (8). All this is to further his insistence that true, systematic reading should be conceptualized as a discourse between individuals.

their emotional nature” and “our moral feelings can become assimilated to theirs by inhaling their spirit” (316). Notably, the author asserts the existence of a process of reading that is based on sympathy and the production of harmony between reader and writer, rather than a process based simply on negative influence, as those critics who sought to document the various diseases of reading had suggested. Thus, in “Reading as a Means of Culture” and in the statements on reading by Harrison and Ruskin, we observe the other side of the dichotomy of reading models that Jon Klancher, in his *Making of English Reading Audiences*, associates with Romantic reading audiences. While the model of reading as a form of consumption was most prevalent in the Victorian period, when the literary field seemed to be dominated by mass consumption, it is clear that certain writers clung to the opposite reading model – reception. The latter model is far more compatible with the ideology of moral and intellectual improvement that clearly underlies *Sesame and Lilies*, *The Choice of Books*, and “Reading as a Means of Culture.” While reception and intercourse were most often associated with educated readers of the upper-classes, Harrison and the anonymous author of “Reading as a Means of Culture” use such concepts in an attempt to show more socially marginalized and newly literate readers that they too could improve themselves through systematic methods of reading.³³

Having made the proper end of reading clear, the author of “Reading as a Means of Culture” goes on to outline a method for achieving the moral and intellectual improvement purportedly derived from an intercourse with a chosen author. In order to be improving, he claims, reading must not interfere with the reader’s “intellectual vigour” or “moral power”

³³ The author of “Reading as a Means of Culture,” shows his desire to speak to new groups of readers early on in the article. The questions about reading he intends to answer, the author claims, are “interrogatories prompted by a desire of self-improvement on the part of the modest and earnest aspirant, *whatever be his position*” (316, emphasis mine).

(317), nor must it “create a distaste for studies or other duties” (316).³⁴ At this point, the author’s interest in the regulation of reading is evident, and as is the case in both Harrison’s and Northcote’s essays, nearly as much time is spent telling the audience how *not* to read as is spent telling them how to read. The reader is advised, for instance, *not* to read when to do so might fatigue or exhaust the mind, *not* to read when to do so “interferes with necessary repose, as it does when pursued at a late hour of the night,” and *not* to read when to do so interferes “with the due cultivation of the social affections, whether by personal intercourse with friends or a punctual correspondence” (317).

Along with these prohibitions, the author provides his readers with positive advice on how best to read systematically, and when he does so he stresses the importance of active engagement with literature, in comparison to the kind of passive consumption that many critics of popular literature associated with reading as eating and as a disease. Insisting on the importance of active reading, the author claims that for successful study to be accomplished, “there must be the full vigour of the attention without any of its wanderings, the full retentiveness of the memory, the full activity of the imagination” (317). This kind of mental activity is opposed to the passivity inherent in more problematic modes of reading, which the author makes evident by warning readers that they must constantly be on guard because “in reading the mind is often in a nearly passive state, like that of dreaming or reverie, in which images flit before the mind without any act of volition to retain them” (317).³⁵ For mentally indolent people, therefore, reading can be little more than the consumption of opiates to bring

³⁴ The example that the author provides to demonstrate the proper amount of time spent in reading suggests that he is writing to a lower middle-class audience: “If a merchant’s clerk has a book which creates a distaste for his ledger, he had better spend no more time in reading that book, for the plain reason that it disqualifies him from his paramount duties” (317).

³⁵ To further expand and define this mode of passive reading, the author uses another metaphor, referring this time to reading as a form of travel, much as Stephen and Northcote do in their essays. “In rapid reading,” he explains, “[the mind] is nearly in the same state as yours is when it is whirled through a country in a railway-carriage or post-chaise. How much of that country do you know in the one case? How much do you know of the book in the other?” (317).

on sleep (317-18). This is not the means of achieving the true end of reading or a thorough understanding of the author, and to accomplish this greater goal, the reader must seek more than a “vague and general impression” of the author’s meaning. Attention to the language of an author is key in this operation, and the writer tells his audience, “You must bestow the whole vigour of your attention on the words, the phrases, the periods, the paragraphs” (318). If, even when the whole of the attention is directed to the author’s meaning, that meaning remains unclear, re-reading is called for, as are “dictionaries, general, classical, and biographical works on sacred and profane antiquities, geography, and chronology” (318). All unknown references, meanings, and allusions should be sought out and conquered through the use of these books.

In its insistence that close attention to words and a willingness to re-read are the keys to systematic reading, this anonymous piece once again echoes the requirements of the model of systematic or “accurate” reading Ruskin outlines in “Of King’s Treasuries.” The two works are aimed at different audiences, with the article in *Sharpe’s* directed towards the comfortable middle-classes and some members of the lower classes,³⁶ while Ruskin’s lecture is aimed at the “young people belonging to the upper, or undistressed middle, classes [...] who may be supposed to have choice of the objects and command of the industries of their life” (Ruskin x). However, the reading models developed in each of these works make similar demands of their audiences, calling for versions of what we might now refer to as “close reading.” For Ruskin, to “enter into the thoughts” of the moral and intellectual greats of the past requires a form of mental activity that he compares to the physical activity undertaken by “an Australian miner”

³⁶ The new editor of *Sharpe’s*, Francis E. Smedley, made this dual audience clear in an editorial (“Editor’s Writing Desk,” *Sharpe’s London Magazine* 9 [1849]: 62) he wrote to introduce himself to his readers when he took over the journal in 1849. “Some portion of [the journal’s] pages,” Smedley explains, “will from time to time be devoted to matters which irrespective of all political tendencies have a vital bearing upon the progress of the community at large especially upon the means of elevating the working classes, by the promotion of their physical comforts, and their mental, moral, and religious improvement” (62).

(Ruskin 24). Before entering a work, the reader must ask himself, "Are my pickaxes and shovels in good order, and am I in good trim myself, my sleeves well up to the elbow, and my breath good, and my temper?" (24). These pickaxes, Ruskin goes on to explain, are the reader's own "care, wit, and learning," and the "smelting furnace" (25) in which the writer's meaning is extracted from his words – like the miner's gold from his rocks – is the reader's own "thoughtful soul" (25). Without these "tools and that fire" (25), the reader can never hope to get at the true significance of an author's words, and this consideration leads Ruskin to make compelling statements about the importance of attentive and accurate reading: "And, therefore, first of all, I tell you earnestly and authoritatively, (I know I am right in this,) you must get into the habit of looking intensely at words, and assuring yourself of their meaning, syllable by syllable, letter by letter" (25).

If the reader ignores Ruskin's assertion here by failing to partake of a systematic analysis of the literature he is presented with, he might "read all the books in the British Museum ... and remain an utterly 'illiterate,' and uneducated person" (25-6). On the other hand, if the same man reads "ten pages of a good book, letter by letter, — that is to say, with real accuracy, — [he] is for evermore an educated person" (26). For Ruskin, "the entire difference between education and non-education (as regard the merely intellectual part of it) consists in this accuracy" (26). In order to demonstrate the kind of work that needs to be done to read accurately, Ruskin performs a kind of "close reading" of a passage from Milton's "Lycidas." In doing so, he tries to show that a thoughtful reader must consider both the contemporary meaning and historical associations of each word, while at the same time keeping in mind that each word a writer uses is important in itself. We are not to assume, Ruskin claims, that Milton used any word lightly; when the poet uses specific words, he does so because "no other words would or could serve the turn, and no more could be added" (38).

It is therefore the case that only a thorough, “word-by-word” examination of an author can be “rightly called reading” (47).

In “Reading as a Means of Culture,” the same emphasis on language and accuracy we see in Ruskin can be found in the author’s claims that, if after having bestowed his or her whole attention on “the words, the phrases, the periods, the paragraphs” of a chosen piece, the reader is still incapable of grasping the piece’s meaning, a second or even third perusal will be necessary (318). The meaning of a word or a phrase should never be guessed at, nor should the true meaning of allusions, and so the reader should always keep reference books on hand. This process of reference and definition might be slow at first, the writer claims, but it is “the only way of becoming deeply interested in any highly intellectual or finished work,” and the only way “in which you can transfer the views of your author to your own mind, and transfuse his spirit to your own soul” (318). For this writer, such transference is the goal of systematic reading, and while the kind of attention demanded here might seem alien to the common reader, the writer believes that, in fact, we adopt this “true model of gaining knowledge” in “the dawn of our mental existence, before bad mental habits are formed” (319). When a new object is presented to a child, the child “gives up the whole of its little mind to its examination” (319). Through careful examination, which often involves the breaking up of the object being examined, “the child transfers to his mind a distinct and full image of the desired object” which he can gaze upon in his mind’s eye even when the object is absent (319). The same processes of attention and decomposition are also central to understanding a serious work of literature, even though the reader has abstract words to deal with rather than real objects.

Reading With Attention

“Reading as a Means of Culture” makes a significant contribution to the Victorian discourse on reading and literacy because it represents a popular expression of the models of reading that were being circulated by men such as Harrison, Ruskin, and Arnold, diffusing these models to a wider and more diverse audience. However, the article is also important because it makes reference to the concept of *attention* so central to discussions of systematic reading in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Both Stephen Arata and Jonathan Crary have much to say about the new importance placed on attention in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Crary argues in his *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (1999) that the concept of attention became vital to definitions of subjectivity in the second half of the nineteenth century in ways that it had never been before.³⁷ Attention came to be defined as a “problem” at this point in history because of “the emergence of a social, urban, psychic, and industrial field increasingly saturated with sensory input” (13). According to Crary, the “changing configuration of capitalism” pushed “attention and distraction to new limits and thresholds, with an endless sequence of new products, sources of stimulation, and streams of information,” thus creating a “crisis of attentiveness” to which those same configurations responded with “new methods of managing and regulating perception” (13-14).

In a tangible way, we see these new capitalist configurations at work in the modern factories and offices of the late-nineteenth century. In this context, inattention was treated as a major problem and a danger (one that might result in the loss of life or limb in a factory) even though it was often the monotony and repetition of these “modernized arrangements of labour” that produced inattention (13). Stephen Arata points out in his “On Not Paying

³⁷ Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999).

Attention” (2004), which explores the alternate forms of attention called for in literary works by William Morris and Robert Louis Stevenson, that the kind of institutional or functional attention required of the modern factory or office worker was but one mode of attention circulating in the discourse of the arts and human sciences of the late-nineteenth century (199-200).³⁸

Outside the industrial factory, the distracting “sources of stimulation” and “streams of information” that Crary refers to were available to the vast majority of consumers – particularly consumers of printed matter – and Harrison notes the ubiquity of these distractions in his *Choice of Books*, referring to the literary field as “some noisy book-fair where literary showmen tempt us with their performing dolls, and the gongs of rival booths are stunning our ears from morning to night.” Harrison’s image gets to the heart of the potentially “stunning” distractions facing the reader. The modern mechanisms used to produce and communicate information go no further in enlarging an individual’s “human faculties” and “mental forces” either: “Telephones, microphones, pantoscopes, steam-presses, and ubiquity-engines in general may, after all, leave the poor human brain panting and throbbing under the strain of its appliance, no bigger and no stronger than the brains of the men who heard Moses speak, and saw Aristotle and Archimedes pondering over a few worn rolls of crabbed manuscript” (18). These devices, modern configurations of science in the service of industry, produce further strain on minds already pushed to the brink, Harrison suggests. While the perceived crisis of attention was not restricted to reading, extending as it did into the realms of industry and management, reading was an important context in which to discuss this crisis.

³⁸ Stephen Arata, “On Not Paying Attention,” *Victorian Studies* 46 (2004): 193-205.

Arata sums up the Victorian concerns about the stunning diversions of modern capitalist culture in his assertion, "To live in modern times was to be prey to distraction" (198). Yet, if the plethoric streams of stimulation and information demanding attention *caused* the crisis of attention, then the crisis could only be solved by the reapplication of the individual's mental energies to the process of paying attention, and this is where reading comes in. True, the activity of reading properly could be degraded by the distractions of the modern world, but it could also be used as a means of improving the mind and its attentiveness in order to provide protection against those distractions. "Reading as a Means of Culture" offers a few pieces of advice to its readers in order to ensure that their reading is both attentive and systematic. The author hopes that through these techniques, none of them revolutionary by any means, readers will be able to achieve something approaching the kind of enraptured attention he associates with the child's attempts to understand a new object. For instance, he insists that readers will see the best results from their reading if they try constantly to understand the work they are reading *in the spirit in which it was written*, attending not only to its intellectual qualities, but to its affective qualities as well.

To enter truly the meaning of a work and to remain attentive to that work, the reader must "exert the faculty which is predominant in the author" and put him or herself in the same state of mind that the author was in when composing the text (319). Therefore, poetry must be read in a very different mental and emotional attitude from the one required to read a scientific treatise or novel successfully. Putting oneself in the appropriate mental state, the writer explains, allows one "to go through the letter into the spirit" (319). This movement *through* language and into something beyond it is meant to approximate, it seems, the kind of transference from world to mind that the article's author sees in the mental habits of the child presented with the new and interesting object. Language can be a "dispersive and refractive

medium” through which the reader must move to reach “distinct perception and full comprehension of abstract ideas” (319).

Another practice that will make sure the reader maintains a high level of attention so that he or she may profit from the act of reading is that of using a pen “as an instrument of thought” (320). The mind remains in an attentive and active state, the writer suggests, when it is in the process of decomposing and reconstituting what it takes in. Therefore, the author advises, “when you are reading a work, it is profitable to take some notes of what is true and beautiful in the thought and expression on one hand, and likewise passages that are erroneous or ungraceful, that you may be able to refer to them, at pleasure” (320). Overall, the article maintains that readers who combine the practices of attentive and systematic reading with a selective attitude when it comes to books – making sure to eschew the ephemeral productions of bookstalls, steam-boats, and railway carriages, where immorality and infidelity lurk in fashionable literature – will be able to improve themselves both mentally and culturally.

Attention is also an important concept in a number of other discussions of systematic reading later in the nineteenth century, both in Britain and abroad. Noah Porter’s *Books and Reading* contains an entire chapter on attention and attentive reading, which the author distinguishes from “aimless reading” (31). For Porter, attentive reading is about mental discipline, and as Arata points out in his discussion of attention, such discipline was thought to be necessary both inside and outside the library. For instance, Porter claims that “the transactions and intercourse of civilized life depend on” the acquisition of literacy, and that “the unconscious discipline that comes from the process [of learning to read correctly] ... rewards the painstaking a thousand-fold” (28-9). Thus, Porter’s “golden rule” is “read with attention” (31), because it is the absence of the habit of attention that makes reading dull to so many beginners. Furthermore, the problems of inattention are compounded by “omnivorous

and indiscriminate reading,” through which “the attention is wearied and overborne by the multitude of objects that pass before it” (31).³⁹ Through this kind of desultory reading “the miserable habit is formed and strengthened of seeming to follow the author when he is half comprehended, of vacantly gazing upon the page that serves just to occupy and excite the fancy without leaving distinct and lasting impressions” (31-2). In Porter’s estimation then, the right kind of reading will improve the reader’s mental faculties just as the wrong kind of reading will degrade them. Systematic reading requires attention – above all – and it is required to prevent the destruction of the reader’s attention through the onslaught of impressions. In Porter’s estimation, attention becomes the linchpin in the mental life of the individual.

Like the author of “Reading as a Means of Culture,” Porter outlines a number of practices that he believes will help to improve the power of attention in reading. He urges, for instance, that each page be read as if it were never to be read a second time. When the reader fails to follow this suggestion, time is wasted, negligent habits are formed, and “the powers of the mind are systematically weakened by the very exercise which should give them strength” (33). He also entreats his readers to read each sentence through at a single breath, to read with a pen, to make a formal analysis of each volume read, or to recite or repeat to others the content and argument of each chapter. The significance of all of these techniques, according to Porter, is that they induce or force an interest in everything read, because “with interest we need no artificial devices to make us read with attention” (34). Accordingly, his next chapter examines how to read with interest and effect. The difficulty here is that in later chapters Porter advises his audience against reading specifically those kinds of light and entertaining literature that were popular because they were interesting to the mass audience (348-9). For

³⁹ Porter explains shortly afterwards that “the omnivorous and indiscriminate reader who is at the same time a passive and listless reader, however ardent is his curiosity, can never be a reader of the most effective sort” (42).

many readers, to become interested only (or at least primarily) in the “solid” forms of literature that Porter approves of would require a sizeable shift in taste and reading ability.

Intensive and Extensive Reading

The strictures involved in the various models of systematic reading outlined above all tend towards what can be defined as *intensive* reading. Roger Chartier makes the distinction between intensive reading and its apparent opposite, extensive reading, in his *Order of Books*, building on the work of the German historian of reading, Rolf Engelsing.⁴⁰ Chartier identifies the distinction between these two modes of reading as one of the widely accepted “fundamental cleavages” that are generally “held to be certain” (17) in discussions of the history of modes of reading. In short, intensive reading is the kind of reading generally associated with a time before the mass production of literature that began in the second half of the eighteenth century in Britain and Western Europe and reached new heights in the late-Victorian period. To read intensively is to read a small selection of books in a “reverential” and “respectful” way that relies on hearing and memory (17); the intensive reader reads these books “over and over again, memorizing them, reciting them aloud and transmitting them to the next generation” (Ross et al. 30).⁴¹ Engelsing suggests that a revolution in reading (“*Leserevolution*”) occurred around the middle of the eighteenth century and that, by the nineteenth century, the expanded opportunities for reading a greater range of publications (thanks to the development of more economical forms of printing and the rise of elementary education) fostered an *extensive* mode of reading. To read extensively is to consume a large

⁴⁰ Rolf Engelsing, *Analphabetentum und Lektüre. Zur Sozialgeschichte des Lesens in Deutschland zwischen feudaler und industrieller Gesellschaft* (Stuttgart, 1973). Cf. Robert Darnton, *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (New York: Norton, 1990) 133-5.

⁴¹ Catherine Sheldrick Ross, Lynne E.F. McKechnie, and Paulette M. Rothbauer, *Reading Matters: What the Research Reveals About Reading, Libraries, and Communities* (London and Westport, Connecticut: Libraries Unlimited, 2006).

number of different kinds of works, sometimes quickly and (the implication is) superficially or “nonchalantly” (17), moving from text to text in search of amusement. Thus, desultory reading is clearly a form of extensive reading.

Chartier suggests that, like the other “fundamental cleavages” to which he refers, the apparent dichotomy between intensive and extensive reading needs to be rethought. He does not accept the picture these dichotomies suggest of “a chronology that sees as major mutations the gradual advances in silent reading in the middle ages and the entry into the world of extensive reading in the late eighteenth century” (17-18). He believes that the revolution that Engelsing charts is too simplistic, and that the shift from intensive reading to extensive reading is actually the product of three transformations whose effects have been “imperfectly untangled”: the “revolution” in the production of texts, changes in the forms of books themselves, and wide scale changes in literacy and in “modes of reading” (18). However, while Chartier wants to introduce complications to the notion of a single *leserevolution*, he does not suggest that we rid ourselves of the distinctions between intensive and extensive reading completely. Certainly, Victorian writers were comfortable with such distinctions.

For instance, it is evident that the model of systematic reading that Ruskin calls for in “Of King’s Treasuries” has much in common with the form of intensive reading described in Chartier and Engelsing. Ruskin’s demand that his audience “get into the habit of looking intensely at words,” and his claim that the man who reads “ten pages of a good book, letter by letter ... with real accuracy” will be more educated than he who reads “all the books in the British Museum” without the required rigour of “real” reading, confirm his privileging of a model of intensive reading in his construction of a program of systematic reading. A number of other critics in the late-Victorian period also made bold statements in favour of intensive reading. For instance, Walter Montagu Gattie points to the troublingly extensive nature of

reading in Britain in his piece “What English People Read,” published in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1889. “We have, then,” Gattie claims, “a constant demand for new books; and this points to the conclusion that the popular taste favours ephemeral literature, produced very rapidly, and designed to fit the fashion of the hour, to afford a momentary excitement, or to gratify some immediate curiosity, rather than works of a solid character and more enduring interest, which cannot be either written or read at the same extravagant rate, and which does not need to be replaced by fresh matter” (106). Gattie’s reference to works containing a “more enduring interest” takes us back to Porter’s model of systematic reading and its foregrounding of attention and interest because he insists that while popular ephemera will provide brief periods of interest, solid, canonical works will provide sustained interest for longer. Despite the country’s improved educational conditions and the establishment of free libraries, the masses are not prepared for intensive reading of a smaller number of solid books, however. Gattie attributes their reluctance to read intensively to their “utter want of culture” (106). The masses read extensively, even desultorily, Gattie claims, but it is the job of the nation’s educators and leaders to lead them towards a more lasting reverence for culture.

J.E.C. Welldon makes similar statements about the conflict between intensive and extensive reading in England in his 1894 article, “The Art of Reading Books.” Welldon’s piece – originally an address delivered at the opening of Kilburn Public Library in 1894 – refers, like so many Victorian treatises of reading, to Bacon’s comments on reading and eating. However, Welldon differs from other writers in that he uses Bacon’s metaphor in order to address the modern competition between intensive and extensive modes of reading. While Welldon admits that “the habit of concentrating the full power of the mind upon every chapter and page of a book is a discipline of very high value,” he doubts that the “great majority of books in a public library” either “require” or “deserve” to be read so (217). He notes the

statistics for public library borrowing and finds that novels are requested most and sermons least, and based on this he decides, “one book in twenty should be read scrupulously” while the rest may be read “so to say, *currente oculo*” (217). However, these findings do not dissuade Welldon from promoting intensive reading, and his next proclamation is that “it is more important to read wisely than to read widely. Intellectual health, like physical, depends not upon the amount of food consumed, but upon the digestion” (217).

While Gattie and Welldon are quick to denounce the extensive mode of reading that they claim is so common at present, there were other commentators who were more interested in endorsing and explicating the importance of intensive reading. For instance, an unsigned article in an 1896 edition of *The Spectator* entitled “Re-Reading” spends far more time extolling the joys of slow and methodical re-reading than it does condemning the practice of extensive reading of ephemeral literature.⁴² The author begins his analysis of reading models by comparing the act of reading to that of travelling, much as Sir James Stephen and Stafford Henry Northcote do in their essays on desultory reading: “The first time we read a book we find ourselves explorers in a new land. We read for the charm and excitement of discovery. When we re-read our mood is very different and far more like that of the man who saunters through a beautiful and well-known piece of scenery” (547). Rather than suggesting that one form of reading is any better or worse than the other, he claims only that both forms have their own distinct pleasures. In fact, the author identifies Samuel Johnson as one of those who reads for “the charm and excitement of discovery,” and associates him with a class of readers who are “always for fresh fields and pastures new” and who perpetually demand “something new, something they have not seen before” (547). These are elements of extensive reading, but in

⁴² “Re-Reading,” *The Spectator* 77 (1896): 547-8.

associating them with the hero of Grub Street, the author avoids positing extensive reading as wholly detrimental.

While the pursuit of novelty may not be as terrible to this writer as it is for Welldon and Gattie, the article clearly holds the more intensive practice of re-reading above extensive reading. Re-reading's power comes from its tendency to reveal new delights in well-known pieces of literature, just as a hike through a familiar wood will reveal "a particular tree or old cottage or moss grown stone" though the way has been passed five or six times before (547). The ability to appreciate the depth of a work of literature is the goal of re-reading, so that "the full delight of re-reading can only come when the book is fairly well remembered" (547). The writer claims that it is because "there are other elements in literature than the imparting of information or the telling of a story that men like to re-read their favourite books" (547), but those that read only extensively will never know these pleasures. However, extensive readers are not kept forever from them by their current mode of reading, because the "power of finding pleasure in re-reading ... is a knack which can be learned like any other" (548). Therefore, even those general readers afflicted by what Gattie calls "an utter want of culture," are capable of learning to read intensively, provided that they turn their attention to solid works by canonical authors.⁴³

Strenuously as the author of "Re-Reading" insists that any literate individual can acquire the intensive practice of re-reading, there are clearly class implications involved in Victorian discussions of extensive and intensive reading. Gattie's "What English People Read," we have seen, is greatly concerned with the relationship between the classes and with political and social change. According to him, it is the "popular" taste that favours the kind of ephemeral literature that affords momentary excitement and forms the main diet of the

⁴³ The author consistently refers to Scott, Dickens, and Austen in his references to imaginative literature.

extensive reader. Gattie acknowledges, as well, that “the altered social conditions” of the present day contribute greatly to the present demand for books; the old French maxim “which tells us that the people must be amused ... applies [now] to the lower classes of England” (106). Now that the lower orders have been sufficiently clothed and fed, have been given some education, and have seen the conditions of publishing change so that literature is within their reach, they seek in their leisure hours (the hours which they use to read) “to be taken out of themselves” (107). In the present state, it seems, the working-class is not likely to read reverentially, respectfully, or intensively. And while the author of “Re-Reading” makes no direct reference to social class in his article, the imagery he uses to elaborate his ideal mode of reading connotes leisure and privilege, in much the same way that Stafford Henry Northcote’s choice of imagery in his volume on desultory reading associates his rehabilitated form of desultory reading with the activities of the upper class. The analogy the author of “Re-Reading” uses, likening the process of re-reading to a leisurely walk through a sylvan landscape complete with “old cottage” and “moss-grown stone,” associates the act of re-reading, one form of intensive reading, with a class of people who have the freedom to roam the woods on a regular basis. He makes re-reading *appear* to be the province of the wealthy.

In truth, however, these associations may not have been entirely sound. Many members of the working class, men and women without the opportunities to spend their leisure time wandering through charming glades, were re-readers and even intensive readers themselves. Additionally, according to Jonathan Rose, many of the assumptions that Gattie makes about the superficial and extensive reading methods of the lower classes are – not surprisingly – false. According to Rose’s study of Victorian working-class reading patterns, drawn in large part from memoirs and autobiographies, the kind of exclusive interest in low cultural forms and ephemera that Gattie characterizes as a product of the working class’s

“utter want of culture” was uncommon. Rose claims that the working-class memoirists whose writings form the basis of his research seldom if ever “seriously questioned traditional literary hierarchies” (369). “Their tolerant affection for low literature,” he explains, “coexisted with a conviction that the great writers were great writers” (369). Of course, working-class memoirists should not be made to represent all working-class Victorian readers, and Rose himself recognizes this, but the view that these memoirists provide of the working class at least complicates the kind of blanket statements made about popular reading habits by Gattie and others.

While Rose admits that autodidactic culture and working-class reading have always been made up of a promiscuous mix of traditionally high and low cultural forms, he also suggests that working-class readers read slowly and intensively, despite the extensive labels thrust upon them. The reading patterns of workers were often of a random and wandering nature, but this was the case because they could easily run out of reading matter and, unlike readers of the wealthier classes, they could not afford to be picky. For this very reason, working-class readers might also read very slowly at times, Rose argues, repeatedly re-reading the limited printed matter they did have (371-2).⁴⁴ Thus, while some working-class reading methods may not have been systematic in the sense that James Stephen uses the term in his lecture on the subject, with the reader choosing a fixed point in the realm of knowledge and working slowly and methodically out from that point, many readers did read and re-read intensively, often out of necessity. Even in the age of the prolific, steam-powered press, some form of intensive reading could be found amongst the lowest classes of society. The members

⁴⁴ Rose mentions one memoirist who, under the pressures of poverty and the spell of reading, even claims to have read the entire post-office catalogue for the year 1867 (372). See also Thomas Wright’s 1883 article “Concerning the Unknown Public.” Wright claims to have been a member of the so-called “unknown public” at one point in his life, spending his hard won pennies on penny serials such as *The London Journal*. Wright points out that when he had “devoured the weekly modicum of fiction” he would “re-read and sometimes learn by heart” the verse headings that preceded each chapter of the serial novels. “My impression still,” Wright explains, “is that I got my first liking of poetry from them” (286).

of these classes read intensively (however miscellaneously) not out of a desire to be taken out of themselves, but out of a love of reading and of literature.

Natural or Cultural: The Representation of Writing in Victorian Periodicals

The authors of articles on systematic reading often remind their readers that there are two distinct practices that make up literacy, arguing that the reproduction *through writing* of ideas and concepts acquired from reading will focus the attention, aid in the retention of those ideas and concepts, and contribute to the development of systematic or intensive reading practices. Outside of these excursions on reading, however, the topic of writing is mentioned in periodicals and other popular publications far less often than reading.⁴⁵ Thus, in trying to determine the way Victorian attitudes towards the act of writing were portrayed in these sources, one is provided with much less raw material to work with. Writing seems not to have become the kind of focal point for concerns about class, gender, and national identity that reading became over the course of the period, at least not to the same extent. A number of periodical articles about writing address the potential concerns of aspiring novelists or the relationship between authors and their readers, but very few commentators attempt to create or elucidate models of writing in the way that models of reading are produced and critiqued. For example, an essay in *Chambers's Journal* in 1884, entitled "Another Word to Literary Beginners," speaks to the topic of writing, but it does so in order to warn those whom the author refers to as "Literary Aspirants"(49) not to develop false hopes about becoming

⁴⁵ One important exception to this trend can be found in papers for women and young girls. In journals such as *Aunt Judy's Magazine*, *Routledge's Every Girl's Annual*, *The Girl's Own Paper*, and *The English Domestic Woman's Magazine* articles on letter writing and handwriting appear frequently, alongside pieces on novel-reading, the use of reading rooms, and reading aloud.

professional authors themselves.⁴⁶ Although the article is devoted to the topic of writing and publishing, the author does not attempt to set up any conceptual model of writing to match those models of reading that were so prevalent in the periodical press. Similarly, when Francis Turner Palgrave examines the relationship between reading and writing in his 1860 essay in *Macmillan's Magazine*, and observes how the distinction between readers and writers has slowly broken down over the last hundred years so that writers are no longer considered a “separate class who [are] qualified and trained to educate others” (488), he engages with a popular model of reading (referring to Bacon’s use of the reading as eating metaphor), but he makes no such attempt to outline conceptually what is involved in the act of writing or to define it through analogy.

The infrequency with which discussions of writing occur in the Victorian periodical press might be caused, in part, by the attitude towards writing in the English education system, in which (as I have shown in Chapter 2) reading took a far more central role, especially before the adoption of the Revised Code in 1862. Teaching the lower orders “their letters” tends to refer, above all, to teaching them how to read; whether or not they learned to write their own names was largely incidental. Even outside the context of elementary education, writing seems to have been seen as a more much specialized practice, calling for less commentary. In short, everyone read, but only writers wrote, and a sense of this distinction between writers and readers comes through in an 1859 article called “Books and Their Uses.” The author of this piece advises his audience to make sure they are ready to go to any length to understand the author they have chosen to read.⁴⁷ He explains, “to understand a great writer, as to understand nature, we must yield our prepossessions” (113). The problem is that, too often,

⁴⁶ “Another Word to Literary Beginners,” *Chambers's Journal* 5th ser. 1 (1884): 49-50. Cf. “On the Writing of Novels,” *Atalanta* 3 (1887): 167-71; and “On the Writing of Novels,” *Atalanta* 7 (1888): 371-6.

⁴⁷ Doubleday, “Books and Their Uses,” *Macmillan's Magazine* 1 (1859): 110-13.

the “centres” of reader and writer are very far apart, so that “they live in different worlds,” and “to understand some writers we must change our planet and wait patiently till we are acclimatized” (113). Anyone can be a reader, the author seems to suggest, but writers are a special breed and need to be treated as such.⁴⁸

Yet, though they are more exceptional, representations of writing can be found in the periodical press, even outside of articles promoting methods of systematic reading. Often, discussions of writing arise in the context of its relationship with reading. For instance, the author of an article entitled “Circulating Library Critics” (1884) demonstrates the extent to which reading and writing go hand in hand, even in the most leisurely of reading situations.⁴⁹ The author describes the phenomenon of writing in the margins of novels taken out from circulating libraries: “as a true specimen of the ready-made critic, we might cite those interesting individuals who, having more time upon their hands than they can comfortably get rid of, endeavor to dispose of some of the surplus stock by subscribing to a circulating library, and diligently ‘cutting-up’ and otherwise abusing every author they read. Novels, of course, are the principal dish of these readers” (81). These subscribers to circulating libraries “will diligently search out” all the “little defects” of a novel and “display them in the margin for the edification of the next reader, who will in turn try his best to discover something which the other has passed over, and triumphantly display it in a similar manner” (81). The writer even reports seeing “at a seaside watering-place,” where novels are naturally read with great frequency, “blank sheets of letter-paper inserted between some of the leaves, because the

⁴⁸ R.K. Webb makes note of the attitude towards writing in his *British Working-Class Reader, 1790-1848* (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1955), claiming that today, “one cannot even accept the popular definition of literacy [in the nineteenth century] as the ability to read and write, for writing in the nineteenth century was of much less importance than it is today” (13). David Mitch disagrees with this view to some extent, however, and argues that many working-class men and women were more interested in “mastering writing and arithmetic than reading because they perceived that the former two skills were more valuable in the labour market” (12). Yet, even in Mitch’s comments we see writing defined as a technical skill (like arithmetic) instead of an everyday activity.

⁴⁹ “Circulating Library Critics,” *Chambers’s Journal* 5th ser. 1 (1884): 81-2.

margins were already too crowded, to admit of some reader adding his mite to the evidence there accumulated” (81). In these circumstances, the presence of the writing in the circulated books amounts, I believe, to a popular variation of Klancher’s reception model. While the kind of reading made possible by popular novels does not resemble systematic reading, the fact that readers are writing back and responding to the narratives they are “consuming” shows the presence of an active form of reading, and the combination of writing with reading here makes this active process possible.⁵⁰

The relationship between reading and writing is also explored in an essay called “Readers and Writers” (1877) by E. Noble.⁵¹ Like Palgrave does in his “On Readers in 1760 and 1860,” Noble begins by discussing the changes that have occurred in the literary scene since the beginning of the nineteenth century. She first observes that in any traditional literary economy, readers *must* outnumber writers because one book has the potential to reach a million readers, adding that fifty, thirty, or even twenty years ago there was a reasonable disparity between the number of readers and writers. This is not the case today, however, because “the race of writers” has “grown and multiplied as quickly, unpopularity, as did once the Israelites in Egypt” (33). She expresses concern through this analogy that writers will soon become more numerous than readers, thus upsetting a traditional balance.⁵² Here, writing takes on some of the negative meanings associated with reading in articles that position it as a habit, disease, or means of imbibing poison. Noble examines the problems of overabundance noted by writers such as Stephen and Harrison, but she examines this problem from a different

⁵⁰ That the author of the article sees some value in the marginalia he makes clear by his comments on the practice as a whole: “But taken as a whole, this criticism, although in some cases severe, is but the echo of public opinion, and as such, is entitled to consideration, no matter how humble the source may appear from which it springs” (81). He also acknowledges that the marginal comments could provide the author of one of the marked up novels an “opportunity for judging for himself how his work was appreciated by the public” (81).

⁵¹ E. Noble, “Readers and Writers,” *The New Monthly Magazine* 71 (1877): 33-8. *Poole’s Index of Periodical Literature* v.1 (Boston & New York: Houghton, Mifflin, & Co., 1901) refers to Noble as “Miss Noble” in its bibliographic entry for the article.

⁵² That is, unless the excess and “unwanted literary offspring” drown in the “river of oblivion” (33).

vantage point, focusing more closely on writing (production) than on reading (consumption). She notes that of all the human undertakings to advance in this age of progress, literature seems to be making “the swiftest, most noticeable career” (33). “With circulation quickening every moment,” she notes, “[...] we are only afraid the pace may be too killing” (33).⁵³

For Noble, the dangerous abundance of reading material is the result of more writers, and she quite obviously fears that the normal disproportion of readers and writers will be upset by the circulation of periodicals and cheap books specifically. However, Noble goes beyond these common concerns to present a more interesting model of writing, associating the act with powerful phenomena of the natural world. In the past, she writes, authors “few and far between, shone as stars through the surrounding gloom,” thus metaphorically associating the act of writing with the stars’ creation of light and energy. At present, however, writers have been able to multiply unchecked, and although “the darkness of illiterate night” may have passed, “we cannot call the present incompleteness noon, nor mistake the crowd of small lanterns carried very near earth for an abiding or guiding light” (37). Noble appears to be working with a model of writing as enlightenment, reinforcing the effect of this model by employing traditional images of light and darkness as well as images from physics and cosmology. She claims that “far above these feeble glimmers, glow our surer, truer literary luminaries, in constellations of varied glory and luster, fulfilling their appointed orbits of knowledge and power” (37).⁵⁴ In comparison to these “luminaries,” the present “mass of subordinate writers, of the lantern degree,” profuse though they be, do not provide the desired degree of enlightenment to their readers (37).

⁵³ Noble’s “too killing” comment is introduced in the context of an earlier statement that “the present age is denominated a ‘fast’ one; ‘fast’ living, very ‘fast’ dying, via mines and railways, via gas and steam” (33).

⁵⁴ The reference to literature of knowledge and power here is an intentional invocation of De Quincey, to whom Noble refers earlier in her essay (35).

References to physics continue as Noble tries to express in more detail her attitude towards the current proliferation of writing and the potential this writing has to enlighten. In the process of her explanation, however, she makes alterations to her initial system of physical imagery. Now she insists that writers do not themselves produce the figurative light they give off, but that they reflect the light produced by some other, greater star. "This physical world," she writes, "contains objects that reflect, others that absorb the sunshine poured equally over them. Of the reflective class there are a great many dull, a great many turbid mediums, but still they transmit some responsive ray; whereas the absorbents drink darkly in and return nothing" (37). Readers (the absorbents) simply consume or "drink darkly in" the power they receive from their reading, without transmitting any of that power or knowledge back to the literary world; the statement shows us that in Noble's model of literacy, reading is a passive form of consumption.⁵⁵ On the other hand, Noble positions writers as active reflectors of light and energy, though they may reflect the enlightenment they receive to a greater or lesser degree, depending on their natural capacities and abilities. Of course, to reflect energy does not require the same level of exertion as producing it does. While she never makes it clear where this energy originates, she looks to Dickens as an ideal writer/reflector, stating, "if our large mass of reflectors strove, in their degree, to be as pure mediums [as Dickens], we might indeed regard their increased number, not as a mere startling arithmetical fact, but a welcome, guiding beam" (37). In the "speed, bustle, and hurry" of the modern world, "every, true

⁵⁵ She reemphasizes this point presently when she notes that the real "work" involved in creating any kind of literary work is "seldom taken [into account] by the passive reader as he skims over a creamy surface flowing too smoothly to suggest any special adjunct of thought or trouble" (37-8).

earnest” soul could use this guiding beam because every such soul is calling for “More Light!” (38), the final exclamation an allusion to Goethe’s last words.⁵⁶

In Noble’s use of these images and analogies to associate the act of writing with the phenomena of the natural world, she deemphasizes its technical, technological, and cultural meanings. In fact, the link between the practice of writing and the natural world is implied very early on in Noble’s article, where, asking why people write, Noble offers “wie der vogel singt” – or *as the bird sings* – as “the true first cause of authorship” (33). Writing is figured here as an ideal and natural form of expression of the writer’s being instead of an economically motivated social practice. Noble does recognize, however, that this “first true cause” is rarely the motivation for writing in the literary scene of the late-nineteenth century. Midway through the essay, she also aligns the creation of literature with other powerful natural processes in her discussion of current reading trends. She notes that along with works on theology, novels are the most frequently published books, according to the *Publisher’s Circular*. In her discussion of the novel as representative of the literature of power, she refers to the ancestry of the form, noting that though the novel “in itself is not of much literary antiquity ... it can hardly stand the test of origin of species” (34). Too many “identical traits,” Noble explains, “bespeak it an offshoot of the drama” (34). Her use of Darwinian language here contributes further to the creation of a model of writing as a natural process, although such a model is only implied in Noble’s article. She clearly recognizes the technological and economic aspects of reading and writing, referring as she does to literature as a field that displays, more than most, the “rapid progress stamped on human undertakings generally” in the “present age” of “gas and steam” (33). Yet, these materialist aspects seem to be forgotten

⁵⁶ While Noble never makes it clear where the figurative light that writers reflect originates, she does mention in the final paragraph of the article the “unmistakable ‘genius’” that Dickens bestows on every sentence. We might take *genius*, then, as an originary source for Noble’s light.

in the discussion that follows, where literary genres are figured as species and writers are figured as celestial bodies.

George Wilson, Edinburgh-born chemist and director of the Industrial Museum of Scotland, makes similar associations between writing and natural processes in an 1859 essay in *Macmillan's Magazine*, but in a more explicit manner.⁵⁷ Wilson's article appears initially to be a meditation on the tools and technologies of writing, a purpose highlighted by the piece's title, "Paper, Pen, and Ink: An Excursus on Technology." The primary questions Wilson seeks to answer are, "What in its fullest sense is the idea conveyed in the respective words, Paper, Pen, and Ink?" and "What is the relative importance, as graphic or scriptorial materials, of the things represented by them?" (31). The consideration of these questions, however, leads Wilson to make some bold statements about the processes of writing and to move away from discussing technology in terms of "industrial manufactures," that is, away from the kind of technology that had been on display at the Great Exhibition a few years before his essay was published. For instance, when Wilson describes in the opening of his article situations in which one scriptural tool can "discharge the duty of all three," his first example is "the olive leaf which Noah's dove brought back to the ark" (32). Noah "had no difficulty reading the statement on the leaf" (32), and thus Wilson considers the leaf a kind of technology of writing. Likewise Wilson claims, "the branch which floated past Columbus as he went sailing westward was a whole folio in Nature-printing upon the trees of America" (32).⁵⁸ In both

⁵⁷ Professor George Wilson, "Paper, Pen, and Ink: An Excursus in Technology," *Macmillan's Magazine* 1 (1859): 31-9. Cf. P.J. Hartog, "Wilson, George (1818-1859)," rev. R.G.W. Anderson, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), 29 July 2009.

⁵⁸ Wilson also considers rainbows to be examples of one writing tool discharging the duty of all: "and of the rainbow which spans the sky the complaint of the nations has ever been, only that it is an illuminated missal, which in a moment so gracefully crowds itself with inscription upon inscription that they are able to read but a few lines in the thick clustered paragraphs" (32).

these circumstances, natural phenomena are put forward as examples of writing and as technologies of communication.

Even as Wilson moves away from these “Divine” (32) modes of writing to consider the exact role of each of the three scriptural tools, he continues to link writing with the natural world and to distance it from the technical and mechanical. For instance, Wilson argues that “all the unliving things of the sleeping mineral world, except the wild sea and the viewless air, have served man as paper” (33). Stones, gems, and metals of all kinds have “submitted to bear some sign or inscription” (33), as “rocks riven by lightening and smoothed by the glacier have been ploughed by the chisel into the Domesday Books and annuals and almanacks of nations” (33). Wilson is also keen to associate the instruments of writing with organic matter, first by pointing out that “with a tree the literature of every highly-civilized people inseparably connects itself” through our use of paper (33). However, the author jumps from discussing the use of paper, to the use of trees themselves (in which inscriptions are often carved), to the use of human bodies as sites of inscription: “From such records on the living pages of unconscious leafy organisms, I find myself unavoidably led a step higher, to gaze at the strangest of all papers, the bodies of living men!” (34). Wilson goes on to mention some of the recent and ancient history of tattooing, all the while implicitly defining writing as an organic and natural practice.

Wilson continues throughout his article to position writing as an entirely natural, bodily activity and to deemphasize the cultural and mechanical qualities of writing as a practice. After discussing the human skin as a form of paper, he claims that the retina is a “living paper” “without which all other papers presented to the eye are valueless, and possessed of which, all others can be dispensed with” (34). In this argument, sight is a form of writing, a kind of *master technology* that mediates all other technologies of inscription: “The

telegraph needle swaying in the air, the revolving handles on the clock dial, the time-ball falling, write and print *directly* on the retina paper” (34). Wilson also maintains that, in reality, the pen too has its natural basis in the human body, asking, “What is the pen but a living finger or more fully, a living hand?” (35). He suggests that when we use other implements instead of our own hands to write and inscribe, “it is because we must often write for eyes distant from us in space, and distant in time” (36). In this way, all forms of external writing technology are simply means to extend the natural writing that occurs in and through the body. The brush, the chisel, the printer’s type, the electric telegraph and the “*actinic ray*, Nature’s photographic pen” (35) are merely “supplementary pens” (35). Even for the most modern of scriptural technologies, the photograph, Wilson finds a more important natural example in “the pencil of light” that Nature uses daily to write not only on the retina of every eye “but abidingly upon every object” (36). To finish off the trinity of writing implements Wilson spends some time on ink, claiming that if paper and pen represent the eye and the hand, then ink represents the heart, that which colours our expressions and gives them feeling (38).

In important ways, both Noble’s and Wilson’s essays seem to run counter to some of the dominant trends in the Victorian discourse on reading and writing that I have explored in my discussion of reading models. Many of the critics who address the subject of literacy highlight the technical and technological elements of reading and writing as they are performed in the modern world. Such trends are evident in Harrison’s *Choice of Books*, when the author identifies the current situation of reading as occurring “in some large steam factory of letter-press” and likens books to other products of mass culture (“houses, steam engines, pictures, fiddles, bonnets, and other products of human industry”). In fact, it could be argued that the drive to associate reading and writing with modern, industrial technology is evident in

all those articles that focus on the dangerous productivity of publishing and the press, such as the 1879 *Blackwood's* article that draws its reader's attention to the sounds of the steam engines and machinery of a great daily paper, and to the "nimble fingers ... moving by instinct about the compartments of the type-boxes, mechanically translating thought into metal" (240).⁵⁹

These representations of print technology, though introduced in discussions of reading practices, help to construct a model of literary production as technologically and industrially mediated to a large extent. They show the metaphorical space between the writer and the reader to be filled increasingly by machines, in some sense distancing the writer from the reader. As we have seen, popular models of writing that foreground its technological character were likely encouraged by the ways in which writing instruction was carried out in some Victorian schools, where orthography was the focus and the letters of the alphabet were regularly decomposed by teachers into their "four elements" of lines, curves, loops, and crotchets to be "recomposed" by students in "specially prepared grids of rhomboids" (Vincent 77). Exercises like these helped to emphasize the technical elements of writing, rather than the personal and expressive elements, and in this context, the statements Noble and Wilson make appear to be attempts (either conscious or unconscious) to represent the act of writing in a less alienating manner. Wilson's article, in particular, takes writing out of the steam-factory and shows it – through metaphor – to be a process that occurs constantly within the human body and within the natural world.

The attempts that Noble and Wilson make to "naturalize" writing can be identified as examples of what Walter Ong refers to as the *interiorization* of the technologies of writing. Ong argues in his essay "Writing is a Technology That Restructures Thought" (a distillation

⁵⁹ "Contemporary Literature: Vii. Readers," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 126 (1879): 235-56.

of the ideas he develops in more detail in his book *Orality and Literacy*) that we regularly fail to feel the effects of writing on our lives because “we have interiorized the technology of writing so deeply that without tremendous effort we cannot separate it from ourselves” (Ong 24).⁶⁰ Seen through the perspective of Ong’s theory, then, Noble and Wilson are underestimating the essentially technological character of all writing – not just the industrialized forms of writing made possible by new information technologies. Wilson’s attitudes towards writing show, on this theory, that because writing is so common a part of life in Victorian Britain, he has begun to understand writing as an activity as native to the human body as opening an eye or waving a finger.

By associating writing with natural events and processes Noble also hides the technological qualities of all writing from her readers. These writers disavow the increasingly technological and mechanical character of writing in order to distance the act of writing from the more widespread mechanization of modern British life. According to Ong, however, statements about writing that overlook its essentially technological aspects make it evident that we “often take writing so much for granted as to forget that it is a technology” (30). For Ong, writing begins properly at the stage of technology – that is, at that stage that other implements are introduced (on Wilson’s theory) to “write for eyes distant from us in space, and distant in time.” As a technology, writing begins with the distancing of the word from the sound by “reducing oral-aural evanescence to the seeming quiescence of visual space” (39).

Views that correspond with Ong’s are not unheard of in the Victorian discourse on literacy and writing. Along with the critics who saw reading as increasingly mediated by technology and industry, there were also those who insisted on the essentially technological

⁶⁰ Walter J. Ong, “Writing is a Technology That Restructures Thought,” *The Written Word: Literacy in Transition*, ed. Gerd Baumann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) 23-50. Cf. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982).

nature of *all* writing. One such scholar was William Matthew Flinders Petrie (commonly know only as Flinders Petrie), a prominent archaeologist, Egyptologist and member of the British Association. Professor Petrie's views on the role of writing in civilizations both ancient and modern are presented in an 1896 article in *The Spectator*, in what amounts to a review and response to a talk Petrie gave to the British Association in September of that year.⁶¹ Unlike Wilson, who suggests that modes of writing can be found throughout the natural world as well as the technological world, Petrie believes that "the fetters of writing hold us back from the living touch with Nature" (394). Indeed, the *Spectator* reports Petrie as claiming that "the study of man in Nature ... 'is being steadily cut away by the growing trust in the power of mere words, and by the habit of learning at second hand through the minds of others which is the bane of the modern system'" (394). It is his opinion that modern men and women gain access to knowledge of the world (more specifically those parts of the world not immediately surrounding them) indirectly, through books. These individuals would be better off, he implies, if they were to expand their direct knowledge of the world through less mediated forms of experience, or in his words, through "the living touch with Nature." Writing is presented here as distancing and restricting, deadening the "memory of the senses" (394), our "natural" means of accessing knowledge of the world, and replacing it with new, technical and artificial, means. In this sense, writing can be seen (from Petrie's perspective) to have a corrupting influence on the mental lives of modern men and women.

The apparent goal of Petrie's talk is to celebrate the power and productivity of ancient, pre-scribal cultures that he has dedicated himself to studying, to remind his audience (as the article's author explains) that "men as unlettered as our ploughmen were before Mr. Forster

⁶¹ "Prof. Petrie on Writing and Reading," *The Spectator* 77 (1896): 394-5. Cf. "The British Association," *The Times* 22 Sept. 1896: 8. Petrie's comments on writing here likely come as a result of the research he was doing in the mid-1890s on ancient writing. Some of the findings of this research are located in his "Sources of the Alphabet" (*Journal of the Anthropological Institute* 29 [1899]: 204-206).

passed his Act, founded cities, built mighty temples, made elaborate ornaments, invented weapons and built boats, and even, it is probable, thought out some of the deepest problems of religion, metaphysics and physics” (395). While the goal of Ong’s essay – to argue that technologies are, at their root, “interior transformations of consciousness, and never more than when they affect the word” (Ong 32) – is very different from that of his Victorian predecessor, Ong makes similar assumptions about the use of writing. He claims, like Petrie, that writing is distinct from “nature,” and that “by contrast with natural, oral speech, writing is completely artificial” (31). “There is no way,” Ong argues, “to write ‘naturally’” (31), because writing is a product of culture, a technology that alters our interactions with the natural world. Ong believes that “oral speech is fully natural to human beings in the sense that every human being in every culture who is not physiologically or psychologically impaired learns to talk,” while this is not the case with writing (31). Of course, Ong’s essay is free of the censoriousness of Petrie’s talk, because he does not feel the need, as Petrie did, to shake the confidence of an age “which believes a little too much that civilization is dependent upon reading and writing” (“Prof. Petrie” 395).

I introduce Ong’s discussion of writing and technology in this context because it speaks to the apparent distinctions made in the Victorian press between writing as a natural form of self-expression and writing as a technical tool of culture. In fact, Ong’s essay provides a middle ground between these two perspectives on the use of writing in Victorian culture. Petrie insists that the activity of writing is an expression of culture, an exercise in artifice that distances the individual from his or her natural environment (from a “living touch with Nature”) and from the self by deadening “the memory of the senses” and transforming “thought” into “mere carcasses, senseless and corrupt” (394).⁶² In this view, writing is a

⁶² Petrie reportedly refers to reading and writing as “crippling arts” in his talk (395).

“device for stereotyping knowledge” that produces a “departure from Nature or the reality of things” (395). Writing is, therefore, an exterior aid in its facility for recording and ordering knowledge, but it has negative consequences on the internal life of the writing subject and of all those who make regular use of the skills of literacy. George Wilson takes the opposing view, and by arguing that some form of writing is constantly at work in the natural world and in our own bodies (even before we take up instruments of inscription), he defines writing as an internal activity native to human beings, not imposed on them by culture. Noble contributes to this latter view, implicitly, by associating writing with physical and natural phenomena. I believe that Ong bridges these apparently disparate positions on the nature of writing by arguing that the type of “natural” writing Wilson depicts is impossible and that writing is essentially technological, but that use of the technology of writing has an impact on the internal world of the writer. The act of writing alters the writer’s mental world by restructuring thought, and in this way there is some association between the activity of writing and what Wilson and Noble would have called the “natural” world of the human body. Ong’s view on the relationship between writing and the human mind and writing and the act of communication differs from Flinders Petrie’s because, unlike Petrie, he refuses to make the claim that the technology of writing diminishes our natural abilities. In effect, Ong’s work on the philosophy of writing helps us better connect the sometimes conflicting lines of thought about the role of writing presented in Victorian journalism.

Writing and Interiority

The discussion of writing in these articles also poses questions about the role of writing as an expression of subjectivity or interiority, because each of these writers takes a different position on the question of whether the act of writing allows the writer to express

some inner, otherwise hidden, element of him or herself. Wilson, for one, believes quite strongly that writing permits the expression of something deeply personal about the writer's inner life. This much is clear from his comments on the third piece of technology involved in writing – the ink. Representing the heart, Wilson argues, “the ink quickens and slackens its current, and ebbs and flows, as the tide of our emotions sinks and swells” (38). When writing *from the heart* in this way, the “material quality” of what we have put down seems not to be relevant, and the “words we have written stand before us ... each a spirit-child with an independent life of its own, proclaiming ‘*litera scripta manet*’” (38).⁶³ In this process, Wilson believes, “we feel as if we directly thought out the words we see,” and “the ink in which they stand is not charcoal, or galls and iron, but the very anger, or sorrow, or gladness we felt, fixed on the paper for ever” (38). Surely, this is a statement about writing as an almost unmediated expression of the writer's interior life. In a similar manner, Noble's assertion that the “true first cause of authorship” can be likened to the instinctual singing of a bird also points to a definition of writing as a natural expression of interiority and subjectivity, but Noble's statements are less decisive. For instance, she acknowledges that this first true cause is not often the *real* motivation to write, and she later refers to writers as reflectors – rather than generators – of expression or enlightenment. Noble is closer to Wilson's schema of writing than Petrie, however, as the latter sees writing as a technological system that causes us to depart from the realities of the natural world (395). In this way, Petrie wonders whether the ability to write does not in fact hamper expressions of the writer's interior life.⁶⁴

⁶³ “The written character remains.”

⁶⁴ “Even as regards thought, it may, he thinks, be doubted whether writing is an advantage, whether epic poetry, and lyric poetry, and dramatic poetry were not in succession killed in early Greece by over-much writing, and by that departure from Nature or the reality of things which that rather contemptible, though possibly necessary, device for stereotyping knowledge inevitably produces” (395).

Christopher Keep refers to the relationship between writing and interiority in his article on the human, the machine, and the institutionalization of literary studies in the nineteenth century.⁶⁵ Keep begins by discussing an automaton constructed in the eighteenth century by the Swiss mechanician Henri Maillardet, consisting of a seated puppet able, by means of mechanical “memory,” to write out a number of poems and to draw various pictures. Referring to assumptions about the relationship between human beings and machines that he feels we have inherited from the Victorians, Keep claims that “writing is different” from other actions we expect automata to perform (56). Writing, we tend to think, “suggests the presence not of a program but of a person, one whose actions are the free and spontaneous expressions of some deep reserve of selfhood, an inwardness or depth of being which is capable of reflecting on itself as a self” (Keep 56). In the way that Keep defines it here, and the way that Wilson and Noble appear to define it in their articles, writing is thus an expression of the imperfect, emotive, intuitive, and spontaneous character of human beings, and therefore an impossible task for a machine that lacks these qualities. While Keep makes the point throughout his article that current concerns about the further mediation of the acts of reading and writing through the inclusion of elite technology such as personal computers stem from “our devotion to the anachronistic ideal of the ‘human’” (59), this human ideal in writing was clearly prevalent during the period I am examining here.

One of the most interesting statements on the relationship between writing and interiority can be found in an article by the psychical researcher and literary scholar Frederic W.H. Myers on the phenomenon of *automatic writing*.⁶⁶ Myers, one of the founding members of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), published a number of articles in leading

⁶⁵ Christopher Keep, “Of Writing Machines and Scholar Gypsies,” *English Studies in Canada* 29 (2003): 55-66.

⁶⁶ Frederic W.H. Myers, “Automatic Writing, or The Rationale of the Planchette,” *The Contemporary Review* 47 (1884): 233-49.

journals during the 1880s and 1890s in order to promote the SPR and relate its findings to the general, educated public.⁶⁷ Myers argues, in “Automatic Writing, or The Rationale of the Planchette,” that writing holds a “prominent place” in the canon of hand movements used by individuals to release “surplus nervous energy along some habitual channel” (Myers 235). “Natural” or “spontaneous” cases of automatic writing can be seen as a variety of this kind of energetic release, but for Myers much more is at stake. He believes that cases of “induced or experimental” automatic writing – those performed to test the limits of the writer’s inner life – involve individuals in the act of writing who are “moved from within by some agency which overrules [their] volition,” and that this agency is in fact “merely [their] *unconscious* life influencing [their] *conscious* life” (237). In the automatic writer, Myers claims, “the act of attention ... has stamped the idea of the projected movement so strongly on his brain that the movement works itself out automatically, in spite of any subsequent effort to prevent it” (237).

According to Myers, this kind of automatic writing can be achieved with pen and paper or with a *planchette* – that is, a small board supported by legs or wheels fitted with a pencil, which makes marks on a sheet of paper above which it is supported. The writer seats him or herself at a table with pen or planchette and (often) asks questions which are to be answered through the automatic writing. When they arrive, these answers are then the “operation of unconscious cerebral action ... much more complex and definite than is commonly supposed to be discernible in waking persons” (235). If two people take part in an automatic writing experiment, Myers feels, they may be able to show the presence of “telepathic action,” or “the transference ... of thoughts or ideas from the conscious or

⁶⁷ Alan Gauld, “Myers, Frederic William Henry (1843–1901),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), 21 May 2008.

unconscious mind of one person to the conscious or unconscious mind of another person, from whence they emerge in the shape of automatically written words or sentences” (235).

Disregarding what we would now call the supernatural elements of his presentation for a moment, I would like to suggest that the definition of writing Myers implicitly puts forward in this article corresponds in some ways to the model of natural writing suggested by Wilson and Noble.⁶⁸ He argues that the act of writing, here automatic writing, is a way to reveal a hidden, internal self; he suggests, therefore, that there is some connection between writing and the writing subject’s *inner being*, even if he does so in ways that some of his contemporaries would not have accepted. Myers’ position is most evident when he discusses automatic writing experiments involving a single writer, such as a case in which a woman automatically wrote out her name with both a pencil and a planchette, though the word she wrote was not legible to her at first.⁶⁹ Myers takes this initial illegibility as an example of the woman’s “hidden other self ... learning to write” and “the transference of an organized memory from one stream of the inner being to another” (238). The text produced in this fashion is “the handwriting of the *secondary self*” (238), or the handwriting of “another focus of cerebral activity within [the writer’s] own brain” (240). It is Myers’ contention, then, that automatic writing allows the writer to call up deep, sometimes hidden, aspects of his or her own

⁶⁸ Lisa Brocklebank suggests in her article “Psychic Reading” (*Victorian Studies* 48 [2006]: 233-9) that Myers’ thoughts on mind-reading can also be understood as representative of his thoughts on everyday, literary reading as well. The “expansion of consciousness” that comes from sympathetically reading the thoughts of another, Myers felt, “could take place though reading books as well” (234). Brocklebank maintains that Myers’ definitions of mind reading and literary reading echo “some of the instructions circulating in contemporary treatises on reading” (234). I would like to suggest that, in a similar way, his thoughts on this occult form of writing correspond to definitions of more traditional forms of writing already in circulation.

⁶⁹ She wrote *I Celen* a number of times, and only after a while did she realize that she was writing *Helen*. The I and the C were juxtaposed to make an H, but she had never written the letter H in this manner before, she reports to Myers (238).

personality; intimate and personal elements of subjectivity are thus objectified through the process of automatic writing.⁷⁰

Though Myers' definition emerges from what we now consider Victorian pseudo-science, his view of writing is not so different from Wilson's position on traditional writing *from the heart*, in which discrete emotions seem to become fixed on paper through the scriptural process, as if the process and its material conditions are unimportant. Both models of writing contradict the definition of writing as a technical and mechanical skill alluded to by Flinders Petrie and implied by those commentators who focused on the more highly mechanized systems of inscription that were so prevalent by the end of the nineteenth century. I would like to suggest, once again, that representations of writing that assert its subjective, human, and interior characteristics are partly reactions to the perceived industrialization of writing in the late nineteenth century. As the act of writing becomes increasingly defined by mechanization and commodification, by the use of new print technologies such as typewriters, steam-powered rotary presses, and stereo lithography, and by a growing market for the reading material produced by these technologies, these expressions of writing's subjective and still human qualities seek to remind readers that writing can still be a personal act, unmediated by any but the most rudimentary technologies (no act of writing can be entirely *unmediated*).⁷¹ Though it is unlikely that they would have seen their articles in this light, Wilson, Noble, and Myers are (to varying degrees) staging implicit oppositions to the mechanistic turn of late-century literary production and late-century culture more generally.

⁷⁰ The presence of more than one consciousness in the mind Myers accounts for in his likening of the present self to "that mass of creeping things which is termed an 'animal colony,' – a myriad rudimentary consciousnesses" (233). He presupposes the existence of more than one consciousness or self in the mind.

⁷¹ On the topic of the mechanization and commodification of writing in the late-nineteenth century, see N.N. Feltes, *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1986). Feltes claims in his discussion of Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* that by the end of the century, the magazine was like a "factory" in which workers came and went, producing commodity-texts (68).

These writers are thus quietly disavowing the industrialization of writing that was so evident to the *Blackwood's* writer who heard “the hum of ‘reading’” in the instinctual movements of “nimble fingers ... mechanically translating thought into metal” in the publishing office of a great daily paper,” asserting instead what they saw as the essentially human qualities of communication.

Conclusions

It is clear from the diverse models of reading and writing set up by writers in Victorian reading guides and popular periodicals that the topic of literacy was as important outside of elementary schools as it was within them. My aim in this chapter has been to show that the “torrent of homily and instruction” regarding reading to which Phillip Waller refers was often built on definitions of reading first established by educators, with journalists and the authors of reading guides developing and transforming these definitions in order to attract and instruct an ever-enlarging body of readers. The inclusion of writing in this discussion – though statements on writing are dwarfed by the amount of press given to the topic of reading – shows that the expressive side of literacy was also seen to require redefinition in an increasingly literate nation.

Ironically, this torrent of instruction, these competing reading models, could lead to the problems that many critics and journalists discussed at length in their books and articles. James Stephen makes note of this paradox in his *Desultory and Systematic Reading*, when he wonders whether all the daily possibilities for reading from newspapers and magazines, “not unaided by us lecturers” (8), really qualifies anyone for the “serious duties of life” in the nineteenth century. The vast dialogue in the press on the dangers of reading and the proper ends of reading could surely contribute to the crisis of attention that writers such as Noah

Porter and Frederic Harrison worried about. We might also ask how readers were expected to profit from the programs of reading published in journals and magazines when the authors of these articles continually warned them away from periodical literature. How, too, were common readers supposed to judge the value of these systems without taking part in some desultory reading in order to get a sense of the wide range of reading models offered to them?

Despite their inherent incongruities, these articles and guides give us a much better sense of the implications that reading could have for the social and gender identities of readers, and when combined with the definitions of reading offered by educational writing, the models established here give us a clear view of the hopes and fears critics and educators had for popular literacy. As the remaining chapters of this dissertation will show, Victorian novelists continued to draw out these popular hopes and fears in new and even more imaginative ways, adding to the general concerns about reading and writing their own particular preoccupations, derived in part from their positions within the literary marketplace.

Chapter 5

The Psychology of Reading and Memory in George Eliot's

Romola and *Daniel Deronda*

Because George Eliot died in 1880, she missed the debate on reading and education that appeared in the periodical press during the century's final two decades. Yet while Eliot was unable to weigh in on the "overpressure" crisis of the early 1880s or on the debates about the value of desultory reading prompted by Frederic Harrison and Stafford Henry Northcote, her work makes it clear that she had educated and evolving views on the personal and political implications of mass literacy. Scenes of reading and writing fill Eliot's novels, and as I will show in my examination of *Romola* (1863) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876), such scenes are designed to appear at pivotal narrative moments, indicating the importance that she placed on literacy. In both of these novels, books have profound effects on personal relationships. In *Romola*, for instance, books and scholarship initially help to bring Tito Melema and Romola di Bardi together when Tito becomes an assistant to Romola's father, Bardo. However, Tito's sale of Bardo's library causes an irreparable fracture in the couple's relationship later in the narrative, prompting Romola to flee Florence. In *Daniel Deronda*, Deronda is occupied with a book during the moment that "had been burnt into his life as its chief epoch" (149).¹ Reading Jean Charles de Sismondi's *History of the Italian Republics*, the boy comes to believe (wrongly but no less strongly) that Sir Hugo Mallinger, the man he has always called his uncle, is in fact his father, and that he himself is an illegitimate child. As well, the collection of texts that Deronda inherits from his maternal grandfather later in the narrative appears to seal the relationship between him and Mordechai Cohen by establishing Deronda within a

¹ George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Graham Handley (1876; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984).

tradition of Hebrew intellectuals and reaffirming Mordechai's hope that his new friend will help re-establish the Jewish people as a coherent national force.

In addition to insisting that books and reading can be central in the formation and destruction of personal relationships, *Romola* and *Daniel Deronda* provide Eliot with opportunities to contribute to the Victorian discourse on the possibilities and limits of literacy and to comment on what was mentally and physically involved in the acts of reading and writing. Eliot's most pronounced contribution to this debate in these novels is her investigation into the psychological and physiological elements of the reading experience, especially her analysis of the relationship between reading and memory. That her examination of reading practices focuses on their psychological implications is fitting considering her dedication to representing the inner life of her characters and the nuances of their personalities and ethical sensibilities. In the discussion that follows, I will demonstrate how Eliot's views on the role of memory and emotion in reading interact with definitions of reading constructed in educational literature and Victorian studies of psychology. In important scenes of reading throughout *Romola* and *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot portrays various levels of mnemonic involvement in her characters. Taken together, I argue, these scenes give us a sense of the psychological factors that Eliot judged to be most constitutive of close, attentive reading. I will also show that Eliot uses the mnemonic form of inward reading that she associates with Baldassarre Calvo and Bardo di Bardi in *Romola* to represent a way of coming to know the world that she believes to be deeply flawed. In *Daniel Deronda*, on the other hand, Eliot offers a far more positive version of inward reading, presenting Jewish cultural heritage, metaphorically, as a dimly seen writing within all Jews, waiting to be illuminated and made legible by an external act that will unite them as a community.

Some Connections Between Reading and Memory in Victorian Education and Psychology

One aim of this chapter is to show that throughout *Romola* and *Daniel Deronda* Eliot sought to develop a theory about the role of the memory in the act of reading and to critique a mode of reading that relies heavily on memory instead of present engagement with texts. In her attempts to clarify this theory, Eliot was contributing to an already substantial body of work on the relationship between reading and memory. These concepts were linked in a number of ways in Victorian discourse, and they were frequently discussed together in popular periodicals, as well as quasi-scientific and philosophical journals. By the 1880s, the place of memory in reading instruction was well established. As noted in the first chapter of this dissertation, for some nineteenth-century educators learning to read meant storing the memory with combinations of letters and their meanings so that they might be recalled when a book was placed before a child. Furthermore, the value of a labourer's education could be judged by his retention of the literacy skills he was taught, and the quality of any reader's experience with a book could be measured by the amount of knowledge he or she was able to retain in his or her memory after the book was put down. One's memory could be strengthened, a number of critics argued, by a focused attention on the reading matter at hand. Finally, reading was used as a means of understanding and testing the limitations of the power of memory, and a test subject's literacy was commonly used as a tool with which Victorian psychologists garnered experimental knowledge of the human powers of recall and retention.² Eliot's own familiarity with the period's educational developments can be traced to "her

² See, for instance, W.G. Smith's, "The Relation of Attention to Memory," *Mind* 4 (1895): 47-73, and Edmund B. Huey's, "Preliminary Experiments in the Physiology and Psychology of Reading," *American Journal of Psychology* 9 (1898): 575-86.

friendship with many of the individuals engaged in educational reform,” and the reading she did in a wide variety of periodicals (Robertson 1).³

If we look in more detail at Victorian education, it becomes clear that attitudes about the proper relationship between reading and memory evolved over the course of the period. As Ian Michael points out in his study of English instruction until 1870, “until recent times, educators have always valued memory training, and teachers of literature have been amongst those who practised it” (259). Learning by heart was supposed to be a useful form of both pedagogic and mental discipline, and elementary school teachers often took the position that “children would virtually memorise anything that they studied thoroughly” (259-60). Memory was called into play most decidedly in the “look-and-say” system of reading instruction that was used frequently in early-Victorian schools. As George White explains in his 1862 instruction manual, the look-and-say method most often substituted for individual instruction in “lower classes of school” (14) where pupils vastly outnumbered their teachers. According to White, the teacher who followed the “look-and-say” method took pains to impress the word’s “portraiture on the memory of the eye of each of his scholars” (15) by constantly showing the children letters and words so that they might commit sounds and meanings to memory. As early as the 1860s, White realized the limitations of this system, most evident in its tendency to weary the eye and fatigue the memory of children.

While the look-and-say method may have been useful for over-taxed elementary school teachers, critics of elementary education such as Matthew Arnold and W.B. Hodgson were quick to point out the limitations of any pedagogic method that relied too heavily on memorization. Arnold’s complaint about the effects of the Revised Code of 1862 – which introduced a set of educational policies that further taxed children’s mnemonic powers – was

³ Linda K. Robertson, *The Power of Knowledge: George Eliot and Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997).

that it led to “a decline in intellectual life” by encouraging students to read and re-read the same passages from exercise books in order to pass their yearly examinations. Arnold could see that the students put before him frequently read the passages quite fluently from memory and mechanical repetition instead of comprehension. Hodgson similarly complained in his “Exaggerated Estimates of Reading and Writing as Means of Education,” that the reliance on memory in the reading and writing instruction was having a detrimental effect on other areas of the curriculum: “Even attempts to teach science are often marred by confounding it with literary or verbal knowledge. Nature is treated on the system of the Eton Latin Grammar. Technical names and lists of genera and species are committed to memory without due explanation of the grounds of distinction” (388-9).

By the 1880s, the negative impact of mnemonic methods of language instruction was a frequent criticism of contemporary methods for teaching reading. In his 1888 article on current educational practices, James Runciman defines an elementary teacher as “‘a person who is under the direction of amateurish clerks, and who is not allowed to teach.’ He may stimulate the faculty of memory as much as he choose, but if he *teaches* as Thring or Clifford taught he does so at his peril” (36).⁴ Still, some writers continued to insist on the importance of harnessing memory to improve reading skills, frequently when advocating a model of systematic reading. For instance, retention is key in the method of reading that W.B. Proctor outlines in his essay, “On the Reading of Books.”⁵ Proctor recommends summing up, rereading, and doing anything that will stretch and freshen the memory to aid in retention. While the attitudes taken towards the place of memorization in reading instruction varied in

⁴ James Runciman, “The New Departure in Education,” *The Contemporary Review* 54 (1888): 33-51. Runciman also notes that “in geography, as in grammar, the official maxim is ‘suppress intelligence, dwarf imagination, cultivate the verbal and statistical memory’” (45).

⁵ W.B. Proctor, “On the Reading of Books,” *Temple Bar* 72 (1884): 176-86.

educational and periodical writing, the link between memory and reading was always seen as a strong one.⁶

As Rick Rylance explains, Victorian psychology was an “eclectic, generalist field, the nature and role of which was hotly debated” (239).⁷ Questions about the character of the human mind were posed in a number of leading journals before the *British Journal of Psychology* was launched in 1904. Reading and memory could be aligned in the psychological discussions that occupy these sources, especially after the 1870s, when memory became increasingly central to British psychological theories (Dames 9-10).⁸ In some cases, books and reading became useful metaphors to illustrate the function of memory for those writing on the human mind. An article entitled simply “Forgetfulness,” published in the British philosophical journal *Mind* in 1877, provides a fine example of this tendency.⁹ The article is an examination of the idea of total forgetfulness and whether it ever really occurs, a question that the writer, R. Verdon, claims has been “simmering in the minds of many for some time” (438). Verdon believes that the possibility of total forgetfulness is highly probable, despite the English tradition that denies its likelihood.¹⁰ To illustrate the notion of total forgetfulness, Verdon uses a “similitude” that takes advantage of the traditional link between reading and memory. In total forgetfulness, he maintains, “the invisible leaf of the book of memory has not become temporarily fastened to another leaf, nor has it been torn out and hidden with a possibility of

⁶ Charles Francis Richardson makes similar claims about the importance of memory in systematic reading in his *Choice of Books* (London: Sampson, Low & Co., 1881) 76 ff.

⁷ Rick Rylance, “‘The Disturbing Anarchy of Investigation’: Psychological Debate and the Victorian Periodical,” *Culture and Science in the Nineteenth-Century Media*, ed. Louise Henson et al. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004) 239-50.

⁸ Nicholas Dames, *Amnesiac Selves: Nostalgia, Forgetting, and British Fiction, 1810-1870* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001).

⁹ R. Verdon, “Forgetfulness,” *Mind* 2 (1877): 437-52.

¹⁰ Verdon attributes the theory of total forgetfulness’s impossibility to the British philosopher William Rowan Hamilton, whose *Lectures on Metaphysics* appeared posthumously in 1859. George Henry Lewes also argues against total forgetfulness in the third series of his *Problems of Life and Mind* (London: Trübner, 1879), completed by Eliot and published posthumously.

recovery, but has been utterly burnt so that its constituent parts have become scattered and have entered into new combinations with the neighbouring parts of the universe” (437). In a literal sense, if a man totally forgets the contents of a page he has read, “there is no Disposition, Trace, or Record left with him in correspondence to the page thus forgotten” (438). In trying to determine how memory works and to what extent knowledge, once processed, remains imprinted on the mind in spite of injury or the passage of time, Verdon uses reading as a metaphor and as a more literal test case to explicate his views. Marcus Hartog uses a similar metaphor in his article on memory and education at the turn of the century.¹¹ If we analyse our memories, Hartog maintains, “we find that they are in the first place arranged in order of time, and associated, as in a commercial ‘waste-book,’ with the transactions that go before and after” (533). Our conscious mind, on the other hand, “effects a sort of ledger-like re-arrangement, and groups them in categories of *kind*” (533).

R.H. Hutton, critic and correspondent of George Eliot herself, examines the connection between reading and memory in his 1874 article “Latent Thought,” but Hutton’s discussion moves beyond the metaphorical associations posed by Verdon and Hartog, asking questions similar to those Eliot asks in her novels.¹² Hutton’s goal is to examine, and eventually refute, the existence of what is referred to as “latent thought,” an increasingly popular conception of “the intellect generally as an automatic machine independent of consciousness” (201). Those who subscribe to this theory seem to mean by the phrase “that the brain, as distinct from the mind, is a sort of intellectual weaving-machine, from which, if you supply it with the raw materials of a mental problem, you may hope to take out the finished article without the exercise of any intellectual judgement or reflection” (201). In order to make his point, Hutton looks at the presence of “automatic habits, which, once formed, require exceedingly little

¹¹ Marcus Hartog, “Interpolation in Memory,” *Contemporary Review* 78 (1900): 532-9.

¹² R.H. Hutton, “Latent Thought,” *Contemporary Review* 24 (1874): 201-11.

thought or attention, so that you may read aloud, or play on the piano, or walk through a crowded street, absorbed all the time in a train of intense thought” widely removed from your immediate actions (204). In Hutton’s words – derived from his reading of William Benjamin Carpenter, who discusses the notion of latent thought in his *Principles of Mental Physiology* (1874) – the “under-mind” in these occasions is working without our being conscious of it while the “upper-mind” is engaged in something else.

Beginning with the example of automatic reading, Hutton argues against the notion of latent thought by suggesting that “if an under-mind were working at reading aloud, for instance, while the upper-mind were dwelling in a totally different train of ideas, then it would follow that the drift of what you had been reading might be recovered by you in some future mental state” (205). Unconscious reading, a phenomenon that occurs more than once in the novels I examine in this chapter, impresses the sound of the words read on the reader’s memory, according to Hutton: “the ear will retain what the ear hears, and sometimes a sentence comes afterwards back on you *verbally*, and then for the first time, if you take in the words, you apprehend what it means, and just as freshly as if you were then hearing it for the first time” (205). However, Hutton argues that what one has read automatically “is never apprehended by the mind, and consequently never recollected, unless it be in the lingering sounds of the memory, which sounds are not translated into their import till some future time” (205). Here, Hutton uses the non-existence of automatically read words in the reader’s recollection to deny the possibility of “unconscious cerebration” or latent thought under such circumstances. He uses the power of recall as a standard by which to judge the attention given to a reading and thus to judge the intellectual value of the reading experience, thereby insisting on the important link between reading and memory.

It is just this kind of theoretical debate on the nature of reading and memory in which Eliot is engaged in *Romola* and *Daniel Deronda*. As I will show, questions about the possibility of total forgetfulness, the similitude between the human memory and a book, and the psychological nature of the reading experience are central to these narratives. Eliot was familiar with psychological and physiological discussions not only, and primarily, through her wide reading in Victorian science and philosophy, but also through her relationships with Herbert Spencer and George Henry Lewes, both of whom published treatises on psychology during Eliot's lifetime. The psychological and physiological theorizing about reading and memory that Eliot engages in throughout *Romola* and *Daniel Deronda*, I believe, is evidence of what Sally Shuttleworth calls Eliot's "active dialogue with contemporary scientific thought" (ix) in the construction of her novels.¹³ That Eliot's interest in the psychological and mnemonic nature of the reading experience predates much of the debate on the nature of memory in Victorian psychological circles shows how important her views on reading and memory are to the wider discourse on reading and writing in the Victorian period.

Baldassarre's Illiteracy: Reading and Forgetfulness in *Romola*

We find evidence of the central place the act of reading takes in *Romola* in the fact that the title character's interactions with books frame her role in the narrative and help to demonstrate the changes that have come over her during that time. The reader's first introduction to Romola comes in the novel's fifth chapter, entitled "The Blind Scholar and his Daughter," where the eighteen-year-old (or, more specifically, her hair) produces "the only spot of bright colour" (46) in her father's sombre library.¹⁴ Romola stands at a "carved *leggio*,

¹³ Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984).

¹⁴ George Eliot, *Romola*, ed. Andrew Brown (1863; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994).

or reading-desk” (46) engaged in the act of reading aloud to her blind father, for whom she acts as an amanuensis and assistant. Her eyes in this scene are “bent on the Latin pages of Politian’s *Miscellanea*” (46) from which she reads, thus creating a look of modesty and humility, fitting her age and innocence at the beginning of the narrative.¹⁵ In the novel’s epilogue, Eliot presents Romola seventeen years later, in a different neighbourhood of Florence. Here, Romola’s eyes are not turned down on the pages of a book but “fixed absently on the distant mountains” (546), and it is Lillo (her late husband’s illegitimate son) rather than she herself who is reading. The direction of her gaze, absently up instead of modestly and studiously down, tells us something about the experiences she has had over the course of the novel. She seems lost in memory, appropriate for a day on which she will memorialize Fra Girolama Savonarola, one of the men who has had a major impact on her life. Lillo too appears to have lost himself in thought, rather than in reading. He is remarkably unlike Romola and her father in the amount of attention he gives to his book, a “finely-printed copy of Petrarch” (546) that sits on his outstretched legs. He swats a fly away from the pages “with an air of interest stronger” (546) than he gives to Petrarch, and he is soon looking expectantly at Romola in hopes of talking with her until it is too dark to continue his memorization of the poems. Soon, the two are talking about Lillo’s future and the possibility of his becoming a scholar like Romola’s father, thus linking this scene to the earlier scene of reading in Chapter 5. Here, although Romola has switched familial roles – she is no longer the child herself, but “Mamma Romola” (546) to Tito’s son – she maintains her position as assistant and confidante

¹⁵ Her youth and innocence are highlighted here by her inexperience of the outside world. As Susan Bernardo explains in her essay, “From Romola to *Romola*: The Complex Act of Naming” (*From Author to Text: Re-Reading George Eliot’s Romola*, eds. Caroline Levine and Mark W. Turner [Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998] 89-102), “when the reader first gets to see Romola she appears within the limiting boundaries of the four walls of her blind father’s study where she works at the edges of manuscripts, writing only at his request” (90).

that she held when Eliot first introduced her. While much has changed for Romola, her link with books and Renaissance scholarship persists throughout the novel.

More importantly, literacy provides Eliot with key metaphors to describe the instances of prophecy and prevision that occur throughout *Romola*. When Romola's brother Dino relates his troubling vision of his sister's future on his deathbed in the convent of San Marco, for instance, the narrator explains that the words "burnt themselves into her memory as they were spoken" (171), inscribing in her mind a prophecy that she constantly re-reads. On the night of her first attempted escape from Florence, she recalls Dino's final words and reflects that they "had never been for many hours together out of her mind" (307), a testament to their continued legibility. Eliot also depicts Savonarola's claims to prophecy in terms of his ability to read. Unlike those Florentines who judge God's word to be "a parchment written by dead men" (215), Savonarola believes that "in the Sacred Book there was a record of the past in which might be seen as in a glass what would be in the days to come, and the Book showed that when the wickedness of the chosen people, type of the Christian Church, had become crying, the judgements of God had descended on them" (199). The preacher's supposed ability to read the Sacred Book and interpret the record of the past in order to determine its meaning for the future singles him out as a leader in a politically turbulent time – at least, in his mind and in the minds of his followers. However, when the Frate's visions and private revelations refuse to match up to the political realities of the times, his revelations begin to be inflected with personal exasperation brought on by the refusal of the real world to match his vision of it. Here too, in describing Savonarola's frustration, Eliot uses a metaphor of literacy. For a public orator like Savonarola, the narrator explains, the conflict of "selfish and unselfish emotion," which remains internal for most men, makes itself evident for all to see: "the language of the inner voices is written out in letters of fire" (417). As the Frate claims to read the Sacred Book

of history, the men and women of Florence become increasingly able to read the personal hopes and fears written into his proclamations.

Eliot also represents the professed visions of other Florentine seers as attempts at a form of supernatural literacy, but Romola herself looks far less tolerantly on these than she does on the visions of Savonarola. In the scene of her leave-taking, during which she remarks on the continual presence of her brother's words inscribed on her memory, she also thinks about the visions – remembered images and voices – that are sometimes called up in her own mind. She remarks to herself, “If they were only a little stronger in me, ... I should lose the sense of what that vision really was, and take it for a prophetic light” (309). However, Romola shudders at the thought of becoming a seer herself because she has been taught “to scorn ... that sickly superstition which led men and women, with eyes too weak for the daylight, to sit in dark swamps and try to read human destiny by the chance flame of wandering vapours” (309). Eliot thus presents the superstitious forms of vision that Camilla Rucellai and other supposed Florentine prophets possess as dangerous forms of misreading. But what is the source of their inferiority when judged against Savonarola's visions?

One might be led to see these readings as inaccurate because they are taken from a book illuminated not by the “mighty beacon” (198) of Savonarola's historical and moral sense, but by chance flames produced by unwholesome swamp gasses. In this case, the conditions of the readings would be to blame for their inaccuracy. The figurative reading conditions (unhealthy surroundings and lack of sufficient light) obscure the texts in question and represent the distorting delusions of the seers themselves. The Frate's moral and religious understanding is far greater and more illuminating than the deluded sense of self-importance evident in others who claim the ability to read destiny. However, we might also see the reading material itself, rather than the reading conditions, as faulty. Savonarola, we are told,

reads “the Sacred Book,” a religious history of the world that prayer and study have made legible to him. He draws his prophecies from a religious and historical document, rather than from the limited human histories that seers such as Camilla Rucellai try to read. Though Romola is not willing to accept Savonarola’s visions, she is willing to overlook their air of superstition because of the ethical principles that underlie them. In women like Camilla, however, Romola sees “shallow excitability” and faculties “all wrought up into fantasies, leaving nothing for emotion and thought” (418). The figurative reading matter on which women like Camilla base their prophecies lacks the emotional and intellectual content of Savonarola’s “Sacred Book,” and leads to fantastical and hysterical claims instead of calls for social and institutional change.¹⁶

The relationship between reading and prophecy that Eliot establishes in *Romola* is important because it shows the persistence with which she turned to the figure of reading to discuss issues of interpretation and will, but the most striking scenes of reading in the novel involve instances of actual rather than metaphorical reading. In her depiction of Baldassarre Calvo’s struggles with the written word, Eliot makes one of her most important contributions to the Victorian discourse on literacy and education. Tito’s father, a scholar in Latin and Greek who has brought his adopted son up into scholarship as well, has been kidnapped and sold into slavery during a dangerous trip to Delos to investigate and document ancient artefacts. His mind has been injured by the hardships and trauma of his experience so that the vast majority of his memory – particularly his memory of the scholarship that has been his life’s work – is out of reach. When Baldassarre finally arrives in Florence as a slave of the French army, he has a wandering look of blank confusion, “as of a man suddenly smitten with

¹⁶ Romola later decides that there is little difference between Savonarola’s visions and those of Camilla Rucellai, however. It becomes clear to her that Savonarola does not condemn Camilla’s visions because “he was fettered inwardly by the consciousness that such revelations were not, in their basis, distinctly separable from his own visions” (419).

blindness” (254). This look is an accurate sign of his inner state because he feels at times as if a thick cloud is obscuring all the knowledge he has stored up. When readers are first introduced to him he is actually unsure whether any part of his memory remains behind the cloud at all: “It had all slipped away from him – that laboriously gathered store. Was it utterly and forever gone from him, like the waters from an urn lost in the wide ocean? Or, was it still within him, imprisoned by some obstruction that might one day break asunder?” (254).

Here, in Baldassarre’s dismayed soul-searching, we see Eliot dealing with some of the psychological issues that Hamilton and Verdon examine in their studies of memory and forgetfulness. In terms with which Eliot herself would have been familiar, it is most accurate to say that Baldassarre has lost his power of “recollection,” even though Eliot uses the more general term “memory” throughout the novel. George Henry Lewes makes the distinction between these two terms in his *Problems of Life and Mind* (1875-1880), the last volume of which Eliot herself prepared for publication after Lewes’ death. Lewes explains in his section on memory, “In Memory, images and ideas arise spontaneously; they are “unbidden” and intrude themselves into the current of thought” (Lewes 119).¹⁷ In “Recollection,” on the other hand, “there is an effort, a search, and a finding. We desire to recall a date, a fact, a name; and we try the various suggestions that spontaneously arise, till the right track be hit upon” (119). In Baldassarre’s case, traces of the information he has acquired throughout his life remain in his memory, though his recollection of this learning is blocked. He has felt mental changes since he first “felt the new darkness within him” during his captivity, and as his bodily strength has recovered, so has his “self-command and the energy of his will” (254). With this restoration of will, Baldassarre has also felt part of his memory return, specifically “memory of all of that part of his life which was closely inwrought with his emotions” (254). The

¹⁷ George Henry Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind: The Foundations of a Creed*, 3rd series (Boston: Houghton, Osgood and Company, 1880).

retention of this part of Baldassarre's memory is essential to the plot, because it is what allows him to recognize and plan vengeance against Tito for leaving him for dead. To have this small portion of his memory back is painful for Baldassarre though, because with it he feels "more and more constantly and painfully the uneasy sense of lost knowledge" (254-5).

It seems that the scholar's only hope resides in those emotional memories that he still retains, because he has found that when strong emotion excites him, he is able to achieve "entire possession" of his past self once again (254). As he reflects on this, Eliot explicitly associates reading with memory. In Baldassarre's slow repossession of his mental powers, "he [seems] again to see Greek pages and understand them, again to feel his mind moving unbenumbed among familiar ideas" (255). Here, the return of memory is presented as a form of inward literacy. Because of Baldassarre's training in classical scholarship, his ability to recollect becomes for him a form of reading through what was for a time "an unremembered past" (254), and the tormented scholar still retains what Verdon calls a "Trace or Record" of his past knowledge. In moments of extreme emotional shock or excitation, he is able to read that record once again, and his ability to recollect is restored.

Eliot illustrates this process and strengthens the link between reading and memory in a striking scene that dramatizes the complete but brief return of Baldassarre's memory. The shock that forces him into recollection and literacy occurs when Tito confronts him for the first time after denying his relationship to him in the streets of Florence. Unknowingly, Baldassarre has been staying in the accompanying shed of the house on the outskirts of Florence where Tito keeps his second family, and when Tito learns from Tessa – the peasant girl with whom he now has a child – that a strange old man with a vacant look is staying with them, he goes to investigate, hoping to repent for his former abandonment. Just before Tito enters the shed, Baldassarre finds himself in "one of his most wretched moments of conscious

helplessness” as he pores over a book he has recently purchased. He is unable to read it, unable to recall the names of his jewels and the symbols on them, “and this effort at inward seeing had seemed to end in utter paralysis of memory” (293). His hope has been that gazing at a book like this might help him to “lay hold of the slippery threads of memory” (261), but he is unable to find the “inward light” with which to make the words anything more than “unintelligible black marks” (261). Here again, reading and memory are closely linked, as Baldassarre sees the possibility that his literacy, if it can be regained, can provide the key to his blocked memory. Eliot makes use of the trope of illumination as she does in her examination of prophetic reading, so that Baldassarre’s longed for ability to read the record of his past in memory is positioned as an “inward light,” and the form of illiteracy and amnesia he now feels is registered as a form of darkness.

The scene that follows, in which Eliot depicts the return of Baldassarre’s memory, is a scene of regained literacy also. An illuminating moment for the aging scholar, it echoes the transformative and revelatory experiences that nineteenth-century working-class autobiographers sometimes record when describing their transformations from labourers into readers. As Baldassarre gazes in vain at the page before him, Tito enters, and the old man attacks him, only to be subdued by the armour Tito wears under his shirt (293). This outburst of passion manages to reawaken Baldassarre mentally, however, leaving him clear minded in the wake of the attack. Recognizing this inner clarity, Baldassarre makes his way back to his book and is able for the first time to read the large letters at the head of the page. Here again, Eliot associates literacy with memory and establishes an interesting psychological model of reading. The narrator remarks that the moonlight, falling on the letters of the word, “had

raised Messenia before him" (318).¹⁸ Surely, the scene before him is raised out of his memory, so that his hopes that literacy might provide the key to unlocking his memory appear confirmed. Excited by the mental clarity he experiences, Baldassarre snatches up the book and tries to continue reading, but the light in the shed is too dim: "No matter; he knew that chapter: he read inwardly" (318). Here, the actual page that he is "reading" becomes unnecessary as his memory proves a strong enough substitute. Baldassarre now possesses an inner literacy that allows him to call up the historical scenes presented in the book even when the book's pages are essentially illegible.

The inward reading he is engaged in at this moment unlocks his memory, saving him from forgetfulness and making the traces of knowledge within him legible. In fact, we might properly see this inward reading as a form of remembering. As the narrator explains, "the words [of the book] arose within him, and stirred innumerable vibrations of memory" (318). In this sense, Eliot presents Baldassarre's memory as a book that his regained literacy allows him to comprehend. The words of Pausanias that he reads, first outwardly and then "inwardly," arise within him and stir up further memories, casting a metaphorical light on his past learning, which had until now been useless to him in his confused state. Eliot registers this scene of revelation by returning yet again to the trope of illumination she made use of in her discussion of prophetic reading: "The light was come again, mother of knowledge and joy!" (318).

In the passages that follow this important scene, Eliot continues to insist on the power of reading to develop the mental capacity of her character. The text initially suggests that Baldassarre's ability to read, once it is regained, creates the necessary network he requires to make use of his past knowledge, not just of books, but of the wider world around him as well.

¹⁸ Baldassarre is reading Pausanias' *Periegesis*, concerning the treachery of Aristocrates and his alliance with the Messenians.

While under the cloud of confusion that he associates with his particular form of amnesia, Baldassarre has access only to the portions of his memory that are linked closely to his emotional life – his relationship to his mother and his rage at Tito’s betrayal, for instance. The return of his ability to read appears to restore factual knowledge to him and to provide him with the mental clarity he requires to use that knowledge to his purpose. In the remainder of the passage that describes his excitement at his ability to read once more, Eliot continues to insist on the power of literacy to shape an individual’s world. As Baldassarre looks down on the city of Florence, for example, he reflects that it changed for him in the instant that his memory returned. What had days ago been “a weary labyrinth” to him is now “material that he [can] subdue to his purposes” (318). Baldassarre feels, “he was once more a man who knew cities, whose sense of vision was instructed with large experience, and who felt the keen delight of holding all things in the grasp of language” (318). Surely these lines are evidence of the power that Eliot ascribes to literacy in *Romola*. The ability to read, to hold “all things in the grasp of language,” provides a map to make sense of the city in the same way that it establishes a mental network with which Baldassarre is able to access the stores of knowledge a lifetime of scholarship has constructed. Quite simply, the ability to read – and through reading to remember and to make connections between ideas – makes Baldassarre see the world differently than he did when he was illiterate.

Eliot provides further evidence of the transformative capabilities of literacy and the link between reading and memory in the next scene, when Baldassarre wakes up on the morning after his conversion experience. Upon waking, his first moments are “filled with strange bewilderment” because he finds himself “a man with a double identity” (319). He wonders if he has awakened “to the life of dim-sighted sensibilities, like the sad heirship of some fallen greatness, or to the life of recovered power” (319). Some working-class

autobiographers also register this sense of a “double identity” created by the ability to read when they describe their transformation from labourers to “great readers.” As Kelly Mays puts it, the transformative experiences associated with reading recorded in these autobiographies create “a new sense of selfhood and agency predicated on the reconceptualization of the relation between reading and other activities, between leisure and work, and between the great reader and others” (Mays 111).¹⁹ Although the ability to read is *regained* by Baldassarre and painfully *acquired* by writers such as Thomas Cooper and William Dodd (two autobiographers whom Mays discusses in her article), the transformative effects are very similar. Baldassarre’s ability to read gives him a new sense of self that is evident in the new feeling of power and empire he experiences as a reader, and it gives him a new understanding of the relationship between reading and other activities. Here, the ability to read has transformed his experience of the city, replacing his wandering negotiations of Florence with discrete and purposeful movements, which readers witness when he stalks Tito and slips himself into a dinner in the Rucellai Gardens. In order to confirm which identity he currently inhabits in the morning following his transformation, Baldassarre picks up Pausanias, hoping to determine if he is literate or not: “He took up the book again, he read, he remembered without reading” (319). Once again, Eliot establishes the intimate link between reading and memory, but in doing so she adds a degree of ambiguity to her model of mnemonic reading.

Baldassarre reads, we are told, but he also remembers “without reading” at all. This kind of reading from memory without physically scanning the page also occurs when he first finds that he is literate and reads about the treachery of Aristocrates “inwardly” without

¹⁹ Kelly J. Mays, “When a ‘Speck’ Begins to Read: Literacy and the Politics of Self-Improvement in Nineteenth-Century British Working-Class Autobiography,” *Reading Sites Social Difference and Reader Response*, eds. Patrocínio P. Schweickart and Elizabeth A. Flynn (New York: MLA, 2004) 108-34. For more on the conversion narratives of working-class autobiographies, see David Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge, and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth Century Working-Class Autobiography* (London: Methuen, 1982).

actually being able to see the pages because of the faint light. While Eliot takes pains to establish the link between reading and memory and to insist that the ability to read creates new mental networks that allow Baldassarre to see the world around him in a different light, she also questions the value of a form of reading that relies very little on the intricacies of the written word and very heavily on the preconceived notions of the reader. Eliot presents these potential limitations in a number of different ways in *Romola*. She does so first by giving us access to Baldassarre's interpretation of Pausanias. When he re-reads the book for the first time, he finds in it scenes that appeal to his sense of betrayal and his desire for revenge. In the "stoning of the traitor Aristocrates" Baldassarre sees "how Time had brought home justice to the unjust" (318). On this second reading of the book, he also reads into it his own preoccupations: "There were sanctuaries for swift-footed miscreants; baseness had its armour, and the weapons of justice sometimes broke against it" (320). These interpretations fit perfectly with Baldassarre's recent experience – of the knife breaking against Tito's chain mail armour. His ability to read the book and remember its contents assures him that "the fine fibres of association" (320) are still active in him, that literacy has indeed provided the network he requires to connect his present state to the stores of knowledge in his memory. Yet, the single-mindedness of his interpretations suggests that his method of mnemonic reading is limited. Like those memories that he could access before he regained the ability to read, the information he takes from Pausanias is closely inwrought with his emotional life.

The limitations of Baldassarre's literacy become even more apparent in the next chapter, when he tries to disgrace Tito in front of his companions at the supper in the Rucellai Gardens. The scene is key to Eliot's exploration of the psychology of memory and reading, but it also provides us with a link to Victorian elementary education. When Baldassarre first steps out of the shadows to confront Tito, he begins by telling the party that Tito is a traitor,

that he brought the young man up from beggary and made him a scholar only to be left in slavery while Tito profited from the rings Baldassarre had given him to buy his ransom. Asked to prove his claims, Baldassarre is put into the position of a pupil before the school inspector. Fittingly, considering the importance Eliot places on the act of reading throughout *Romola*, Bernardo Rucellai proposes a reading test for Baldassarre, and this test focuses our attention once more on Baldassarre's psychological state and the link between reading and memory. The ring that Tito has sold Rucellai was "engraved with a subject from Homer" (335), and the old man is asked to turn to the passage in Rucellai's "fine Florentine Homer" (335) from which the subject is taken. If he can read the book and identify the passage, it will prove that his claims about Tito's treachery are valid. In terms of the logic of the narrative, the scene has its weaknesses. It is unclear whether Baldassarre's success in identifying a passage during the reading test would actually prove that he is the man he claims to be, and that Tito has betrayed him. Is this really the best way of proving or disproving the old man's claims? The test's power resides in Tito's contention that the man he claims his father to be is not a scholar. In essence, it resides in the question of whether or not Baldassarre is literate, and part of the scene's strength is that it brings the psychology of reading to the forefront once again.

Despite the mental clarity he felt on the night of the attack, the agitation that his own accusation causes within him, along with Tito's counter-accusation that Baldassarre is a mentally "unhinged" servant who accompanied Tito and his father to Greece, shakes Baldassarre's hold on his knowledge. Before he steps forward to confront the group, he assures himself "by rapid mental glances" that he can attest to his learning and identity (334); here he is testing that mental network that has been re-established within him, and making sure that he can connect the gems he trusts will be put before him with their specific histories and attributes. However, the shock of rage and "nervous strain" of the accusatory moment

affect him deeply: “a cold stream seemed to rush over him, and the last words of the speech seemed to be drowned by ringing chimes” (334). In his mind, thought gives way to the “dizzy horror” that has always accompanied his amnesiac moments (334), and when the copy of Homer is placed before him, he can do no more than gaze blankly at it. The sight of the book only recalls for him “the habitual longing and faint hope that he could read and understand” (335), and his eyes wander over the pages without any signs of recognition. Baldassarre’s despairing cry, “Lost! Lost!” (335), is a reminder of the scene in the previous chapter that depicts the return of his literacy. There, he had declared himself to be once again a man who knew cities and could use them to his purpose. Here he is lost instead, destined to wander without purpose, just as his eyes do over the text of Homer before him.

Although it is easy to attribute Baldassarre’s illiteracy to the shock suffered by his clearly fragile nerves, it is also important to consider what effect the model of inward reading he practices might have on his performance in Rucellai’s reading test. In his previous moments of reading, the actual text of Pausanias had little to do with the information he took from it. At first, external conditions do not permit him to read the book physically (besides the chapter heading) so he reads it inwardly; the next morning, he returns to the book and though it is light enough to read, he also “remembers without reading.” On both occasions, he is reading the text of his memory more than the actual book itself, and in his memory of the book’s pages he finds confirmations of his most powerful emotion – vengeance. He appears to be *reading into* the book what he wants to find there instead of taking anything from the actual text of the book itself. Therefore, his failure speaks to Suzy Anger’s claim regarding Eliot’s view of interpretation. Like Feuerbach, whose work Eliot translated, “Eliot also remonstrates

against interpretations motivated by desire and need” (102).²⁰ Driven by his desire for revenge over Tito, Baldassarre interprets his book in a manner that gratifies that desire. When presented with another book, his inward reading fails and his actual illiteracy is revealed. The straightforward explanation for Baldassarre’s failure to read the text of Homer is that his regained mental empire could only be short-lived because of the lasting damage done to his nerves, and while this theory may be attractive in its psychological simplicity, it fails to take into account Eliot’s consideration of reading models elsewhere in *Romola* and in *Daniel Deronda*. When we look closely at these other instances of reading, it becomes apparent that Baldassarre’s failure is part of Eliot’s larger exploration of the possibilities and complications of reading and memory.

The Mnemonic Network of Printed Words: Problems of Reading, Memory, and Attention in *Daniel Deronda*

Before examining more closely the terms of Eliot’s critique of mnemonic reading in *Romola*, it is important to examine the scenes that unite reading and memory in *Daniel Deronda* because these scenes bear a striking resemblance at times to those that depict Baldassarre’s struggles with literacy. *Daniel Deronda* presents readers with a world in which personal experiences are constantly mediated by acts of reading, to a much greater extent than is the case in *Romola*. As Tony Jackson observes, the novel “represents literature as a determinative cause in human consciousness” (232) and references to literary works abound

²⁰ Suzy Anger, *Victorian Interpretations* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 2005). Anger maintains, furthermore, that Eliot believed in “an ethical imperative to try to understand others’ words as they intend them” (99). An accurate divination of the meaning of any utterance requires one to “enter imaginatively into the perspective of others” (99).

throughout the book.²¹ The self-conscious references to literature and reading are especially prominent in the scenes that feature Mirah Cohen, the novel's most obviously romantic character. When Deronda rescues her from her attempts to drown herself in the Thames and decides to take her to Mrs. Meyrick's house, he trusts that Mrs Meyrick's daughters will accept Mirah instantly because they "hardly knew of any evil closer to them than what lay in history books and dramas, and would at once associate a lovely Jewess with Rebecca in 'Ivanhoe'" (178). When Deronda arrives with Mirah, Mrs Meyrick's daughter Mab feels that the appearance of this romantic figure is a "preternatural" answer to a wish she made moments before the couple arrived. Inspired by the book her mother has been reading her, "Erckmann-Chatrian's *Histoire d'un Conscrit*," Mab cries, "Oh – oh – oh! ... I wish something wonderful would happen" (181), and something does. As cool-headed as Deronda sometimes seems, and as self-conscious as he is about any potential quixotic behaviour,²² he too feels that "this event of finding Mirah was as heart-stirring as anything that befell Orestes or Rinaldo" (189).

The ability of characters to read, and to read accurately, is clearly central to the novel, therefore, because past readings tend to inform a character's views of the present. It is striking then that *Daniel Deronda* contains scenes of reading in which very little actual reading takes place, scenes in which memory takes over and replaces any active engagement with the text the reader holds. In the epoch-making moment of realization concerning his parentage, for instance, Daniel sits with a book in front of him but the powerful memories that race through his mind – memories from his own life as well as memories from his readings – make him so inattentive to the book that his tutor must shock him into consciousness of the external world

²¹ Tony E. Jackson, "George Eliot's 'New Evangel': *Daniel Deronda* and the Ends of Realism," *Genre* 25 (1994): 229-48.

²² Deronda decides, for instance, not to mention his visit to a German synagogue to the Mallingers because of his "usual inclination to reticence on anything that the baronet would have been likely to call Quixotic enthusiasm" (340).

by asking, "Daniel do you see that you are sitting in the bent pages of your book?" (152). Eliot is not depicting Daniel's achievement of literacy here, but the relationship she establishes between reading and the "inward experience" (153) of memory and imagination is no less striking than the one she sets up in Baldassarre's moment of reawakening in *Romola*. Daniel has dim memories of his infancy, of "being kissed very much" and of being "surrounded by thin, cloudy, scented drapery, till his fingers caught in something hard, which hurt him, and he began to cry" (150), but he also thinks back to the more recent memories of his life with Sir Hugo and scans these memories with what he considers a new key to their meaning. Added to this are memories of literary works that take on new aspects now that Deronda considers the possibility that he himself is an illegitimate child. Because he has read "Shakespeare as well as a great deal of history," Deronda feels he can talk with some wisdom of "men who were born out of wedlock and were held unfortunate in consequence," but he had "never brought such knowledge into any association with his own lot ... until this moment when there had been darted into his mind with the magic of quick comparison" the possibility that the man he thinks is his uncle is in fact his father (152). As a result of all this mnemonic work, his features bear "that indescribable look of subdued activity which often accompanies a new mental survey of familiar facts" (151). In this scene of reading, a new network seems to have been put in place in Daniel's recollection, forging new connections between the materials stored there. The relationship between his memories and his present situation seemed to have changed dramatically.

Although little physical reading actually occurs in this scene, Deronda's brief reading of Sismondi acts as a catalyst to a major awakening in the boy. In this way, we can see a similarity between this moment and Baldassarre's moment of regained literacy in *Romola*. Baldassarre's renewed ability to read and remember gives him a sense of "mental empire" and

a new relationship with the city that lies below him and with the individuals within it. Something similarly transformative occurs for Deronda. As the narrator explains of Deronda, “the summing up of all his fluctuating experience at this epoch was, that a secret impression had come to him which had given him something like a new sense of relation to all the elements of his life” (153). As in *Romola*, Eliot shows a moment of reading here to be potentially transformative even though the act of reading occupies a very small portion of the scene itself. In Deronda’s awakening, the actual text in question has even less to do with the establishment of these new relations than Baldassarre’s Pausanias did in *Romola*. A single detail from Sismondi – the fact that many popes and cardinals referred to their illegitimate children as nephews – creates powerfully transformative inner experience and encourages Deronda to read his memories in a new way.

Eliot’s depiction of Deronda’s epoch-making experience as a scene of reading is intentional, and similar scenes throughout the novel provide evidence of her purposeful connection of reading and memory. For instance, the night after he finds Mirah, Deronda stays up half the night repeatedly and compulsively scanning his memory, “living again through the moments since he had first discerned Mirah on the river-brink, with the fresh and fresh vividness which belongs to emotive memory” (189). These intense memories overpower his ability to read, so that “when he took up a book to try and dull this urgency of inward vision, the printed words were no more than a network through which he saw and heard everything as clearly as before – saw not only the actual events of two hours, but possibilities of what had been and what might be which those events were enough to feed with the warm blood of passionate hope and fear” (189). Deronda thus appears to exhibit a form of “latent thought,” in the terms provided by nineteenth-century psychology. If we apply to this passage the terminology that R.H. Hutton uses in his article on the subject, then we must say that

Deronda's "under-mind" is reading while his "upper-mind," the conscious part of his brain, is engaged in other, more pressing, thoughts. Eliot seems to be using the term "network" in this passage to signify a physical, woven net, through which objects on the other side can easily be seen, rather than a system of interconnected things. Deronda's reading does not seem to forge new connections between his memories and the external facts of his life because his memories overpower the text before him. In this way, Eliot's use of "network" is different from the use I made of it in my discussion of Baldassarre's renewed literacy, where the old man's ability to read forms the necessary connections between his memories and the external world, restoring his ability to manipulate the external world to his personal needs.

Deronda occupies a position at the opposite end of the mnemonic spectrum from Baldassare, but there are similarities between the two men in their struggles to read. For instance, as in *Romola*, Eliot depicts Deronda's memory in this scene as an interior form of vision. Deronda is unable to overcome the demands of his memory's "inward vision" in order to read. His thoughts pass through the book he holds before him and he sees only the emotional events of hours earlier. In this sense, Eliot depicts the workings not of recollection, that form of memory that Lewes refers to as "exclusively human" (Lewes 119), but of memory proper, the spontaneous and "unbidden" thoughts and images that Lewes considers a simpler mental activity, active in animals as well as humans. In *Romola*, on the other hand, Baldassarre is unable to conjure up the "inward light" (261) of recollection in order to read his copy of Pausanias until the emotional shock of the encounter with Tito re-engages his mnemonic powers. While Deronda's inward vision is too strong to permit reading, Baldassarre's tends to be too weak. The end result is that problems of memory prevent each character from reading.

As powerful an observer as Deronda is and as powerful a “reader” of character as he seems to be, the scene described above is not the only one in which Eliot presents him in an unsuccessful act of reading. Later in the novel, a meeting with Gwendolen at Grandcourt’s London home has an effect on Deronda similar to the one produced by his first encounter with Mirah. The narrator explains, “Deronda’s nature had been acutely touched by the brief incidents and words which made the history of his intercourse with Gwendolen; and this evening’s slight addition had given them an importunate recurrence” (384). The result of this flood of memories is that Deronda finds himself “after one o’clock in the morning in the rather ludicrous position of sitting up severely holding a Hebrew grammar in his hands (for somehow, in deference to Mordechai, he had begun to study Hebrew), with the consciousness that he had been in that attitude nearly an hour, and had thought of nothing but Gwendolen and her husband” (384). Latent thought is at work again, and Deronda seems to read automatically with his “under-mind” while his “upper-mind” is occupied with more pressing emotional matters. Once again, the book that Deronda feigns to read is nothing but a network through which he sees particular elements of his own recent history. Rather than representing Deronda’s mnemonic powers as an apparent aid to reading, as she does in representing the work of Baldassarre’s recollection, Eliot shows memory to be a hindrance to the reading process, occupying the conscious mind and producing a trance-like state that prevents what is read from being “apprehended by the mind,” hence ensuring that it is “never recollected.”

As many critics and educators suggested in the popular sources I examined in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, productive methods of reading rely on a reader’s ability to fix his or her attention on the text at hand. Taking this into consideration, Deronda appears a very unsuccessful and unsystematic reader in these passages. He shows nothing of the active engagement with literature that the author of “Reading as a Means of Culture” calls for, for

instance. He lacks what that writer calls the “full vigour of attention without any of its wanderings,” and his mind appears to be in that “nearly passive state, like that of dreaming or reverie,” to which the author refers. However, the personal crisis of attentiveness that Deronda suffers in these scenes is not the product of the distractions of modern, industrial culture and its various streams of stimulation and information. Nor do desultory or aimless readings from ephemeral literature bring it on, in the manner that Noah Porter worries about in his *Books and Reading*. Rather, the origin of Deronda’s inattention is internal; the acuteness of his inner life distracts him from his book. In fact, Deronda’s problem does not result from the passive form of reading discouraged in “Reading as a Means of Culture” because his mind is *too active* in these cases to permit anything but the most rudimentary interaction with the texts. He seems lost in “reverie,” but the book he holds does not bring on this reverie (as novels were often accused of doing in statements about the dangers of reading). He reads unconsciously while his conscious mind is absorbed in more pressing memories.

In sharp contrast to Deronda’s absent-minded, automatic reading, Eliot offers a reading scene that features Gwendolen Harleth, the protagonist of the novel’s other major narrative thread. Eliot illustrates in Gwendolen the kind of wrapt attention to reading material called for by proponents of systematic reading, although the context of Gwendolen’s experience is very different from those imagined by such critics. This scene of reading, as life-changing for Gwendolen as young Deronda’s reading of Sismondi is for him, occurs on the evening of her wedding, when Mrs. Glasher (Grandcourt’s former mistress) delivers to Gwendolen the jewels Grandcourt once gave to her. The jewels are accompanied by a letter, in which Glasher accuses Gwendolen of injuring her and her children by marrying Grandcourt, noting that Glasher warned her of the true state of Grandcourt’s familial affairs before he proposed to her. In essence, Glasher intends the letter as a “curse” (330) on Gwendolen for knowingly and

willingly marrying a man who has a “family” already. Eliot provides evidence of Gwendolen’s close reading of the letter in the “spell-bound” attention she devotes to it: “It seemed at first as if Gwendolen’s eyes were spell-bound in reading the horrible words of the letter over and over again as a doom of penance” (330-1). In re-reading the letter, Gwendolen also unintentionally adheres to the edicts of systematic reading, and the effect that the letter has on her shows that she has fully and attentively apprehended its meaning. She loses consciousness of herself and of her surroundings so that her entire attention is given to the letter, which she reads repeatedly in her memory even after she has cast it into the fire: “She sat for a long while, knowing little more than that she was feeling ill, and that those words keep *repeating themselves in her*” (331).²³ Later in the novel, Eliot shows how effective Gwendolen’s method of reading has been by showing how strongly Glasher’s lines have worked their way into her memory. The narrator reiterates, for instance, that “the words of that letter kept repeating themselves, and hung on her consciousness with the weight of a prophetic doom” (395). In this line, Eliot echoes the description of Dino’s prophecy about Romola in the earlier novel. There, words (spoken instead of written) had been “burnt” into Romola’s” memory as they were spoken,” and as is the case for Gwendolen, these words had “never been for many hours together out of [Romola’s] mind.”

The power that Glasher’s letter has over Gwendolen is derived from its ability to harness her memories and her emotional life. On her first reading, the letter is not a “network” through which she sees scenes of her past, but a text to which she gives all her attention so that it momentarily obliterates her surroundings and all other concerns. She may not be reading systematically, but she is reading deeply and attentively, thus exhibiting the popular Victorian reading model of “transportation.” According to Andrew Elfenbein in his article on

²³ Emphasis mine.

cognitive science and Victorian reading practices, “transportation” is produced by a high level of coherence and comprehension in the reader, often achieved through emotional sympathy (492).²⁴ To be transported by a piece of writing is to be arrested and overpowered by it, and in this sense, the transportation model of reading relies on the assumption that the reader is in a fairly passive state while in the act of reading, open to influence from the text. It is fitting then that it is Gwendolen who exhibits this mode of reading (rather than Deronda) as “Victorians typically associated transportation with feminized, degraded reading” of the kind that involved very little in the way of intellectual processes (493).²⁵ Evidence of Gwendolen’s transportation can be found in her ignorance of the world around her: she sits “helpless” in her chair, takes no notice when she knocks the jewels onto the ground, and knows little more than the fact that she is feeling ill. Here, Gwendolen’s attention is so completely focussed on the page she is reading that transportation has reached the level of “nervous shock” (331), and Eliot seems to be insisting (as she does in her portrait of Baldassarre in *Romola*) that reading can have profound physiological effects on the reader, besides the obvious intellectual effects.

What do the distinctions between Deronda’s and Gwendolen’s scenes of reading tell us about the relationship between reading and memory Eliot has constructed in *Daniel Deronda*? In part, the difference in Deronda’s and Gwendolen’s experiences can be explained by the nature of their reading material and its relationship to the immediate circumstances of their lives. In the case of Deronda, the Hebrew grammar he reads on the evening after his encounter with Gwendolen and Grandcourt and the unnamed book he reads after his encounter with Mirah on the Thames are no match for the emotional memories that occupy him. As a result,

²⁴ Andrew Elfenbein, “Cognitive Science and the History of Reading,” *PMLA* 121 (2006): 484-502.

²⁵ Eliot displays Gwendolen’s lack of intellectual prowess later in the novel, when Gwendolen decides to consult a “miscellaneous selection” of philosophical books in the hopes that they will bring her closer in understanding to Deronda, whom she is sure has read them too. She finds little time to read these books, however, despite the fact that she is “a clever young lady of education” (508-9).

he is inattentive to the texts. There seems to be very little connection between these works and the experiential knowledge that is most pressing while he reads, so that the texts themselves become somewhat incoherent and Deronda is incapable of taking any useful information from them. On the other hand, Glasher's letter speaks to the fears constantly lurking in Gwendolen's mind, even when the excitement of her marriage and her new prospects render them dim, fears that she has acted weakly and immorally in her decision to marry Grandcourt and that "a punishment might be hanging over her" (326). Additionally, the letter reactivates in Gwendolen's mind the scene at Whispering Stones, when Glasher first confronted her in person and revealed her relationship to Grandcourt (137). The role of powerful and unbidden memories in Gwendolen's act of reading becomes more apparent later on, when she reflects on the force that the letter has had in determining the course of her life. The narrator's claim that "the words [of the letter] had nestled their venomous life within her, and stirred continually the vision of the scene at the Whispering Stones" (395) shows that the letter draws its affective power largely from its ability to activate painful memories. While these memories are just as unbidden and sudden as those Deronda grapples with as he tries to read, they are connected for Gwendolen with the text she is reading, thus fixing her attention rather than drawing it away.

While juxtaposing the experiences that Deronda and Gwendolen have with the written page and insisting again on the central role of memory in the process of reading, Eliot also stresses the issue of her characters' agency. Partly, it is Gwendolen's passivity in the jewel scene that makes her so susceptible to transportation. Eliot presents her as an open vessel for stimulus here, noting her "creeping luxurious languor" (330) in the moments before she opens the package containing the jewels. Trying on the jewels, she thinks, will be a pleasant "diversion" (330). In fact, Eliot highlights Gwendolen's apparent lack of agency even before

this, as she and Grandcourt approach his estate, Ryelands. When Gwendolen's husband kisses her for the first time as they approach the gates, she registers the act of affection as "no more than the passive acceptance of a greeting in the midst of an absorbing show" (329). Indeed, she feels in some ways that her whole life of the past three months has been a show "in which her consciousness was a wondering spectator" (329). The startling impact the letter has on Gwendolen is the result of its ability to call up lurking fears and images from her memory, which remains passive and open to influence.²⁶ In *Deronda*, on the other hand, Eliot presents a memory and an intellect that is far too active – at least during these scenes of reading – to permit close attention or transportation.

Gwendolen's passivity and susceptibility to emotion allow Glasher's letter to become a perfect medium, transferring the writer's mental state to the reader. Such an ideal transfer is in sharp contrast to the "network" of *Deronda*'s book. When Grandcourt meets with Glasher before his wedding, Eliot alludes several times to Glasher's seemingly impaired mental state. For instance, when Glasher refers to the possibility of her attending the wedding, Grandcourt tells her that she may "play the mad woman" if she likes (322) – in a possible reference to *Jane Eyre* – and he calls her "mad" once again shortly afterwards. In begging Grandcourt to allow her to deliver the jewels herself, Glasher bursts into a "hysterical sob" and speaks "almost with a scream" (323), the consequence of which is that Grandcourt has "a baffling sense that he had to deal with something like madness" (323). Because of the manner in which Gwendolen reads it, Glasher's letter passes her madness on to Gwendolen, a form of transmission that Eliot compares to poisoning. When Grandcourt enters the room after

²⁶ Pamela Thurschwell has much to say about Gwendolen's passive nature in her essay on the supernatural elements of the novel. In "George Eliot's Prophecies: Coercive Second Sight and Everyday Thought Reading," (*The Victorian Supernatural*, ed. Brown et al. [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004] 87-105), Thurschwell calls Gwendolen a "'frail' and superstitious 'vessel'" (90) who can "find no active place for herself in her superstitious version of second sight" (100).

Gwendolen has read the letter, she screams “again and again with hysterical violence,” giving Grandcourt the impression that he has walked in on “a fit of madness,” and causing the narrator to announce that “in some form or other the Furies had crossed his threshold” (331). The narrator also reflects that Grandcourt’s diamonds are “poisoned gems, and the poison had entered into this poor young creature” (331), but it seems to be the case that the letter itself is the carrier of poison because it is Gwendolen’s reading of it that occasions her hysterical fit. It is possible to detect in Eliot’s construction of this scene an echo of the warnings about dangerous forms of reading that were so common in the press. As I have shown above in Chapter Three, the act of reading was frequently presented in periodical literature as the consumption of unwholesome food or drink, and even poison, by undiscerning readers, often women or members of the working class. While Eliot’s reference to this model occurs in an entirely different context, with the periodical sources focussing their attack on ephemeral periodicals or sensational fiction, both cases rest on the assumption that the reader is a passive consumer of texts.²⁷

Gwendolen’s close attention to Glasher’s letter does not make her a “good” reader, just as Deronda’s lack of attention to books does not make him a “bad” reader. Rather, the juxtaposition of these scenes allows Eliot to explore the influence of memory and intellectual agency on experiences of reading. She insists on the psychological complexity of reading by depicting the interplay of memory, will, and emotion in both *Romola* and *Daniel Deronda*. Her illustration of the multiple demands on Deronda and Gwendolen gives us a sense of what Eliot herself feels is required for reading to be successful. It is clear that a text must activate a reader’s memory and emotions in order to be engaging, but in the experiences of Baldassare,

²⁷ The transference of madness in this scene from Glasher to Gwendolen seems also to illustrate A.C. Christensen’s assertion in *Nineteenth-Century Narratives of Contagion: Our Feverish Contact* (London & New York: Routledge, 2005) that letters could be presented as transmitters of contagion in Victorian fiction. See his discussion of contagion and letter writing in *Bleak House* (209-29).

Deronda, and Gwendolen, Eliot shows that different levels of mnemonic and emotional activity are met with different levels of success, measuring success by a reader's attention and comprehension, the standards provided frequently by Victorian educators and critics.

Baldassarre reads inwardly from memory, relying on his rediscovered powers of recollection, but as I have shown above, his reading is ultimately unsuccessful because his interpretation relies too heavily on memory and on those emotions with which he is most occupied.

Deronda's memories and emotions are too strong, and the texts he reads fail to interact with this inner life, making attention and comprehension seemingly impossible. It is interesting too that in Deronda's first reading scene, the details from Sismondi's history engage his emotions and memories while ultimately leading to a misreading of his familial situation, leading him to believe that Sir Hugo is his father. This inaccurate interpretation occurs, Tony Jackson argues, because the young Deronda misapplies "a literary text to his own life" (233).

Only in Gwendolen's reading of Glasher's letter do we see an instance of reading that involves a high level of attention and comprehension, painful though it is for Gwendolen. Her mental passivity allows her to be transported and physiologically affected by Glasher's letter, fixing her attention and forcing Glasher's meaning and her emotional state on her. Her reading therefore illustrates some of the statements about the affective quality of literature made by the author of "Reading as a Means of Culture." The article's anonymous author claims that to achieve "understanding" of a piece of writing, a reader must activate all of the faculties addressed by that work. To truly enter into a piece of writing, the reader must "exert the faculty which is predominant in the author" and put him or herself into the spirit of that author: "it is necessary for you to give yourself up wholly into his hands, to put yourself into the same state of mind, when you read, as he was when he wrote" (319). Though Gwendolen's judgement appears weak throughout the novel, and her "reading" of other people seriously

flawed, she manages in her reading of Glasher's letter to achieve a form of close and attentive reading, permitting her to go "through the letter into the spirit" (319). She achieves this level of comprehension by paying close attention to the details of the letter, unlike Deronda and Baldassare in their interactions with books. The transportation she experiences as a result comes naturally because the content of the letter is tied so closely to her present concerns, but her close attention to the text of the letter is fundamental to understanding the epistemic value that Eliot places on such close attention. Returning to Eliot's meditation on reading and memory in *Romola* helps to clarify Eliot's epistemological concerns and their relationship to reading.

"Fixed by the Tool of the Graver": Bardo's Inner Sight

Eliot continues to explore the mnemonic and psychological requirements of reading in *Romola* by establishing important similarities between Baldassarre's mode of reading and that of the novel's other significant father, Bardo de' Bardi. In the joint struggles of these men, Eliot provides a critique of inward reading and the epistemic model it represents. In the chapters that introduce Bardo and Romola to the reader and to Tito, Eliot makes many of the same associations between reading and memory that she does in her description of Baldassarre's inward reading later in the novel. For instance, when Bardo asks Tito about the existence of a written record of the researches he and his father undertook during their dangerous travels throughout the Mediterranean, Tito replies, "The only record left is such as remains in our – in my memory" (62).²⁸ Bardo adds to the now familiar metaphor of the memory as a book when he tells Tito to commit this mental record to paper while simultaneously expressing his confidence in the young man's mnemonic powers: "Doubtless

²⁸ The adjustment that Tito makes here – "our" to "my" – betrays his contention that his father is dead.

you remember much, if you aided in transcription; for when I was your age, words wrought themselves into my mind as if they had been fixed by the tool of the graver” (62).

Bardo’s own participation in the form of inward reading that Eliot illustrates in the character of Baldassarre is evident in an earlier scene, as well, in which he and Romola reflect on the Greek passage they have been reading, a selection from Politian’s *Miscellanea* that describes the blinding of Teiresias. Bardo seems to consider himself gifted, like Teiresias, with a kind of second sight, though he is physically blind, and he believes his extended vision to come from his ability to read the knowledge that has been engraved on his memory through his studies. Eliot draws further attention to the importance of memory here through the quoted passage about Teiresias’ blindness. According to the text from which Romola reads, the seer is happy because “‘he had beheld Minerva unveiled, and thus, though blind, could for evermore carry her image in his soul’” (47). In response, Bardo asks, “what is that grosser, narrower light by which men behold merely the petty scene around them, compared with that far-stretching, lasting light which spreads over centuries of thought, and over the life of nations, and makes clear to us the minds of the immortals who have reaped the great harvest and left us to glean in their furrows” (49). Through a combination of metaphors, Bardo insists that the historical knowledge that scholars (like himself) possess is more profound than the quotidian knowledge provided by a simple observation of the surrounding world, no matter how detailed. Literacy and memory are truly illuminating forces in Bardo’s view.

As with Baldassarre’s inward reading in the absence of external light, Bardo tends to feel that his physical blindness is no real detriment to his knowledge because he is able to read with an inner vision the texts he has stored up in his memory. Romola introduces this notion when she humours her father after his speech on the value of scholarship. Bardo is happier than Petrarch in some ways, Romola points out, because Petrarch’s inability to read Greek

made Homer unintelligible to him: “so far, he had the inward blindness that you feel is worse than your outward blindness” (49). Building on her father’s earlier observations, Romola’s contention is that Bardo’s inner vision makes classical scholarship legible to him although he is now physically unable to read; the inability to see is a better fate for him than the inability to read and understand Greek would be. Here, Eliot also works with the trope of illumination that appears throughout the novel in discussions of prophecy, as well as in the scenes that focus on Baldassarre’s restored literacy. Although Bardo is blind, he reads the pages of Homer just as he sees the books and marble fragments that fill his study, “by the light of those far-off younger days which still shone in his memory” (45).²⁹ Baldassarre’s own attempts to read before the attack on Tito are similarly described as attempts at “inward seeing” (293), in which he hopes an “inward light” will arise on the black characters of his Pausanias. If reading can occur in the memory, engagement with texts in the real world becomes less urgent, and there is no need for Bardo to pay attention to the particularities of any external text if he is content (as he seems to be) with the interpretive knowledge with which he has furnished his mind.

Eliot insists on the limitations of Bardo’s views by drawing our attention to his isolation, which is partly a product of his mnemonic reading method. Even before he lost his sight, Bardo lived only in books; now that he is no longer able to see, he lives solely in the book of his memory, reading and rereading well-established judgements by the “inner light” he feels himself to possess. His comments to Romola about the importance of books confirm his life-long isolation: “For me Romola, even when I could see, it was with the great dead that I lived; ... I have returned from the converse of the streets as from a forgotten dream, and

²⁹ Eliot makes another reference to Bardo’s ability to see inwardly shortly afterwards, when the narrator explains how Bardo, passing his hand over Tito’s face, tries to see the young man with his “inward vision” (70).

have sat down among my books" (49).³⁰ To the young Bardo, living men and women seemed to be "mere spectres ... dispossessed of true feeling and intelligence" (49). Now that he is cut off by his physical blindness even from those books he made his companions, his relationship to them and their contents can be summed up by a question he poses to Romola regarding the composition of his library. Requesting that Romola find his own transcription of the Greek poet Nonnus, Bardo asks if the manuscript is in the right place on the shelf, leading the narrator to remark that Bardo "was perpetually seeking the assurance that the outward fact continued to correspond with the image which lived to the minutest detail in his mind" (47). In his mnemonic reading, we see Bardo engaged in a similar activity, insisting on the power of his memory and inner sight while his only real contact can be with the images and texts written in his memory. He is no longer able to add new knowledge to his stock because he has lost the ability to physically read. Thus, as Bardo himself recognizes in a moment of clarity brought on by his sense of being forsaken by Romola's brother (who turned away from his father and towards Savonarola and the church), his blindness "acts like a dam, sending the streams of thought backward along the already-travelled channels and hindering the course onward" (50). Because he reads only the words engraved on his memory through his past study, Bardo's thinking has become circular.

As apt as this realization is, however, it has no permanent effect on Bardo's behaviour, and he continues to seek the honour of being recognized for his scholarly work. Furthermore, his knowledge is incomplete because it is merely an impressive accumulation of information, lacking interpretive depth. Evidence of what Eliot herself thought was required of a valid

³⁰ For Christopher Greenwood, Bardo's lifelong isolation has actually led to his blindness. As he explains in his essay "'An Imperceptible Start: The Sight of Humanity in *Romola*" (*From Author to Text: Re-Reading George Eliot's Romola*, eds. Caroline Levine and Mark W. Turner [Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998] 165-80), "Bardo is a failed visionary noticing not what is about him, nor producing anything of value, only allowing his selfish concerns to lead him into blindness" (172).

interpretive method can be found in her essay, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" (1856), where she writes, "admitting that genius which has familiarized itself with all the relics of an ancient period can sometimes, by the force of its sympathetic division restore the missing notes in the 'music of humanity' and reconstruct the fragments into a whole which will really bring the remote past nearer to us and interpret it to our duller apprehension - this form of imaginative power must always be among the very rarest, because it demands as much accurate and minute knowledge as creative vigour" (253).³¹ For Eliot, accurate interpretation and real knowledge require both close attention to detail and an imaginative sympathy. Even if we allow that the knowledge that Bardo has acquired is "accurate and minute," his isolation shows that he lacks what Eliot saw as the essential human quality of sympathy with the world around him.

Eliot shows us this circuitous mental behaviour in both Bardo and Baldassarre and insists that it contributes to their individual downfalls. The repetitive patterns of thought along "already-travelled channels" produced by Bardo's inward sight echo Baldassarre's obsessive inner reading, in which the amnesiac reads his own feelings of revenge into Pausanias though he is unable to read at all when a new text is placed before him. Similarly, although Bardo considers himself to be Teiresias-like, gifted with a scholarly second sight in the absence of physical vision, Eliot shows his true blindness throughout the novel. He derides the "capriciousness" of his daughter's memory, "which grasps certain objects with tenacity, and lets fall all those minutiae whereon depends accuracy, the very soul of scholarship" (62), but his own reliance on his ability to read the book of his own memory does nothing to prevent his failure as the narrative progresses.

³¹ [George Eliot], "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," *Westminster Review* 66 (1856): 243-54.

In the trajectory of Bardo's character development, the equivalent to Baldassarre's inability to pass the Rucellai Garden's test is the sale and dismantling of Bardo's library. That the destruction of what he hoped would be a lasting tribute to his scholarship should come at the hands of the very man he had hoped would help him achieve his goals emphasizes Bardo's inability to properly judge the world around him and the limitations of his inner sight. As Nicholas Dames points out, Bardo's "blindness and social irrelevance marks his capacious textual memory as ultimately useless" (209). The narrator describes the extensive library that is so important to him, "fruit of half a century's toil and frugality" (Eliot 233), as a "precious relic" (233), suggesting that even during Bardo's lifetime, the knowledge he stores up is part of the past. Although the old man's mnemonic reading does not *cause* his failure in the same way that Baldassarre's does, Eliot's attribution of this reading method to an irrelevant antiquarian emphasizes her dismissal of inward reading as a viable model of literacy. While Eliot shows the limits of mnemonic reading as an actual reading practice in her characterization of Baldassarre, she uses Bardo's professed ability to read mnemonically as symbol of his isolation from the important particularities of the world that surrounds him.

Dames attributes the failures of these prominent scholars to Eliot's desire to explore the value of personal nostalgia in *Romola* (209). He claims that the novel shows the elimination of the useless past – embodied in the relics and manuscripts of Bardo's library and in the traces of classical scholarship in the memory of Baldassarre – in favour of a vivid and nostalgic past that is useful for the present and the future. Though the construction of the novel required so much antiquarian research on Eliot's part, Dames believes the narrative itself dramatizes the destruction of accumulated historical detail that cannot be usefully activated in the present. As valuable as this reading is in the context of Victorian historiography, I think that Dames' view on Bardo and Baldassarre fails to take into account

the impact of their shared mnemonic reading method on their personal failures, thus ignoring the central thematic place that literacy holds in *Romola*. I believe that the similarities between these fathers and the consistency with which Eliot describes their relationships to memory and literacy is evidence that she sought to use these characters to critique the model of reading they adhere to, and through this critique to expose the limitations of a more general way of interacting with the external world that this reading model represents.

The Epistemic Limitations of Inward Reading in *Romola*

Baldassarre's mnemonic inward reading is tortuous and ineffective because it leaves him unable to adjust to new textual details, causing him to return obsessively to well-known works and strongly felt emotions. Thus Eliot shows Baldassarre's actual illiteracy when he is asked to read something not bound up with those ever-present emotions. In the character of Bardo, Eliot's criticisms of mnemonic reading are more abstract. Bardo's inner vision relies on prejudgments of the outside world and on assurances that external reality corresponds to mental images. As I have shown above in my discussion of systematic reading in educational literature and the press, however, close readings of actual texts were thought to require an attention to detail and an ability to adjust to emendations and other textual changes. In the case of Bardo, this would mean finding the ability to take the fine and changing details of the world into account and learn from them, something that his physical blindness and stubborn detachment from the world outside his study keep him from doing. His mental acquisitions appear mere antiquarian details, as lifeless as the dusty, broken fragments that furnish his study. For Eliot, however, knowledge needs to contribute to a program for living in the world. As George Levine explains, "the work of knowing [for Eliot] was an enterprise of both epistemological and moral importance: the past mattered then as it matters now, not as a

Dryasdust collection of dead things, but as a continuity helping to determine the way we live now” (56).³² If we place the characterization of these men in the context of contemporary statements on systematic reading, we might say that both Baldassarre and Bardo are incapable of the attention to detail called for in the essays by John Ruskin and Frederic Harrison I examined in the previous chapter. Bardo’s mental store of antiquarian detail does not prevent him from being irrelevant. His blindness impedes his ability to “look intensely at words” in the manner Ruskin prescribes in “Of King’s Treasuries,” and the inner light he claims to cast upon the words engraved in his memory does not compensate for this impediment.

While Eliot recognizes the essential role of individual memory in the process of reading, she uses the practice of mnemonic inward reading in *Romola* to represent a way of seeing the world and acquiring knowledge that she believes to be severely limited. In this way, her representation of mnemonic reading is made to serve an epistemological end, and the failures of Baldassarre and Bardo in the course of the narrative signal her disapproval of the epistemic formula that underlies the way they read. As Tony Jackson points out, Eliot uses the motif of “reading-as-knowing” throughout her novels, and she directly associates her characters’ literary experience and interpretive abilities with their ability to “read” other people (232). In *Romola*, as in *Daniel Deronda*, the ability to really know a person depends on the willingness to attend to the minute details of that person’s character, both internal and external. In *Daniel Deronda*, Jackson argues, Eliot shows that without the willingness to study other people closely, one will tend to read them as projections of oneself. On the other hand, what Eliot calls Deronda’s “many-sided sympathy” (Eliot 335), a product of his “early-awakened sensibility and reflectiveness” (335), allows him to “read others as others” (Jackson 235). In *Romola*, such sympathetic knowledge of others is most pronounced in the character

³² George Levine, “*Daniel Deronda*: A New Epistemology,” *Knowing the Past: Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. Suzy Anger (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001) 52-77.

of Romola herself. Eliot identifies her heroine's attempts to "read" the character and behaviour of others in a scene that occurs shortly after Bardo's death. Troubled by Tito's indifference towards her and towards the preparation of her father's library, with which she had hoped he would help her, Romola looks at her husband with anxiety, "as if she wanted to *read an excuse for him* in the signs of bodily fatigue" (Eliot 236).³³ Attending to the details of his appearance and character, Romola tries to sympathize with Tito even though she is hurt, but in this instance she is still allowing her own feelings to obscure her reading. She reads her own concerns into Tito's behaviour instead of drawing conclusions solely from the details she is presented with.

Romola's capacity to identify imaginatively with others is perhaps best demonstrated in the scene that depicts Savonarola's execution. Though Romola has ceased to believe in Savonarola's ability to lead, ceased to believe that he is capable of acting without the ugly egoism and self-interest that she sees everywhere else in Florentine public life, she still achieves an imaginative sympathetic connection with him as he awaits his execution. She has been expecting him to say something in his last moments: "But in the same moment expectation died, and she only saw what he was seeing – torches waving to kindle the fuel beneath his dead body, faces glaring with a yet worse light: she only heard what *he* was hearing – gross jests, taunts, and curses" (544). Despite her anger at Savonarola's refusal to seek clemency for her uncle when he himself faced execution, Romola is still able to sympathize with him in the moments preceding his death by putting herself *in his place*, seeing what he sees and hearing what he hears. It is important that she achieves this imaginative sympathy through her perception of distinct details of the scene before her, rather than any generalized or preconceived notions in her own mind and memory. By attending to

³³ Emphasis mine.

these sensible details, Romola is able to put herself into Savonarola's place and know what he is experiencing.

Her powers of observation and her compulsion to act in an ethical manner are similarly combined in "Romola's Waking," when she is roused, in the little boat she used to escape Florence, in a riverside village that has been ravaged by a plague. Shaken from a sense of oblivion – "a bliss which is without memory and without desire" (518) – by the sound of a child's cry, Romola investigates and finds the child alone in a hovel surrounded by the bodies of her plague-stricken family. In her examination of the bodies, she is quick to conjecture, based on her perception of "the strongly marked type of race in their features and their peculiar garb" (520), that the family are Spanish or Portuguese Jews. She speculates that the Jews had "perhaps been put ashore and abandoned there by rapacious sailors, to whom their property remained as a prey. Such things were happening continuously to Jews compelled to abandon their homes by the Inquisition: the cruelty of greed thrust them from the sea, and the cruelty of superstition thrust them back to it" (520). In this way, Eliot shows that Romola's observational powers lead her to a sense of sympathy with the deceased that compels her to act on their behalf.

As important as memory is to this historical novel, Eliot suggests elsewhere in *Romola* that to make judgements about the world by relying too heavily on memory rather than direct observation produces inaccuracy. She first indicates the limitations of this method of acquiring knowledge and making judgements in her "Proem," which depicts the "Shade" or "Spirit" of a Florentine citizen who lived during the era of the novel's narrative overlooking Florence from the hill of San Miniato in the mid-nineteenth century. The Spirit's face is one "charged with memories of a keen and various life passed below there on the banks of the gleaming river" (4). Because the "sense of familiarity is so much stronger than the perception of change" for

the Spirit as he looks down on the scene, he considers descending into Florence to take up his busy life once again. With its foregrounding of memory and its representation of an aerial view of the city, the proem anticipates Baldassarre's reawakening from illiteracy and amnesia in Chapter XXXVIII. Like Baldassarre, the Spirit peers down on the urban prospect below him and feels that he "knows" it because of the power of his memory. At the same time, the Spirit's survey of the city resembles Bardo's relationship with his library because he seeks assurances in the landscape that the "outward fact" of Florence corresponds to the image he has stored in his memory. The changes he sees, which he cannot account for by scanning his memory, raise difficult questions in his mind, causing the narrator to reflect, "it is easier and pleasanter to recognize the old than to account for the new" (5). Memory can be a trap, the narrator suggests in this statement, because we are drawn by the pleasure we take in it away from new details that require observation.

Eliot introduces the ultimate limitations of knowing and judging through memory towards the end of the Proem, at which point the Spirit considers, "There is knowledge of these things to be had in the streets below. ... The changes have not been so great in those uncounted years" (9). As the narrator points out, however, the image that lives in the Spirit's memory, though rich and strongly felt, is inaccurate and insufficient to base judgements on. In her warning to the Spirit, she implores him: "Go not down, good Spirit! for the changes are great, and the speech of Florentines would sound as a riddle in your ears" (9). Though the Spirit's panoramic vision and well-stocked memory produce powerful images of Florence, the judgements he makes based on these images will be flawed. The Florence that exists in his memory will supply him with some truths about the now older city into which he hopes to descend, but they are only "eternal" truths that have little to do with the realities of the city itself: "the little children are still the symbol of the eternal marriage between love and duty:

and men still yearn for the reign of peace and righteousness – still own *that* life to be the highest, which is a conscious voluntary sacrifice” (9-10).

The judgements made by those who embody the epistemic mode represented by inward mnemonic reading are equally limited. In *Romola*, mnemonic reading comes to stand for an inability or unwillingness to “account for the new” and an unwillingness or inability to furnish the mind with close observational detail. As Bardo and Baldassarre strive to make the world around them match up with the image of it they hold in their minds, they strive to *read into* external reality the image that they have of it stored up in their memories. Both men seem to do so unwillingly. Baldassarre reads in Pausanias and hears in Savonarola’s sermon only his desire for personal vengeance against Tito, and Bardo is compelled to retrace the already travelled paths of his thinking because his physical blindness limits his observational abilities. Though Eliot’s narrative does not, because of their physical frailties, hold these scholars entirely responsible for their behaviour, their collective blindness nonetheless represents an unwillingness or inability to observe the fine detail of the world around them. Trusting too willingly in their own memories and the knowledge stowed away there, Baldassarre and Bardo represent an egoistic mode of seeing the world that denies the importance of close observation to detail. Divorced from such detail, these men see the world about them from a distance just as the Spirit of the Proem sees Florence from the hill of San Miniato. They are trapped inside themselves because of their individual infirmities and unable to read the world around them in detail.

The amount of research Eliot undertook for the writing of *Romola*, including the trips to Florence she took in order to experience the city for herself, gives us some indication of the importance she placed on the accumulation of detail. Statements she makes in a number of her essays also emphasize the attitudes she expresses in *Romola* and in the process of research she

went through in constructing it. For instance, in “The Natural History of German Life,” Eliot’s 1856 review of the first two volumes of Wilhelm Heinrich von Riehl’s *The Natural History of the People as the Foundation of a German Sociopolitical System*, she draws her reader’s attention to the value of direct observation – here of the working classes – in both political history and art. In the essay’s introduction, Eliot devalues the work of English painters who seek to represent the masses because they frequently “treat their subjects under the influence of traditions and prepossessions rather than of direct observation” (143).³⁴ The images of common life that these artists present in their works are “prejudices ... from the artistic mind, which looks for its subjects into literature instead of life” (143). Eliot’s complaint here is with an idealization or generalization about the realities of the external world based not on direct observation, but on preconceptions, and this is the way of seeing the world represented by the faulty reading methods of *Romola*’s aging scholars.

The idealizations and preconceptions that inform the paintings Eliot scorns in this passage are the product of distance, and distance is maintained as long as close, direct observation is eschewed. Therefore, Eliot observes that while observation of a group of haymakers “at a distance” (143) will confirm all the observer’s strongly held assumptions (derived from artistic representations) about the jocularity of the scene and happiness of the workers, a nearer approach will force details upon the observer that are as far as possible from his “conception of idyllic merriment” (144). She praises Riehl throughout the review for his close observation of the peasant life of Germany, derived from investigation that he himself took throughout the country: “his present views were evolved entirely from his own gradually amassed observations” (163). Riehl began his journey throughout Germany for the sake of obtaining information about the people “which he was unable to find in his books” (163).

³⁴ George Eliot, “The Natural History of German Life,” *The Essays of ‘George Eliot,’* ed. Nathan Sheppard (New York: Funk and Wagnall, 1883) 141-77.

Similarly, Baldassarre had complained before he began his journey, Tito tells Bardo, “that scholars themselves hardly imagine [ancient cities] to have any existence out of books” (63).

The kind of distance Eliot discusses in her haymaking example, the same form of distance Riehl avoids by relying on direct observation, produces a general image of the external world and an abstract notion of peasant life. In *Romola*, Eliot shows her reader a general image in the Spirit’s general view of Florence as he stands remembering it on San Miniato and shows it to be inaccurate. Yet, it would be incorrect to assume that Eliot was opposed to all generalizations and abstractions; the process of generalization is what Riehl undertook to compose his history of the German peasantry and to observe, in Eliot’s words, that “the generic character of the German peasant is everywhere the same” (163). The key though is that this generalization is based on direct observation of particulars and a process of seeing the world in its detail, instead of as an extension of an imagined or remembered ideal. Any act of generalization needs to be accompanied by a close attention to particulars because, according to Eliot, it is the particular details of any situation or any other person that contribute most directly to the creation of sympathy and to the acquisition of the kind of emotional knowledge that Eliot held as crucial to an ethical life.

Eliot voices her belief in the emotional power of particularities throughout her writing, but her views come out with special strength in “Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young” (1857), a review of Edward Young’s poetry she published in *The Westminster Review*.³⁵ Eliot criticizes Young’s apparent “love of abstractions” and “telescopic view of human things” (229), two literary tendencies that she claims deny power even to the poetry of

³⁵ My citations come from “Worldliness and Other Worldliness: The Poet Young,” *The Essays of George Eliot*, Ed. Nathan Sheppard (New York: Funk and Wagnall, 1883) 205-56. The essay was originally published in *The Westminster Review* 67 (1857): 1-42.

his best-known work, *Night Thoughts* (1742-6).³⁶ Emotion, Eliot argues, “links itself with particulars, and only in a faint and secondary manner with abstractions. ... The most untheoretic persons are aware of this relation between true emotion and particular facts, as opposed to general terms, and implicitly recognize it in the repulsion they feel toward any one who professes strong feelings about abstractions” (243). When abstractions or general terms do manage to excite strong emotion, it is because in men of “active intellect and imagination ... the abstract term rapidly and vividly calls up the particulars it represents, these particulars being the true source of the emotion” (243). If “such men ... wished to express their feeling,” Eliot maintains, they “would be infallibly prompted to the presentation of details” (243). An attention to particular details creates the possibility for sympathy, and Eliot saw sympathy as an essential component of accurate moral knowledge of the world. As she explains in a letter that is frequently quoted, “My own experience and development deepen everyday my conviction that our moral progress may be measured by the degree in which we sympathize with individual suffering and individual joy.”³⁷ This formulation explains her commitment to historical detail in *Romola* and the exertions she put herself through to achieve it, even if the accumulation of historical facts and references in the novel are capable of going against her wishes by creating a distance between the reader and the narrative. Her view of the link between detail and sympathy also explains the concerns she expresses regarding her characters’ mnemonic inward reading within the novel. If close attention to the particular details of the world around us allows us to sympathize with the individuals we live with, and if morality is measured by the ability to achieve this sympathy, then the kind of self-satisfied detachment Baldassarre and Bardo exhibit in their reading practices hinders their moral

³⁶ The full title of the work commonly referred to as *Night Thoughts* is *The Complaint, or, Night-Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality*.

³⁷ George Eliot, “To Charles Bray,” 15 November 1857, *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1954-5) 402-4.

development. However, Eliot presents a very different view of the potential of inward reading in *Daniel Deronda*, where she suggests that a form of inward reading can actually be constructive of a sense of moral duty.

“It is a way of printing”: Reading the Inner Language of a Nation in *Daniel Deronda*

The figure of individual memory that Eliot sets up in *Romola*’s early scenes between Bardo and Tito – of memory as surface waiting to be inscribed by learning or experience – returns in the Jewish narrative of *Daniel Deronda*. Mordechai Cohen, Mirah’s quasi-mystical and prophetic brother, is the character most frequently associated with this view of memory. He is dying slowly from tuberculosis, and his chief concern is that all the philosophical and spiritual study he has undertaken, study that he hopes will help to re-establish the Jews as a more coherent national and intellectual force, will be lost. As a result of these fears, all his “passionate desire had concentrated itself in the yearning for some young ear into which he could pour his mind as a testament” (440). Mordechai’s goal is to find a Jew who is not only “intellectually cultured” and “morally fervid” (444), but who possesses the health and social refinement that he himself lacks. In the absence of this ideal (which he later realizes in *Deronda*), Mordechai has begun to teach young Jacob Cohen, the son of the family in whose house he lives. After giving Jacob brief lessons in “English reading or numeration” (444), Mordechai recites Hebrew poems or other Hebrew passages for him, asking Jacob to repeat them himself. In Mordechai’s view, this process of memorization is a form of inscription: “‘The boy will get them engraved within him,’ thought Mordechai; ‘it is a way of printing’” (444). Though Jacob tends to play and act through these lessons, Mordechai continues his “strange printing” (444) with patience, saying to himself, “My words may rule him some day. Their meaning may flash out on him. It is so with a nation – after many days” (444).

Mordechai's hope seems to be that something innate within Jacob will help to foster the learning he is trying to transmit to him, despite his obvious deficiencies as a pupil now.³⁸ The fact that Jacob is part of "a nation," Mordechai believes, provides some assurance that although he is currently ignorant as to the meaning of his teacher's inner writing, it will one day take hold of him and determine his future as its meaning becomes clear.

In Mordechai's labours, Eliot appears to be imagining a form of figurative inward writing (accompanied by inward reading on Jacob's part) that bears similarities to the one she presented in the characters of Baldassarre and Bardo in *Romola*, both of whom Mordechai resembles in his scholarly seclusion and in his obvious infirmities. He is most reminiscent of Bardo in his isolation from the world, and in his explanation of his labours to Deronda, Eliot echoes Bardo's words to Romola regarding his intellectual life. Asked if he has written only in Hebrew, for instance, Mordechai replies, "Yes – yes ... in my youth I wandered toward that solitude, not feeling that it was a solitude. I had the ranks of the great dead around me: the martyrs gathered and I listened. But soon I found that the living were deaf to me" (465). Both Mordechai and Bardo claim to live with "the great dead," and while Bardo sees the living as ghosts and shadows, Mordechai finds that the living are deaf to him. Both are types of the isolated scholar, and both insist that human memory can be treated like a book. The two men differ, however, because where Bardo claims to have inscribed his own memory with knowledge through his reading, Mordechai directs his efforts to the memory of others.

In one of his speeches before his friends at the *Hand and Banner*, where he and a group of working-class intellectuals meet weekly to discuss philosophy and politics, Mordechai enlarges his association of literacy with memory while discussing his hopes of reigniting the Jewish national consciousness: "The heritage of Israel is beating in the pulses of

³⁸ For instance, Jacob uses his Hebrew chiefly to frighten children and animals, and he practises tricks he has learned from a mountebank while Mordechai recites poetry (445-6).

millions; it lives in their veins as a power without understanding, like the morning exultation of herds; it is the inborn half of memory, moving as in a dream among writing on the walls, which it sees dimly but cannot divide into speech" (497). Again, Mordechai insists on the presence of innate cultural/racial knowledge, and he describes it as a language written into the collective memory of the Jews despite their present inability to read it. The passage helps to clarify Mordechai's attitude towards his improbable student Jacob, though he extends his claims here beyond the individual to a larger group. He insists that the inner writing within the memories of all Jews can be made legible by the "torch of visible community" (497). If someone is able to reunite the Jewish Diaspora and give them an image of themselves as a coherent community, thereby letting "the reason of Israel disclose itself in a great outward deed" (497), Mordechai feels that the meaning of that interior "writing on the walls" will become evident. It will "flash out" in the manner that he hopes the Hebrew poetry he prints into Jacob will.

Eliot adds to the definition of inherited knowledge she introduces in these passages in a statement Deronda makes to Mordechai after the former learns of his true parentage. Reflecting on Mordechai's vision that Deronda will provide some form of leadership for his race, Deronda explains that Mordechai has given shape to a desire that he had always felt, even when he was unaware of his origins. He describes this desire as

an inherited yearning – the effect of brooding, passionate thoughts in many ancestors – thoughts that seem to have been intensely present in my grandfather. Suppose the stolen offspring of some mountain tribe brought up in a city of the plain, or one with an inherited genius for painting, and born blind – the ancestral life would lie within them as a dim longing for unknown objects and sensations, and the spell-bound habit of their inherited frames would be like the cunningly-wrought musical instrument,

never played on, but quivering throughout in uneasy mysterious moanings of its intricate structure that, under the right touch gives music. (697-8)

Deronda's vision of his inherited interest in binding the Jews together as a "visible community," a role he refers to as a "social captainship" (698), bears obvious similarities to Mordechai's statements about inherited cultural knowledge. Both men speak of a "power without understanding," of innate but currently inaccessible knowledge as a form of potential energy. Where Mordechai sees writing that remains unread, Deronda sees a musical instrument that remains untouched by the hand of the musician; where Mordechai sees some great outward deed illuminating the barely visible writing in the collective memory of Jews everywhere, Daniel sees (on an individual level) Mordechai's ideas and the recent disclosure made by his estranged mother as the touch that gives music to the "cunningly-wrought instrument" that represents his inherited memory and yearnings. In her book on memory in Eliot's work, Hao Li rightly defines the Jewish cultural knowledge that Mordechai and Deronda strive to conceptualize in these passages as a form of "communal memory," or "a framework of knowledge and presupposition consciously or unconsciously inherited or shared" (3).³⁹

In the metaphors Mordechai and Deronda provide, Eliot suggests a complex relationship between memory, knowledge, and heredity, while at the same time configuring this relationship in terms of literacy. As Michael Davis suggests, the view of human evolution and memory that Eliot proposes in these passages owes something to Victorian evolutionary psychology and to the competing theories of Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin.⁴⁰ The passages above in which Deronda tries to posit, through metaphor, the role of inherited

³⁹ Hao Li, *Memory and History in George Eliot* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000).

⁴⁰ Michael Davis, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Psychology: Exploring the Unmapped Country* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

memory in the formation of personal identity, suggest, in Davis's words, that "it is the past experiences of the individual, which have been assimilated and organized in the brain, along with the experiences of the species, in the shape of instincts, which provide the means of reacting to new experiences" (73).⁴¹ This model of inherited knowledge helps to explain Deronda's reactions to the service he attends at the Genoese synagogue. The details of the service and his reading of the Hebrew prayer book are all "blent for him as one expression of a binding history, tragic and yet glorious" (339). Deronda wonders at the intensity of his reaction to the scene: "it seemed beyond the occasion – what one might imagine to be a divine influx in the darkness, before there was any vision to interpret" (339). Deronda's seemingly instinctual reaction to these experiences, readers later learn, is the result of inherited memory. As she has done frequently throughout *Romola* and *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot once more uses the trope of illumination to represent her character's inner experience. Bardo considers himself to see the world by the "far-stretching, lasting" light of study; Baldassare searches for an "inward light" to make the black marks on the pages of his book legible, and he hails the restoration of his memory as the return of "the light"; Mordechai speaks of the re-establishment of the Jewish community as providing illumination to the inner writing that represents the inborn heritage of Israel; and here, Deronda thinks of his reaction to the religious service as a flash or inflow of light, anticipating some divine vision.

The treatment of memory in these passages from *Daniel Deronda* demonstrates a consistency in Eliot's handling of the concepts of knowledge and memory over time, as they

⁴¹ According to Davis, the "harmony between individual experience and development and the ongoing process of evolution, which this [passage] seems to suggest, closely parallels the Lamarckian model of evolution adopted by Spencer, which posits the direct transmission of learned adaptations from one generation to the next" (65). This argument for the consistency of racial identity helps to explain Deronda's character development over the course of the narrative. Davis also notes, however, that Eliot also takes into account the element of chance in the formation of personal identity, and that her view on heredity has much more in common with that of Darwin because Eliot insists that "heredity can only be understood in the context of the wider lived experience of the individual, which develops and shapes inherited characteristics in unpredictable ways" (65).

mirror some of the author's statements on the subjects in *Romola*, published over a decade earlier. In her characterization of Deronda, however, Eliot offers hope that the form of inward reading Mordechai imagines can be more successful than the examples of flawed inward reading she presents in her treatment of Bardo and Baldassarre. Of course, in Mordechai's attempts to "print" Hebrew verse into young Jacob, Eliot seems at first to depict another failure. Jacob is able to recite the verse because he has essentially learned it by rote, in much the same manner as working-class children were taught to read their Bibles in the earliest Victorian elementary schools. As he reads the verses from memory, he also strips them of their original meaning, and the words become playthings for him. Technically, Mordechai's inward printing has worked, but it has hardly been a success. At the same time however, Eliot leaves her readers with a sense of hope regarding Mordechai's instruction because she puts off the final effect of this instruction on to the future, beyond the confines of the narrative.⁴² Mordechai's hope that his words may "rule" Jacob some day are tied to his theory of Judaism as the "inborn half of memory," and Deronda's personal development over the course of the narrative seems to give weight to his theory.

Daniel's response to the Hebrew sermon and the desire he has felt throughout his life to be a central part of some mass movement suggest that Mordechai's vision of inward writing within the Jews is apt. If the meaning of this metaphorical inner writing has begun to be illuminated for Deronda, who has been raised outside of his ancestral community, then it may also be illuminated for a boy like Jacob Cohen, as unlikely as that now seems. The difference between the treatment of this idea in *Romola* and *Daniel Deronda* is that Eliot presupposes a more appropriate medium for mnemonic writing in her later novel than she does in the characters of Bardo and Baldassare. She shows that the framework of inherited communal

⁴² Readers learn through a letter from Hans Meyrick to Deronda that Mordechai continues to teach Jacob even after the disappointment he suffers as a result of the boy's mountebank tricks (599).

memory, built up over time through an evolutionary process, is more receptive to inscription than the individual memory that Bardo and Baldassarre claim to have written upon in *Romola*. The reliance of these men on their memories tends to isolate them from the world around them, trapping them within their own minds. On the other hand, Eliot suggests that the inherited memories of the Jews have the potential to bring them together as a group. Considering Eliot's use of reading and writing as metaphors for memory in the novel, it is fitting that Deronda's inheritance from his grandfather, Daniel Charisi, is a chest that contains, in addition to Charisi's own writings, "preserved manuscripts [and] family records stretching far back" (696). As he comes into possession of these scripts, Deronda feels himself to be "touching the electric chain of his own ancestry" (700). In this way, Eliot once more associates memory and history with the tools of literacy.

Eliot insists throughout the final volume of the novel on the importance of Deronda's inheritance of this chest, but I would like to suggest that, because of the model of inward writing she establishes in *Daniel Deronda*, the chest of scripts is less important than it may at first seem. Li maintains in her reading of memory in the novel that Deronda's "identity is finally achieved, both in terms of symbolical meaning and of narrative structure, only through his accepting from Kalonymos the script left to him by his grandfather" (165). Certainly, the chest is important because (as I have already suggested) it brings Deronda even closer to Mordechai, establishing him within a family tradition of Jewish intellectual culture and giving the two men another collection of writing, besides Mordechai's own productions, to work on. As Deronda explains, the writings give him and Mordechai "a sort of communion" with Deronda's ancestors, a strain of men who have "ardently maintained the fellowship of our race" (696). In terms of plot development, as well, there are some similarities between this archive and the archive with which Bardo and Tito work in the early chapters of *Romola*. In

bringing Deronda into frequent contact with Mordechai, the archive also brings him closer to Mirah, in much the same way that Tito and Romola became more intimate because of Tito's scholarly relationship with Bardo.

Yet, because of Eliot's insistence throughout the novel that Deronda's personal identity and inborn potential for the vocation he is now embarking on is *written into him*, the actual writing in the inherited chest seems to be entirely symbolic, and those physical texts are made redundant in Deronda's development. The figurative inner writing takes precedence over the actual external writing. In fact, Eliot alludes to the chiefly symbolic nature of this inherited writing herself in the chapter that describes Deronda's return to Sir Hugo's estate after his stay in Mainz and Genoa, where he meets with his grandfather's friend. Although Deronda left for the continent with a deep sense of uncertainty about his future, the narrator explains, "he came back with something like a *discovered charter* warranting the inherited right that his ambition had begun to yearn for" (692).⁴³ By confirming his Jewish identity, the chest he receives from Kalonymos gives him what he acknowledges here as an official right to pursue his desire for the "duty" of "social captainship," and for Mirah. However, this right is already inscribed into his character, just as his suitability for the role he proposes to take on is written into his appearance. Once Eliot has confirmed Deronda's racial background, her references to inward reading in Mordechai's statements about the "inborn half" of Jewish memory encourage us to read earlier passages that describe Deronda's interests and obsessions as the result of this figurative mnemonic inscription.

For instance, we can read Deronda's resistance to the rigid but limited academic demands of Cambridge as signs that the future that Mordechai has planned for him is part of an inherited yearning. Deronda finds his "inward bent towards comprehension and

⁴³ Emphasis mine.

thoroughness diverging more and more from the track marked out by the standards of examination” at Eton and Cambridge (164). The “germs” of his “inclination” towards studying abroad, readers are told, “had already been stirring in his boyish love of universal history, which made him want to be at home in foreign countries, and follow in imagination the travelling students of the middle ages” (164). We learn too, well before Deronda’s racial background is established, that he is waiting for some sign to give his life a definite direction, and in imagining this sign he uses language very similar to Mordechai’s: “in the last few years of confirmed manhood [Deronda] had become so keenly aware of [his inaction] that what he longed for was either some external event, or some *inward light*, that would urge him into a definite plan of action, and compress his wandering energy” (336).⁴⁴ These vocational drives fit neatly with the plan that Mordechai has set out for Deronda, and the conclusion of the novel sees him heading off for “the East” (747) to prepare for his project to restore a “political existence” and a “national centre” for the Jews.

Thus, while Deronda’s inheritance of his grandfather’s papers confirms a hereditary suitability for the role he proposes to take on, Eliot shows in this passage and the one that describes his response to the Genoese service that the desires and tendencies he will draw on are already present in him, as part of a communal memory. Mordechai also plays a central role in establishing Deronda’s suitability for the task he takes on. His visions of Deronda as the “imagined ideal” he has been searching for implies that Deronda and Mordechai are fated to meet, thereby suggesting that the elements of Deronda’s identity that make him the ideal are already well established. When Mordechai asks Deronda (Chapter XXXIII), when the men first meet in the East End bookshop, if he is Jewish (357), it is because he sees in him “a face and frame which seemed to him to realize the long-conceived type” (447). It seems at times,

⁴⁴ Emphasis mine.

in fact, that Mordechai is practising on Deronda the figurative inward printing he has begun on young Jacob Cohen. When, while standing on Blackfriars Bridge, he sees Deronda coming down the river, he feels that his visions have been confirmed, and he begins to tell Deronda that he believes that that evening's sunset has brought him his "new life," a "new self ... who will live when this breath is all breathed out" (461). Spoken to in this way, Deronda "felt himself strangely wrought upon" by Mordechai (461). Now, "wrought upon" and "written upon" have different meanings, but Eliot has already used the term "wrought" elsewhere to signal a process of inscription. In *Romola*, for instance, Bardo uses it to explain the power of his youthful memory, telling Tito, "words wrought themselves into my mind as if they had been fixed by the tool of the graver." It seems appropriate then to think of Mordechai as an active agent in the shaping of Deronda's identity through the process he describes elsewhere as a kind of printing.

Pamela Thurschwell points to the apparent power of inward reading in *Daniel Deronda* in her essay on the portrayal of clairvoyance in Eliot's fiction, but her focus is on Mordechai's role as an active reader, rather than as a writer. She argues that "second sight and clairvoyance function in Eliot's work as on the one hand prophetic, elevated, nation- and vocation-forming, and on the other hand uncontrollable and unwanted, or banal and mundane, as in *The Lifted Veil*, a matter of an onslaught of unprocessable material information" (89). While Gwendolen possesses the uncontrollable and unwanted form of second sight, Thurschwell argues, Mordechai's is productive because it is active, a form of imaginative will that makes things happen (98), especially to Deronda. His visions of an ideal successor coerce Deronda into the role that the novel's conclusion sees him embarking on. In my view, however, Mordechai's main role is to compel Deronda in a direction in which he had already been heading by directing the metaphorical "inward light" that he expresses a desire for

shortly before his experience in the synagogue. By providing this, Mordechai confirms the presence of a successful form of inward reading in *Daniel Deronda* and offers an alternative to the failed scenes of inward reading in *Romola*.

Conclusions

Taken together then, *Romola* and *Daniel Deronda* tell us a number of important things about what reading and writing meant to George Eliot. For one thing, the novels show that she saw literacy as a potentially life-altering skill because it opens individuals up to influences from well beyond the scope of their quotidian existence. We see these influences at work on the young Daniel Deronda and on the recently married Gwendolen Harleth. In the scenes that show them interacting with texts, they are made aware of varieties of human relationship and aspects of human character by which they might otherwise have remained untouched. However, Eliot is also well aware of the ever-present potential for misreading and of the capacity that literacy has to warp a reader's reality (though her concerns are far more tempered than those of critics of the "vice of reading," who feared that imaginative literature would encourage hopes in labouring men and women that could never be fulfilled). Deronda's mistaken belief that he is the bastard son of Sir Hugo Mallinger, derived from his misapplication of literary and historical texts to his own life, provides evidence of this risk. Similarly, Gwendolen's distorted ideas about what her marriage to Grandcourt will look like and about what life is like for a woman such as Lydia Glasher are created by what Eliot calls her "uncontrolled reading ... in what is called pictures of life" (140). Her misapprehension regarding what she has actually done to Glasher is not resolved until she reads Glasher's letter, which provides a very different "picture of life," one devoid of the "safe remoteness of a strange language and artificial phrase" (140).

Reading can provide one with new details about oneself and about one's fellow human beings, Eliot insists, but there is no guarantee that these details will be useful, or even correct. For Eliot's characters, much depends on the uses that are made of the information garnered in the process of reading. In *Deronda*, for instance, the shock that accompanies his misreading of his relationship to Sir Hugo, "the sense of an entailed disadvantage" (160), does not resolve itself in bitterness (as it does in the Shakespearean characters that he can suddenly relate to) but in an "inexorable sorrow" that "takes the form of fellowship and makes imagination tender" (160). The influence of reading on the individual is determined for Eliot by the character of the reader, which is the result both of inheritance and of luck. As the narrator observes in regards to *Deronda* as he glides down the Thames shortly before his encounter with Mirah, "often the grand meanings of faces as well as of written words may lie chiefly in the impressions of those who look on them" (170).

In Gwendolen's hysterical response to the letter, we see Eliot dealing with a different level of influence and suggesting that reading can have physiological effects as well as the obvious intellectual ones. The psychological and physiological effects of reading also arise in her study of Baldassarre, where the mental influence of literacy on the individual goes beyond the nervous shock that Gwendolen experiences. For Baldassarre, literacy seems to act as a mental linchpin that holds together a large portion of the knowledge gathered up in the mind. Re-acquiring the ability to read, Baldassarre believes, does more than allow him to access books and other texts. It places him in a new relationship with the physical environment in which he finds himself and determines his relationship with the men and women he interacts with on a daily basis. That Eliot complicates these beliefs by insisting on the limitations of Baldassarre's reading abilities does not take away from her assertion that literacy could have these effects if it were based on more than the ability to read from memory. At the same time,

Baldassarre's failures allow Eliot to elaborate on the relationship between literacy and memory, a psychological function that was receiving increasing attention towards the end of the nineteenth century.

For Eliot, human memory could be understood as a vast collection of writing, and new experiences (with books, with others, or with oneself) are perpetually inscribed onto the remaining blank surfaces of memory. This conceptual figure of the memory occurs in both *Romola* and *Daniel Deronda*, testifying to its continued suitability for Eliot's narrative purposes.⁴⁵ Certainly, the frequency with which reading and writing are used as metaphors in these novels – not just for memory, but for understanding interpersonal relationships, character traits, and attempts at prophecy as well – is a result of the continuous dialogue on literacy during the second half of the nineteenth century. Travelling in the social and intellectual circles she did, and working for several years as the editor (in all but name) of a major quarterly review, Eliot was well aware of the social questions associated with national education and the rise of popular literacy. George Eliot's persistent use of reading and writing as metaphors for ways of knowing the world and the individuals in it (including oneself) speaks to the ongoing importance she placed on the gifts of literacy throughout her career as a writer.

⁴⁵ Neil Hertz also points out in *George Eliot's Pulse* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003) that the inscription metaphor is one that Eliot uses frequently, not just in her examination of memory. See, for instance, Hertz's attempt to consider all the characters in *Middlemarch*, but particularly Casaubon, as "texts or as clusters of signs" (23).

Chapter 6

Trapped, Obsessed, and Spellbound:

The Complexities of Literacy, Work, and Gender in George Gissing's Fiction

Few Victorian authors were more concerned with the social effects of education and the uses made of reading and writing than George Gissing. His early novels often incorporate questions about mass education and popular literacy into their social theses. Jacob Korg has noted, for instance, that *Thyrza* (1887) stages a “vigorous attack upon popular education” (104) by rejecting it as a remedy for social ills and insisting instead that sending the masses to school will ultimately result in “the lowering of public taste and the debasement of civilization” (105).¹ Some of these social and intellectual concerns resurface at the end of Gissing’s career in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903), in which he continues to explore the ways in which reading and writing are implicated in broader social and political questions, in some ways summing up observations on literacy and education voiced in his earlier novels. Through the persona of Ryecroft, the retired literary hack, Gissing expresses concern that the “semi-education” now available to the masses will not be integrated into broader social and moral knowledge, that education will not actually improve life in England (61).² From Ryecroft’s perspective, the problems at the turn of the century seem much the same as they were in 1887, when Gissing published *Thyrza* – that “education is a thing of which only a few are capable; teach as you will, only a small percentage will profit by your most zealous energy” (61). The education that does sink in amongst the masses, Ryecroft fears, will be used to expand the public sphere to the point of dissolution: “Your average

¹ Jacob Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1963).

² George Gissing, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903; New York: New American Library, 1961).

mortal will be your average mortal still: and if he grows conscious of power, if he becomes vocal and self-assertive, if he gets into his hands all the material resources of the country, why, you have such a state of things as at present looms menacingly before every Englishman blessed - or cursed - with an unpopular spirit" (61). Articulating these concerns through Ryecroft, Gissing returns in one of his final completed books to the observations on literacy, education, and politics that underpin his early, more obviously reform-minded novels.

Elsewhere in his later fiction, however, Gissing tends to move away from the broad social claims that mark both *Ryecroft* and the early novels in order to show the effects of reading on individuals more specifically, delving into the emotional and psychological effects of modes of reading and writing. David Grylls maintains that Gissing repeatedly "sifts his characters according to their love of books" (109), for instance, rating their moral and intellectual worth by their choice of reading material.³ Gissing goes further than this, I believe. Throughout his fiction of the 1890s he suggests that a character's relationship with books can be just as substantial in defining that character as his or her relationship with the men and women who populate the novels. *In the Year of Jubilee* (1894) provides a good example of this. At least three of its central characters are defined in some way by the uses they make of their literacy. The pompous and naively optimistic Samuel Barnby can be summed up by his reading practices. Though he holds himself prophetically wise on social and cultural questions, he has seemingly never read a single book. Barnby is very much the troubled kind of desultory reader whose reading practices critics such as James Stephen and Stafford Henry Northcote hoped to regulate. Though he speaks of "Culture" and "imagine[s] himself far on the way to attain it," Barnby is, in fact, "quite uneducated, in any legitimate sense of the word" because all his learning has come "by dint of busy perusal of penny popularities"

³ David Grylls, *The Paradox of Gissing* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986).

(214).⁴ Indeed, this “diet of newspapers” has “rendered him all but incapable of sustained attention,” with the result that he had probably “read no book at all” since his boyhood (214). Yet, as the narrator explains, Barmby pretends to do much with this limited education: “from puerile facetiae he passed to speculations on the origin of being, and with equally light heart” (214). These speculations make him a figure of ridicule, for both the novel’s readers and a number of its characters.

In the same novel, Nancy Lord’s choice of books also indicates a great deal about her. When we are first introduced to her, Nancy is gazing out of her parlour window in Camberwell, while behind her lies “a new volume from the circulating library – something about Evolution” that she has “no mind to read” (13). Her reluctance stems from her consciousness of “the insincerity with which she approached such profound subjects” (13). Nancy recognizes that her social position demands this kind of reading, and that the superior education her father has provided for her should have prepared her for it, but her personal interests lie elsewhere, as her behaviour in the Jubilee Day scene makes evident. Later, in Teignmouth, Nancy recognizes that her reading defines her in the eyes of Lionel Tarrant, as well, and she chooses a book from the local library that she believes will elevate her in his eyes. Not wanting to appear frivolous, she chooses “a book that promised anything but frivolity, Helmholtz’s ‘Lectures on Scientific Subjects’” (120).

Jessica Morgan, who is, like Samuel Barmby, a minor but central character, is similarly defined by her educational pursuits as she prepares for her London University exams. Jessica, we are told, longed to “become B.A., to have her name in the newspapers, to be regarded as one of the clever, the uncommon women” (17). In pursuit of this goal, “her brain was becoming a mere receptacle for dates and definitions, vocabularies and rules

⁴ George Gissing, *In the Year of Jubilee* (1894; Rutherford, N.J.: Farleigh Dickinson UP, 1976).

syntactic, for thrice-boiled essence of history, ragged scraps of science, quotations at fifth hand, and all the heterogeneous rubbish of a ‘crammer’s’ shop” (17). Gissing seems clear in his disapproval of Jessica’s use of literacy, and her learning resembles the kind of piece-meal, rote-learned “information” that Matthew Arnold condemned in his reports on schools and his examination of student teachers. Her definition of learning is as incomplete and as destructive to “Culture” as Samuel Barmby’s is, and the pettiness of her pursuits (her desire to “have her name in the newspapers,” for instance) is mirrored by the pettiness of her actions towards her friend Nancy later in the novel. Gissing implies in *In the Year of Jubilee* that the extension of “Culture” and education to the masses has the tendency to degrade those concepts, even though his focus throughout the novel is on the struggle of individual characters and the discrete ways in which education and literacy touch their lives.

In the discussion that follows, I will examine Gissing’s representations of the personal consequences of reading and writing in his fiction of the 1890s. More specifically, my goal in this chapter is to study the ways in which Gissing’s fiction exposes the relationships between gender identity and the practices of literacy in late-Victorian culture, and to argue that Gissing shows these relationships to be further complicated by contemporary notions of work and public space. I want to suggest, furthermore, that Gissing understood how contemporary models of reading and writing were informed by definitions of gender. These definitions were also undergoing a process of transformation, of course, and the works of fiction I examine here dramatize this process and begin to judge its results. In order to achieve these ends, I will look in detail at one of Gissing’s novels – *New Grub Street* (1891) – and two of his short stories – “Spellbound” (1897) and “Christopherson” (1902). Each of these works dramatizes the relationship between literacy and the performance of gender at the end of the nineteenth century, particularly when literacy and gender intersect with contemporary definitions of

work. In my discussion of *New Grub Street* I will show that Gissing recognized the role of gender in determining an individual's position within the economy of literacy as either a reader or a writer, and in conjunction with an analysis of "Spellbound," I will show that he illustrates the impact of public space – in particular, the Reading Room of the British Museum and the interiors of London's free libraries – on the practices of reading and writing. In "Spellbound" and "Christopherson," Gissing sought to expose the personal effects of misdirected literacy on the masculine identities of his protagonists, while at the same time questioning the validity of contemporary masculine ideals.

Mr. Baker and Miss Yule: The Complexity of Popular Literacy in *New Grub Street*

David Grylls has claimed that the "conflict between art and commerce" is the subject of *New Grub Street*, art being for Gissing "the purest expression of the individual's creative potential," and commerce "the dirtiest product of collective greed" (56). Jacob Korg calls the novel a "unique exploration of the writer's problem of survival in a commercial age, of the social and professional background that bears upon his work, and of the relations between his activity as an artist and his personal and family life" (154). Stephen Arata elaborates on this in the introductory essay of his 2008 edition of the novel, stating that Gissing represents authorship in *New Grub Street* "as an activity driven primarily by the pressures of money and sex" (11).⁵ On the subject of art, Arata adds that Gissing himself "clung fiercely if despairingly to a Romantic ideal of the writer as solitary genius" akin to Carlyle's heroic man-of-letters (11). Based on this Romantic ideal we might associate Gissing, in some way, with the novel's struggling Harold Biffen, who claims that his friend Edwin Reardon and himself

⁵ Stephen Arata, "Introduction," *New Grub Street* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2008) 10-39.

form their ideas from old literature and “think and talk like Chatterton” (428).⁶ Certainly, the struggle of writers to write in a commercial world is an overwhelming preoccupation of the novel. The pathetic ends that can arise from the clash between artist and commerce are alluded to in the first scene, during which Jasper Milvain mentions Edwin Reardon to his sisters Dora and Maud as “just the kind of fellow to end up poisoning or shooting himself” because he “isn’t the kind of man to keep up literary production as a paying business” (54). Appropriately enough, this statement follows Jasper’s reference to a man being hanged in London at that moment. Yet as a novel that opens on the subject of art and commerce and is “wholly dedicated to the theme of authorship” (Korg 154), *New Grub Street* also has a great deal to say about the definition of reading and the relationship between reading and writing.

The expansion of the literary market into a widespread commercial enterprise relies on the expansion of audiences, and thus on the growth of each audience’s literacy skills. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the subject of popular literacy should arise very shortly after the introduction of this more obvious theme, as it does when Jasper visits the home of John Yule in hopes of getting to know better his literary brother Alfred and Alfred’s daughter Marian. John Yule, who has recently been forced to take to his bed after presuming too far upon his “bodily vigour” in encouraging outdoor exercise and Volunteerism in his town, explains to his visitors that he would “like to see the business of literature abolished” because it physically degrades those who involve themselves with it, making them “weak, flabby creatures, with ruined eyes and dyspeptic stomachs” (70). Yule’s brother Alfred seems to illustrate this view, at least as it refers to those on the production end of the “business of literature.” He lacks the colour even of his sick brother and his “parchmenty skin” (69) indicates a life lived in the pages of periodicals. However, as his statements on the effects of

⁶ George Gissing, *New Grub Street*, ed. Stephen Arata (1891; Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2008).

literature continue, John Yule suggests that he is equally – if not more – concerned with those on the receiving end of the literary economy, that is, with readers. While Jasper points out glibly that the literary production he and John’s brother are involved in “helps to spread civilization” (70), sounding alarmingly similar to Samuel Barmby, John Yule is much more cynical: “Your Board schools, your popular press, your spread of education! Machinery for ruining the country, that’s what I call it” (70).⁷

Through John Yule, Gissing voices the concerns of many of those commentators in the periodical press who sought to expound the dangers of mass literacy, and who saw constant and ephemeral reading as the downfall of the working and lower-middle classes and a detriment to the vigour of the nation. “Who is it,” he asks, “that reads most of the stuff that’s poured out daily by the ton from the printing-press? Just the men and women who ought to spend their leisure hours in open-air exercise; the people who earn their bread by sedentary pursuits, and who need to live as soon as they are free from the desk or the counter, not to moon over small print” (70). As I have discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, similar concerns fuelled the debate on overpressure during the 1880s and into the 1890s. That Gissing recognizes the irony in the statements of those commentators whom John Yule echoes is obvious from Jasper’s tongue-in-cheek plan to “make a good thing of writing against writing” (71). Jasper believes that “the reading public should pay [him] for telling them that they oughtn’t to read” (71). Writing at the beginning of the 1890s, Gissing himself was clearly familiar with journalists who did just as Jasper proposes in magazine articles about not reading magazines.

⁷ See, for instance, Barmby’s paean to the press in *In the Year of Jubilee*, during which he declares that he intends to write and deliver a talk on the subject of Victoria’s reign as an “Age of Progress” with special reference to “the Press,” which he considers “a marvellous thing ... packed with thought and information” (57).

Yet, while Gissing and John Yule may have agreed on the shortcomings of modern journalism, an occupation that Gissing saw as “one of the murkiest pages in the commercialization of literature” (Grylls 76), Yule is not to be trusted as an uncomplicated mouthpiece for the author. For one thing, he himself has read little besides newspapers since infirmity forced him to his room, making his criticisms of the popular press ring hollow; for another, his remedy for too much reading is military service, something Gissing himself objected to elsewhere.⁸ While Gissing himself could sympathize with John Yule’s views on the destructiveness of journalism and the levelling quality of the periodical press, he refuses to use Yule as an outlet for preaching. He does, however, introduce questions about reading – who ought to read, what they ought to read, and what ends this reading ought to serve – early on in this novel about the pressures of a writer’s life. Yet as much as *New Grub Street* has to say about the changing nature of reading and writing in the late Victorian literary marketplace, some of the novel’s most compelling statements are those that complicate the notion of mass literacy and that seek to show how complex the relationship between reading and writing had become.

One scene that allows Gissing to explore this complexity occurs towards the mid-point of the novel, in a chapter entitled “Rejection,” which firmly entrenches Edwin Reardon’s failure as a writer. In hopes of commiserating with another struggling novelist, his friend Harold Biffen, Reardon heads to Biffen’s apartment only to find him engaged with a pupil (even less successful than Reardon as a commercial artist, Biffen lives in a garret in Clipstone Street that often doubles as a schoolroom). When Reardon enters, he finds Biffen in the midst

⁸ See, for instance, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, where Ryecroft (whose views are traditionally associated with those of Gissing) claims that he is happy to believe that, when the “sweet voice in praise of Conscription” is raised, most English people are “affected by it even as I am, with the sickness of dread and of disgust” (53). If England is “imperilled,” Ryecroft explains, he would expect Englishmen to fight, but the kind of “fixed military service” (*New Grub Street* 70) that John Yule calls for, he calls “the curse of universal soldiering” (*Ryecroft* 53).

of helping a man named Mr. Baker with his letters, but things are not going smoothly for the pair. “I can’t break it up,” says Baker, commenting upon the fruits of his intellectual labours in the midst of the two struggling artists: “The thoughts come in a lump, if I may say so. To break it up – there’s the art of compersition” (231). In contrast to Edwin Reardon and to his consumptive-looking instructor, Mr. Baker is described as a “robust, hard-featured, black-haired young man” with “something of the riverside about him” (231). The narrator judges him to be “a dock-man, or even a bargeman” (231). Clearly a member of the lower classes, a fact reinforced by his mildly idiomatic speech, Mr. Baker is trying to improve his lot by “preparing for the examination of the Outdoor Custom’s Department” (231), and his goal reflects the role that literacy had in the possibility of social mobility in the period.

Biffen’s tutorials are said to be helping, but although Baker claims to be making much “headway with the other things,” composition evades him: “There’s handwriting, there’s orthography, there’s arithmetic; I’m not afraid of one of ‘em, as Mr. Biffen ‘ll tell you, sir,” Baker explains to Reardon, “But when it comes to compersition, that brings out the sweat on my forehead. I do assure you” (231). Baker’s remarks might remind us of the lack of instruction in composition provided by the Board Schools, which the dock-man would likely have attended, and that the umbrella term “writing” is not specific enough in the context of Victorian education to describe the graphic skills students were taught. For Mr. Baker and others of a similar background, the contrast between manual dexterity and the active composition of text creates frustration. Biffen’s advice is for Baker to draw his ideas out by endeavouring to write in shorter sentences. Baker has put all he has to say “into three appalling periods,” whereas he ought to have used a dozen (231). While Biffen and Reardon sympathize with Baker, no doubt recalling their own recent struggles, specifically with the “compersition” of three-decker novels, the student leaves cheerily unfazed by his

unsatisfactory results: "I'm not easily beaten when I've set my mind on a thing, and I'll break up the compersition yet, see if I don't!" (173). In this way, Baker's determination is in sharp contrast to the irresolution of Reardon, who soon begins to consider returning to his work as a clerk and admitting his failure as a commercially successful author.

Indeed, although the scene is seldom commented on by critics who examine *New Grub Street* for its insights into the late-Victorian literary market, it has a number of important functions within the narrative of *New Grub Street*, one of which is to shed further light on the exertions of Reardon as he struggles to maintain his respectable, middle-class existence through writing. After Reardon's excruciating churning out of three-volume novels at the expense of his physical and mental health, his response to Mr. Baker's comment that "compersition ... brings out the sweat on my forehead" ("You're not the only man in that case, Mr. Baker" [231]) sounds a darkly comic note. Gissing suggests a similarity between the efforts of Mr. Baker to draw his ideas out into a dozen sentences and Reardon's own effort to stretch enough plot and character development for a decent single volume novel into a salable triple-decker. The struggle of writing for money and position, Gissing seems to imply here, affects more than those employed by the literary trade, and the difficulty with which many write suggests that it is neither a healthy nor a "natural" occupation for men and women, no matter what their class.⁹ Most importantly, however, I believe the scene in Biffen's garret points to the intricacies of mass literacy and the important difference between reading and writing in Victorian society, a major theme Gissing pursues throughout the novel.

By situating *New Grub Street* within the cultural context of its production, we are better able to understand the degree to which the developments of mass literacy were

⁹ See Patrick Brantlinger's reading of *New Grub Street*'s take on modern culture in *The Reading Lesson*: "The sensitive, cultured souls – Reardon, Biffen, Marian Yule – are just as unhealthy as the vulgar masses, only they are aware of the cultural epidemic that Gissing identifies with too much culture, with excessive reading and writing" (194).

transforming and complicating definitions of reading and writing not just for educators and critics, as I have demonstrated in the first section of this project, but for novelists such as Gissing as well. *New Grub Street* shows us that generic concepts such as “writing” were more fluid and fraught with difficulty during the Victorian period than literacy rates let on, and that the newly united practices that comprised literacy were subject to different assumptions, regulations, and restrictions as they interacted with notions of class, gender, public space, and the changing technology of literary production. Although some of these themes are illustrated in Mr. Baker’s only scene, Gissing explores them much more thoroughly in the character of Marian Yule, particularly as she is depicted in those passages that dramatize her literary exertions in the British Museum Reading Room. In these Reading Room scenes, which are featured in almost every discussion of the novel, Gissing explores the diverse cultural expectations of women *readers* in contrast to those of women *writers*.

Indeed, although Marian Yule is often aligned with other women readers who were thought to be “invading” the British Museum in the 1880s and 1890s, or seen as little more than an amanuensis, secretary, or slave to her literary father, I believe that to comprehend fully her characterization and her struggles in the Reading Room we need to redefine Marian as an active and productive *writer* of texts, rather than a passive reader and consumer of literature, a more traditionally feminine position in the literary market.¹⁰ Marian’s sense of discomfort and alienation is the result of her economically compelled negotiation of both the Reading Room and the literary market beyond its borders, and her move from passivity to activity in the Reading Room scenes dramatizes the expansion of the end-of-century literary

¹⁰ For discussions of the advent of women readers in the Reading Room, see Kate Flint’s *The Woman Reader* and Ruth Hoberman’s “‘A Thought in the Huge Bald Forehead’: Depictions of Women in the British Museum Reading Room, 1857-1929” (*Reading Women: Literary Figures and Cultural Icons from the Victorian Period to the Present*, eds. Jennifer Phegley and Janet Badia [Toronto: Toronto UP, 2005] 168-91). Hoberman cites Marian Yule as an example of the class of lower middle-class women who work as copying-clerks for literary men (175-6). For a discussion of Marian as a slave to her literary father, see Robert L. Selig’s *George Gissing* (Boston: Twayne, 1995) 46-53.

marketplace to include women. Paradoxically, however, Gissing's version of this expansion leads not to feminine self-determination but to the implication of the woman writer in restrictive structures of authority no less debilitating than those faced by her male counterparts, making the Reading Room a hauntingly paradoxical symbol of both classed and gendered cultural emancipation and panoptical constraint. Through his exploration of Marian's writing experience and his investigation of the factors determining her writing practice, Gissing points to the changing definitions and representations of reading and writing that were brought about in an increasingly literate nation.

Reading/Writing Gender in the British Museum Reading Room

The British Museum Reading Room has been described as the "hub" of *New Grub Street's* action and the circular lending counter in its centre one of the many "circles of frustration" in the novel's pessimistic plot (Grylls 98).¹¹ Certainly, the scenes that take place in the Reading Room are central to the novel's romantic plot (in that they set the stage for Jasper and Marian's relationship) and to its attempts to examine the meanings of literacy at the end of the nineteenth century. The Reading Room had a similarly central role in British intellectual life in the 1880s and 1890s, as it was during these decades that it "enjoyed its greatest fame amongst the general public as the Mecca of literary research workers," used frequently by Walter Besant, Thomas Hardy, Arnold Bennett, H. Ryder Haggard, and Gissing himself (Harris 24).¹² What made the space so intriguing to the journalists and novelists who invoked it in their writing was that the Reading Room (in fact, the British Museum in its entirety) was far more than simply a location for conducting literary and antiquarian research,

¹¹ Grylls claims that the logic of the novel is a vicious circle: "poverty demoralizes; the best escape from poverty is commercialism; but commercialism also demoralizes" (98).

¹² P.R. Harris, *The Reading Room* (London: British Library, 1986).

but a symbol for the growth of imperial and archival knowledge more generally. According to Ruth Hoberman, the British Museum participated in the construction and organization of the nation as a whole because the growth of the Reading Room coincided with the expansion of the British Empire as well as the expansion of “the increasingly sophisticated means by which it was administered and explained” (169). Full of artifacts and texts from the far corners of the globe and guardian of the global knowledge derived from these materials, the British Museum could easily be depicted as one of the crowning jewels of London, the nation’s imperial centre. Hoberman builds on studies of the British Museum by Thomas Richards and Tony Bennett, and particularly on Richards’ claim that the Victorian Empire was a “collective improvisation” (Richards 3), constructed out of the information that could be collected and collated in the British Museum and other archival sites.¹³

The centrality of the Museum to national identity was so well known that it could be both celebrated and lampooned in the popular press. For instance, an article by the poet and novelist Amy Levy in the girl’s monthly magazine *Atalanta* calls the Reading Room “a *centre*, a general workshop, where in these days of much reading, much writing, the great business of book-making, article-making, cramming, may be said to have their head-quarters” (450).¹⁴ The Room, she maintains twice in the essay, is inhabited by “all sorts and conditions of men and women” (450, 454). Another sketch, this one in the comic magazine *Fun*, entitled “The Reading Room Outrage,” dramatizes the physical effects of the Reading Room’s annual four-day closure on one of the men who frequent the library.¹⁵ This story concerns a man for whom there was “no world, no hope, no life, no anything outside the Reading Room of the British Museum” (172) and who writes “heartbroken letters” to the *Times* every year complaining that

¹³ Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁴ Amy Levy, “Readers at the British Museum,” *Atalanta* 2 (1883): 450-55. Emphasis mine.

¹⁵ “The Reading Room Outrage,” *Fun* 962 (1883): 172.

the Reading Room should close at all. Waking up on the first morning of the closure, he finds himself barely able to get out of bed, but he drags himself with all the effort he can muster to the nearest bookstall, from which he is able to draw a little energy. Fighting off suffocation in this way, the man begins to wonder “whether he had any kind of relations with the strange new world in which he suddenly found himself adrift” (172). He vaguely remembers his family and decides to try to find them, but only because he hopes that “*their* intercession might induce the trustees to open the doors of the Reading Room to him ere it was yet too late” (172). At the conclusion of the sketch we find the “Reading Roomer” installed back in the Museum, where the Trustees have allowed him to remain in order to save him from complete destruction. He never trusts himself outside of the Reading Room again, and sleeps now, “by special permission of the trustees, in the great waste paper basket” (172). Though slight in nature, the sketch shows us some of the popular interest in the British Museum and establishes it as a central national landmark, at least for the reading addicts discussed in Chapter 4.

More importantly in the context of Victorian literacy, however, the growth of the Museum and its Library and the steady increase in Reading Room use could be taken as indications that Britain was fast becoming a more informed and more literate nation, and that educational reforms such as the Revised Code of 1862 and the Education Act of 1870 were improving its intellectual character.¹⁶ Although, as Richard Altick has asserted, the Reading Room was never a popular place for members of the newly literate lower classes who were more likely to frequent the free libraries that had begun to spring up throughout London and other cities in the latter half of the Victorian period (215), a number of comments made by

¹⁶ On the topic of increased library use, see P.R. Harris, who cites an 1884 *Pall Mall Gazette* interview with Dr. Garnett, in which the superintendent claims that although the average daily number of 300 users had remained consistent from 1863 to 1875, daily totals increased to 500 per day by the end of Garnett’s tenure in 1884.

users of the Reading Room do, in fact, allude to a new degree of social heterogeneity in those decades that some at the upper end of the social scale seem to have found disturbing. This is the variety and accessibility to which Amy Levy refers in her essay. For instance, in his now standard popular history of the Reading Room, G. F. Barwick makes note of an 1863 letter addressed to the Trustees of the Library “complaining of the delay in getting books and ‘the presence of certain readers in a state of uncleanness and unsavouriness wholly inadmissible’,” complaints, Barwick goes on to note, that the Trustees found were not without foundation (112).¹⁷ Such comments reflect at least the *perception* that a new, less seemly class of reader was increasingly likely to be present under the dome.

Indeed, it became much easier to become a reader at the British Museum Library in 1873, shortly after the passing of the Education Act, when an amendment to the rules made it so that “admission was granted on application accompanied by a letter from some responsible person recommending the applicant as a fit and proper person to be admitted” (Barwick 124). This process also allows Gissing’s Edwin Reardon to get a ticket for the room, even though he lives in a garret and is almost penniless,¹⁸ and Levy alludes to this rule in her article, claiming, “any person above the age of twenty-one, who can convince one householder to vouch for his good behaviour, has the whole collection within his easy reach” (454).

One also sees a shift in the reading demographic in other trends during the late-nineteenth century, including the increase in younger readers and the decrease in established and well-known older ones. Barwick explains, for instance, that as early as the 1860s, the overcrowding of the Reading Room was attributed by the administration to “the influx of

¹⁷ G.F. Barwick, *The Reading Room of the British Museum* (London: Earnest Benn, 1929).

¹⁸ Gissing’s alter ego, Henry Ryecroft, professes to being in a similar state when he first became acquainted with the Reading Room “at a time when [he] was literally starving in London” but did nothing but read disinterestedly all day (Gissing, *Ryecroft* 50).

young persons who have not yet completed their education” (118). According to an order issued by the Trustees, “at least one-fifth of the visitors are of this class, and this proportion of accommodation and attention is thus to a great extent diverted from those whose studies and pursuits are of a graver character” (118). The Trustees’ response was to increase the limit age of admission from eighteen to twenty-one. Barwick also makes note of a comment by Dr. Garnett, superintendent of the Reading Room from 1875 to 1884, that “the falling off of distinguished readers” observed over the course of his tenure was a trend that had begun as early as 1830, a fact which he attributes to the increase in private libraries and reading clubs throughout London (139). At these places, the “graver” and more “distinguished” readers hoped not have to put up with the distractions and crowding of the Museum Reading Room. Comments such as these reveal the degree to which changes in the reading public and in the educational character of the nation in general contributed to the changing definition of the British Museum Reading Room over the course of the Victorian period, particularly during its latter decades.

Although it is possible to see the Reading Room’s demographic shifts and increased use as positive signs of an improving nation, it is also true that the Reading Room was a contested and sometimes troubling space in the era of *New Grub Street*’s creation. Partly, the physical characteristics of the Reading Room itself led to these troubles, and Gissing alludes to these in his depiction of the Room, which Jasper Milvain refers to as “the valley of the shadow of books” (63) in order to highlight the sense of gloom with which it could be associated. Marian Yule, for one, feels that the room is “gloomy” and with the November fog obscuring the dome, “one could scarcely see to read” (143). This fog, much of it composed of smoke from soft coal, seems to seep through the glass dome and into the Reading Room itself

so that it can be tasted in the “warm, headachy air” (143).¹⁹ However, if these physical conditions were often difficult for users of the Reading Room to deal with, the nexus of gender and class issues that accompanied library use in general seem to have affected the British Museum as well, and these less material conditions could be even more trying.

As the use of libraries and reading rooms by women increased over the latter decades of the Victorian period, statements about the effects of women on the library environment – as well as the equally dramatic effects of the library environment on women – proliferated in the periodical press. Popular wisdom among those involved with libraries maintained that open reading rooms like that of the British Museum were uncomfortable places for women. For example, in a paper given in 1891 at the annual meeting of the British Library Association, a librarian named Butler Wood explains that it was his experience that when a woman reader entered the general reading room in the past “it was with the air of an intruder who felt her position, and who would very soon beat a retreat from what appeared to be an embarrassing situation” (Wood 108).²⁰ Views that conformed to Wood’s contributed to the construction of separate reading rooms, entrances, and borrowing desks for women in libraries throughout Britain in the latter half of the nineteenth century.²¹ This would have been more of an issue in free libraries than in the Museum Library, because in the former middle-class women were expected to be frightened off by the working-class patrons who may have entered only to find a warm place to rest or to consult the betting papers (Flint 174).²² This was not the case in the

¹⁹ In her article, Amy Levy constructs a counter-model of the Reading Room, claiming that the new, circular Reading Room that opened in 1857 is a vast improvement, in terms of health and comfort, over previous incarnations: “The desks and tables are models of comfort and convenience; the lighting is by electric light; and so carefully is the temperature regulated by means of an elaborate ventilating apparatus, that an enthusiastic American lady once compared the atmosphere of the place in summer to that of a cool and shady dell” (454).

²⁰ Butler Wood, “Three Special Features of Free Library Work - Open Shelves, Woman Readers, and Juvenile Departments,” *The Library* 4 (1893): 108-14.

²¹ Cf. Flint 171-180.

²² See Abigail A. Van Slyck, “The Lady and the Library Loafer: Gender and Public Space in Victorian America,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 31 (1996): 221-42. Van Slyck points out in her study of library use by women during the

Museum Reading Room, where (despite the supposed social heterogeneity of the readers) representatives of the lower classes would have been generally confined to the employees who delivered the books to the Reading Room from the stacks, and these workers were of a decidedly more “white-collar” character than those visiting the free and public libraries. Primarily, then, it was the interaction between men and women (rather than any interaction between the classes) in the Museum Reading Room that occasioned some time before the 1880s the creation of a separate group of tables set apart for women. This separate area was the cause of much controversy, especially as the Room became increasingly crowded during the 1880s and women became more willing to take “the risk of sitting next to a man” in order to claim a needed reference book after he had used it (Barwick 137).²³ Some patrons complained that the separate tables were unnecessary and that they took up much needed space.²⁴ In *New Grub Street*, Marian Yule does not use this separate ladies’ area, but Gissing’s reference to the “ladies’ cloak-room” (123) alludes to the sense of separation maintained between the sexes in public spaces.

The forms of separation Wood and Barwick refer to above seem intended to make the Reading Room a more comfortable place for middle-class women patrons. More often than not, however, the rationale behind separate reading rooms and other reading areas was an attempt to save the scholarly men who frequented the Museum and other libraries from the

same period in America that public libraries were one of a select few “places where the interaction between men and women was unmediated by the promise of financial gain or the threat of dismissal” (224). Cf. Chris Baggs, “In the Separate Reading Room for Ladies Are Provided Those Publications Specially Interesting to Them: Ladies’ Reading Rooms and British Public Libraries 1850-1914,” *Victorian Periodicals Review* 38 (2005): 280-306.

²³ Barwick quotes an 1882 article by Percy Fitzgerald in *Belgravia*, in which the author remarks that “one of the standing jests of the place is that these [tables for women] are left solitary and unattended” (qtd. in Barwick 131).

²⁴ This seems to have been the case in other libraries as well, as a writer in *All the Year Round* pointed out in an article from 1892 called “A Day at the London Free Libraries” (*All the Year Round* 3rd ser. 7 [1892]: 305-9). In a sketch of the Southwark Public Library, the writer claims that although an authority on free libraries once told him that a ladies’ room “means simply gossip,” Southwark’s ladies’ room is in fact empty, and an oppressive silence is felt throughout the library in general: “But even a little gossip is not a bad thing, and would be a relief from the somewhat oppressive silence that pervades the free library in general” (307).

distracting effects of women. In the discourse on reading and library use, these distractions were figured in two ways, and both were the result of Victorian notions of gender difference. For one thing, women were thought to gossip, giggle, and frivolously occupy seats in an environment where space was already at a premium. In another piece on the British Museum Reading Room, this one fictional, Amy Levy illustrates the concerns about women's use of the room and the unjust assumptions on which these concerns were based. In her short story, "The Recent Telepathic Occurrences at the British Museum" (1888), Levy introduces the character of a young professor who tends to grumble over the distractions of the Museum Reading Room: "Why do they always wait to the last moment before lighting up? And what a tramping and a whispering on all sides! It's the women – they've no business to have women here at all" (432).²⁵ However, as the professor looks over his shoulder to observe the noisy "women," he is greeted instead with the sight of "a clergyman and a law-student [passing] by in loud consultation" (432).

Given these assumptions, it is not surprising that Butler Wood feels he must make a case in his article in *The Library* that the ladies' reading room in his Bradford library is "quiet and orderly" (108). Wood attributes this fact to the sufficiency of the newspapers and magazines provided within to "keep in subjection the natural conversational propensities of the sex" (108). The British Museum attempted to keep its Reading Room quiet and orderly through the creation in 1889 of a "salutary rule" decreeing, "readers cannot ... be supplied with novels within five years of publication, and every reader requiring for special purposes to consult a recent novel must state his reasons in writing" (110).²⁶ The assumption that the Trustees made with their use of the masculine pronoun that the potential novel reader would

²⁵ Amy Levy, "The Recent Telepathic Occurrences at the British Museum," *The Complete Novels and Selected Writings of Amy Levy, 1861-1889*, ed. Melvyn New (Gainesville, Florida: UP of Florida) 431-4. The story was originally published in the inaugural edition of *Women's World*.

²⁶ "Jottings [British Museum Novel Restriction]," *The Library* 1 (1889): 110.

be male was out of place, however, as it is women who are most often portrayed as novel readers in articles about library use. In addition, women were also thought to cause distractions of a more intimate nature, and there was a sense that the Reading Room was a space that promoted too free amorous interaction amongst the sexes; as an unpoliced public space, the Reading Room might provide an arena for flirtation.²⁷ Indeed, a common conception of the role of women in the British Museum Reading Room in particular is recorded in an article in the *Saturday Review* in 1886, where the writer claims that when a woman is in the room “she flirts, and eats strawberries behind folios, in the society of some happy student of the opposite sex” (213).²⁸ This is much worse, it appears, than the “tramping and whispering” that Levy’s professor complains of. Indeed, representations like this one illustrate Ruth Hoberman’s claims that when it came to women patrons, “male observers seemed to experience their conspicuous presence as an imposition of bodily imperatives – their clothes, food, and flirtations are most frequently complained of – on an otherwise disembodied, rational workspace” (175).

The popular representations of feminine library use in *The Saturday Review*, *The Library*, and in Levy’s short story construct for us a model of women’s reading practices, particularly as these practices are mediated through women’s experiences of select public spaces.²⁹ Unlike representations of reading men in the library atmosphere, the women that we

²⁷ One mention of this concern can be found in “Library News and Notes (Middlesbrough),” (*The Library* 5 [1893]: 140), in a note concerning a petition at the Middlesbrough Public Library for better accommodation for ladies visiting the Reading Room. It was found that both men and women had written their opinions on the document, showing reluctance amongst both men and women for a Ladies’ Reading Room. An administrator is said to have remarked that this “could be easily accounted for because there was a number of young girls who, if they had their own way, would prefer to have an opportunity of looking at the men, and being looked at by them” (140).

²⁸ “Ladies in Libraries,” *The Saturday Review* 62 (1886): 212-13.

²⁹ The stereotypes of feminine library use that Levy invokes in her story are not found in her essay. In fact, both pieces reject the popular notion of women as frivolous and distracting agents in the Reading Room space. For instance, the illustrations that accompany her *Atalanta* essay include two of women making use of the space without being distracting. One decorous woman sits upright with her nose in a book above the caption, “A Fair

meet in the periodical press rarely if ever transcend the traditional, consumptive role that the Victorian discourse on reading was most likely to afford them.³⁰ The conspicuous frivolity of the flirtatious woman reader in the Reading Room, as it is depicted in the *Saturday Review* article, finds an echo in the behaviour of the ladies in “A Day at the London Free Libraries.” In this sketch, a woman’s consumption of books through reading and her consumption of commercial goods through shopping go hand in hand. For instance, while the men who use the libraries discussed are more likely to “do something” with what they read, such as the curates “who meet and converse, and write letters and postcards after consulting the clerical journals,” the middle-class ladies that the writer finds inside the reading rooms have come only to “consult the oracles of fashion, and muse and meditate over drawings of skirts and trains, and wonder if the new style of hair will become them” (305).

This writer presents library use as little more than preparation for a trip to the shop or the salon, and nowhere is this connection between women’s library use and the act of commercial consumption more evident than at the Kensington Free Library, which is “well lodged in the former Vestry Hall, in the midst of the bustling High Street, with its fine shops and crowds of women – ladies of every degree, who are engaged, one and all, in the exciting pursuit of shopping” (306). The proximity of the library to the shops suggests that a middle-class woman’s role inside the library differs very little from her role outside of it. The atmosphere of the market seems to be carried into the library so that the oracles of fashion that are explored directly on the High Street may be consulted virtually in magazines within the

Reader” (451); another shows a similarly refined lady climbing a ladder to find a reference volume above the caption, “Reaching After Knowledge”(452).

³⁰ Flint’s study finds this consumptive role for women laid out again and again in the Victorian discourse on women’s reading. For instance, examining the representations of women’s reading in the periodical press, she comments that critical appraisals that focussed on the “susceptibility and moral frailty of the woman reader ... were once again based, at least rhetorically, on the assumption that women would be passive consumers, automatically influenced by what they read” (147). Flint is referring specifically to the work of women reviewers such as Margaret Oliphant and Dinah Maria Mulock.

walls of the reading room. In addition, the article presents young middle-class women as the most prevalent patrons of the public libraries, beginning as it does with the following exchange between a husband and wife: “‘Well, ta-ta, I am going to the club,’ said he. ‘And I to the free library,’ said she” (305).³¹ With these illustrations of women’s library use in mind, it is not hard to understand why women who use the British Museum Reading Room are so frequently assigned to the role of consumer in periodical discourse, despite the fact that the British Museum was of a different character than the free and public libraries.

As an avid library-user and reader of the popular press himself, Gissing would no doubt have been familiar with the characterizations and stereotypes of women readers (in the reading rooms of both the British Museum and the Free Libraries) that persisted in the late nineteenth century.³² It is essential, however, that we understand how different Marian Yule’s fictional experiences of the Reading Room are from those (equally fictional) accounts of feminine library use in the popular and critical press. Above all, it is important to keep in mind that use of a library does necessarily make one a reader, and that categories like reader and writer can be more complicated than they first appear, just as general definitions of reading and writing can obscure important complications. Since the novel’s Jasper Milvain and Alfred Yule can make use of the Reading Room and maintain their positions as writers, we need to be equally open to the fact that Marian herself is more than a reader in her use of the space. It is misleading to link Gissing’s rendering of Marian Yule to a “set of representations [that] depict lower-middle-class women” who work as copying clerks for literary men and are “in danger of tumbling into indigence, eccentricity, and ill-health” (Hoberman 175) without

³¹ Interestingly, this article does not mention the problem of middle-class women mixing with men of the lower classes, even in more predominantly working-class districts such as South London. The apparent reason for this is that “the working classes of the population are not much attracted by the library. The silence and good order are a little too much for them; they miss the freedom, the chaff, the jokes of the out-of-doors and the full-flavoured hilarity of the public house” (308).

³² Grylls (1986) argues that while Gissing deplored the effects of periodicals on “cultural health,” he was nonetheless “addicted to them throughout his life,” and once considered running his own weekly (77-8).

considering the entirety of Marian's Reading Room practices.³³ To characterize Marian in this way, I believe, is to misunderstand the truly productive role that she takes on in the Museum Reading Room. We begin to see, when we compare her with other representations of the Victorian lady in the library, that Gissing is working against such traditional figurations, and that *New Grub Street's* depiction of her discomfort is a direct result of the pattern of non-traditional library use that Gissing creates for her.

Marian Yule as a Woman Writer

Just as they are central to the novel's plot as a whole, *New Grub Street's* Reading Room scenes are central to Marian's characterization as a woman and as a writer.³⁴ It is plain from her negotiation of the Museum space that Marian is unlike the library-dwelling women so often depicted in the periodical press. Marian neither giggles, sketches, nor gossips, and she refrains from reading novels, as well. Rather than disturbing others by eating, rustling her skirts, flirting or gossiping, Marian herself is disturbed more than once by masculine Reading Room *habitués* and friends of her father. She is disturbed even more, however, by the atmosphere of the space as she perceives it. Initially, it appears that her response to the Museum Reading Room as a foggy and headachy tomb is the result of the physical discomforts popularly associated with the Room, but her apprehensions extend to other, more abstract, problems. The real depth of her concerns become evident when, upon observing the sickly light emerging through the Room's glass ceiling, Marian falls into a frightening fantasy:

³³ Cf. Hoberman 176: "But Fitzgerald's women are not merely physically incongruous; they are exploited, 'fair damozels'" in need of rescue from a workplace where they do not belong, as they work 'for some literary man who has cash and position' – much like George Gissing's Marian Yule in his 1891 *New Grub Street*, whose work in the reading room for her abusive father makes her pale and cough-prone."

³⁴ P.J. Keating notes in *George Gissing: New Grub Street* (London: Edward Arnold, 1968) that Marian Yule "is the character most associated with the British Museum Reading-room" (47).

Then her eye discerned an official walking along the upper gallery, and in pursuance of her grotesque humour, her mocking misery, she likened him to a black, lost soul, doomed to wander in an eternity of vain research along the endless shelves. Or again, the readers who sat here at these radiating lines of desks, what were they but hapless flies caught in a huge web, its nucleus the great circle of the Catalogue? (144)

Along with this dark vision of the dome above the unwieldy and “trackless desert of print” (143) and its transformation into a giant spider-web, Marian’s eyes fail her, she feels faint and headachy, and she imagines that at any moment “the book-lined circumference of the room would [become] but a featureless prison-limit” (144).³⁵ This experience of restriction, sickness, and exhaustion bears no resemblance to the happy consumption of fashion plates and magazines that comprises the experience of women readers as they are represented by the periodical articles outlined above. However, although Gissing’s depiction of Marian’s experience has little in common with those of other women readers, to discount the role of her gender in determining the anxiety Marian expresses would be a mistake.

Marian differs from other women who use the Reading Room in her adoption of a *productive* role in her negotiation of the library space. We notice, for instance, that women not only frivolously read novels and rustle their skirts in the scenario presented by the *Saturday Review* article, but that they are shown literally *consuming* strawberries, and using the Museum’s precious folios as mere screens to hide their conspicuous ingestion. The writer is engaging with the popular model of reading as eating outlined in Chapter 3, a model, as I have shown, that was employed with additional vigour when the reading subject was a woman, child, or member of the working class. Incorporating the gendered distinction between

³⁵ Robert Selig (1995) points out that Marian’s final image of the Reading Room as a “circular prison reflects an historical and architectural oddity. Jeremy Bentham’s 1790s design of a moral penitentiary called ‘the panopticon’ – ‘a circular ... structure’ with the guards’ observation ‘rotunda’ at the centre – influenced the design of the British Museum Reading Room” (62).

production and consumption that relegated women to the consumptive role, Gissing places Marian in an anomalous position in the literary market. Emma Liggins examines this in her study of Gissing's relationship to late-century New Woman writing, placing Marian's characterization in *New Grub Street* in the context of debates about the suitability of journalistic work (and other, similar professions) for educated middle-class women in the 1880s and 1890s.³⁶ Liggins puts Marian forward as a lady-journalist, but maintains the standard picture of her as an appendage to her father the writer, explaining that she "only gains access to the labour market by acting as her journalist father's unpaid researcher" (72). Liggins notes that Marian's father worries about his daughter's potential for the work she does, not because of any intellectual deficiency, but because he fears she is "overtaxing her strength," thus echoing conservative views about a woman's ability to work (80).

Such concerns also show up in the literature on women and libraries at the end of the century, once again revealing Gissing's engagement with contemporary social and professional questions. An 1893 edition of *The Library*, for instance, contains a letter to the editor that touches on the subject of feminine exhaustion in a library environment. The correspondent, who refers to himself as a "Chief Librarian," writes to express concern about the health of women assistants, explaining that "at one library it has been calculated that the women assistants are absent three times as much as the men through illness" ("Health" 92).³⁷ The presumption this librarian makes seems to be in line with that of Alfred Yule – that a middle-class woman's health is seldom fit for the strains of library work.

I believe that we can find another explanation for Marian's Reading Room discomfort, however, one that fully acknowledges her characterization in *New Grub Street*. To understand Marian's function in the novel, we must go beyond her portrayal of herself and her portrayal

³⁶ Emma Liggins, *George Gissing, the Working Woman, and Urban Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

³⁷ "The Health of Female Assistants," *The Library* 5 (1893): 92.

by the novel's literary men in order to acknowledge the unusual position in which Marian finds herself in the Reading Room as a consequence of the activities she takes part in there. It is true that when she first meets Jasper in Wattleborough she claims of her literary endeavours, "I only help father a little" (Gissing 77), a comment that leads Jasper to tell his sister Dora that Marian "doesn't write independently" (80). Yet details throughout the rest of the novel reveal that this depiction of her literary efforts is misleading. More than a secretary to a literary man, Marian is able to complete articles of "manufacture," such as her essay on seventeenth-century French authoresses, almost by herself, so that "her father's share in it was limited to a few hints and suggestions" (120). In this sense, her father acts more as an editor to her than she does as a secretary to him.

In constructing these pieces, Marian assumes the masculine place of her father, who submits her articles in his name, and finally publishes them anonymously. In fact, Gissing hints at the fact that Marian is in reality a "better" writer than her father in some ways. Her writing has a "merit" and a "grace" denied to Yule himself, though he has much more experience and learning (120). He eventually realizes the true nature of his daughter's work, and late in the novel when Marian finishes a critical paper on James Harrington, author of the unwieldy work of seventeenth-century political theory, *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, Yule tells her, "there is so little to add to this paper - so little to alter - that I couldn't feel justified in sending it in as my own work. I think it is altogether too good to appear anonymously. You must sign it, Marian, and have the credit that is due to you" (393). If Marian were to be published within the novel's narrative, then readers might be more willing to accept her as a writer, alongside Jasper Milvain and Edwin Reardon. Although she has been characterized as no more than her father's secretary, Alfred Yule's comments suggest that Marian is not only a writer (in the strictly physical sense of copying and compiling her father's notes), but also an

independent *composer* of literature. That Gissing hints at her potential literary authority, while refusing all the time explicitly to identify her as an equal to Milvain and Reardon, shows that he wants to draw attention to the difficult position Marian finds herself in.³⁸ That he recognizes the complexity of nineteenth-century literacy and the relationship between reading and writing is as evident in his construction of Marian as a troubled writer as it is in his exploration of Mr. Baker's problems with "compersition."

Adding to the complications of Marian's position in the Reading Room, the genre of writing that she produces is one not typically associated with Victorian women, whether they are readers or writers. As Dorothy Mermin explains in her book on Victorian women of letters, "literary culture was most resistant to female infiltration in the arena of high-prestige non-fictional prose," the genre most typically linked with the public sphere during the period (95).³⁹ While the "prestige" of any genre is put into question by the decidedly debased nature of the works produced by all of Gissing's characters, it is important that Marian's work in the public space of the Reading Room involves writing in a genre still largely associated with masculine production, unlike fiction or travel-writing, which had long been part of the feminine literary domain. In contrast to Marian, Jasper's sister Dora Milvain, another of the novel's women writers, produces short fictional pieces for a journal called *The English Girl* under the tutelage of her brother, recalling the large number of women employed in the field of "light literature" during the Victorian period. This form of writing required education, but no special training or skills, and was thus open to many middle-class women (Mermin 45).

³⁸ The last mention of her writing in the novel occurs at the end of the penultimate chapter in a letter to Dora, where Marian notes that the paper she sent to Mr. Trenchard is accepted (486), though its publication is never mentioned.

³⁹ Dorothy Mermin, *Godiva's Ride: Women of Letters in England 1830-1880* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1993).

There is a striking difference in the attitudes that these two women writers take towards the act of writing, and it is possible to see their competing responses to composition as the result of the very different environments in which that composition takes place. In contrast to Marian's overwhelming and potentially restrictive surroundings, the "boudoir" in which Dora is said to write, "could not have been daintier and more appropriate to the charming characteristics of its mistress. [She] affected no literary slovenliness; she was dressed in light colours, and looked so lovely that even Jasper paused on the threshold with a smile of admiration" (Gissing 489). Thus Dora is positioned as a counter-type to the sometimes shabby and always overworked Marian. As well, Dora becomes Mrs. Whelpdale, and no longer writes simply as a form of financial support, as Whelpdale has enough income to maintain a home, thanks in part to a successful manual of literary advice he has penned. Gissing's depiction of Dora's boudoir composition here fits her literary production neatly into the model of "women's work," or "the notion that women's public engagement must be an extension of domestic virtues and talents" (Epstein Nord 183).⁴⁰ In sharp contrast to Marian, for whom writing is toil and the place where that toil is accomplished a veritable prison, Dora is noticeably untroubled by her writing experience. This is partially because she is not writing for her life in the manner of Marian and Reardon, but also because her writing occurs within the confines of what was traditionally perceived to be acceptable in women's writing in the Victorian period.

Marian and Dora also write for very different audiences, a fact that contributes to their contrasting responses to writing. Unlike the quasi-academic, non-fictional prose that Marian writes, Dora's sketches and stories are written for a domestic audience that Victorian editors would assume to have no interest in seventeenth-century French literature or in political

⁴⁰ Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1995).

theory. Most of the writing that the Milvain sisters produce requires very little thought and less research, at least in Jasper's opinion. His advice to his sister Maud about an article she is preparing for a women's illustrated paper seems to reflect some of Gissing's own attitudes about an expanded literary market: "You must remember that people who read women's papers are irritated, simply irritated, by anything that isn't glaringly obvious. They hate an unusual thought. The art of writing for such papers – indeed, for the public in general – is to express vulgar thought and feeling in a way that flatters the vulgar thinkers and feelers" (385).

Dora and Maud may leave the typically feminine occupations of governess and music teacher for the profession of writing in London, but they continue to write traditionally feminine types of literature, such as history books for children (115) and stories for religious and girls' magazines. As Liggins points out, Jasper's advice to his sisters to begin in this way corresponds to the advice given in employment manuals, which often "confirmed that even journalists could not afford to abandon their femininity" (79). While the Milvain sisters come across as satirical figures in *New Grub Street*, an apparent comment on the vapidness of feminine literary genres, we should keep in mind that the majority of writing done by and for men in the novel tends to be just as ephemeral. Dora represents for Gissing the model of the successful woman writer who finds success because she is capable of supplying the market with what it craves from a socially acceptable position. Thus, in contrast to Marian's writing, the circuit of Dora and Maud's writing begins in the boudoir of the writer and ends in the boudoir or parlour of her audience, skipping entirely over the masculine space of the study and the public space of the Reading Room. With these details in mind, we can see more clearly that the painful experience that Gissing conceives for Marian is not simply the result of the physical eccentricities of the Reading Room space or of her own psychological identity

but of her emergence into the public sphere as a woman in a productive role; this emergence is marked in Marian's case by her work in a genre and a space associated with this sphere.

Public Space and the Public Sphere

As it is conceived of by Jürgen Habermas, the public sphere is a discursive space for rational-critical debate between individuals who are determined to be guided by argument rather than status.⁴¹ While the early public sphere consisted primarily of a small section of the population – literate, educated, and propertied white men – Habermas' description of the transformation of this discursive space emphasizes its increasing inclusiveness over time. In response to Habermas' theories, Michael Warner suggests that the development of print was central to the expansion of the public sphere and that the possibility of publication through the medium of print was largely responsible for its coming into being. "In print," Warner explains as he discusses the bourgeois public sphere of the eighteenth century, "one surrendered one's utterance to an audience that was by definition indefinite" (380).⁴² While earlier writers may have felt some anxiety about the level of mediation occasioned by print, Warner claims, "in the eighteenth century the consciousness of an abstract audience became a badge of distinction, a way of claiming a public disposition" (380). It is this process of "self-abstraction" (381) through the medium of print, which began in the eighteenth century and carried on into the nineteenth, that Warner feels facilitates the ostensibly status-free discourse of the public sphere. However, while self-abstraction might be seen as a tool capable of opening up the public sphere to rational-minded individuals whose actual status (whether it be influenced by their class, gender, race, or sexuality) would otherwise have excluded them

⁴¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere*, trans. T. Burger and F. Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989).

⁴² Michael Warner, "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject," *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992) 377-401.

from public life, Warner argues that, in fact, “the rhetorical strategy of personal abstraction” employed by writers as they enter the public domain “is both the utopian moment of the public sphere and a major source of domination” (382).

While the bourgeois public sphere “claimed to have no relation to the body image at all,” it continued throughout its transformation to rely “on features of certain bodies” (382). In fact, the “utopian” principle of negativity when it came to bodies in the public sphere – a principle that said that the validity of one’s public statement “bears a negative relation to [his or her] person,” so that an utterance carries force despite and not because of one’s personal status – continued to mark discursively certain features of bodies that were not modes of whiteness, maleness, and wealth “as the humiliating positivity of the particular” (382). In the process of self-abstraction created by the emergence into the public sphere through print, only certain accepted bodily features become abstracted while others continue to be marked as particularities of the body that could not become neutralized without ceasing to exist.

As many feminist critics have argued since the publication of Habermas’ study, the “bodily particularities” associated with femininity constitute key grounds for exclusion from the public sphere.⁴³ The promise of disincorporation, openness, and universality through self-abstraction that the public sphere seemed to offer was not available to women because gender difference is always rendered as a positive, marked particularity in the discursive zone that the public sphere creates. Faced with the possibilities of self-abstraction through print, women writers continued to face an obstacle in that the only way to neutralize the bodily features that contributed to their feminine identity was to deny them altogether. In Warner’s view, while

⁴³ For an analysis of the function of gender difference in the bourgeois public sphere see Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988). Cf. Nancy Fraser, “What’s Critical About Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender,” *Feminism as Critique*, eds. Seyla Benhabid and Drucilla Cornell (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987) 31-56. For an examination of these ideas in the context of the Victorian novel, see Pam Morris, *Imagining Inclusive Society in Nineteenth-Century Novels* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2004).

“self-abstraction for male bodies confirms masculinity,” the very same process for female bodies “denies femininity” (383). The result is that the very mechanism of publicity “designed to end domination is a form of domination” (384).

The tendency to mark femininity as a positive, bodily difference is evident in the Victorian discourse on feminine library use. This is particularly true, as Hoberman maintains, in the British Museum Reading Room because it was so closely associated with the literary public sphere, which Habermas believed led directly into the political public sphere (178). We see the complications of women’s bodies in the noise they make, the food they eat, and especially in the potential desire they elicit in the otherwise abstracted men who use the Reading Room. However, the potential of self-abstraction as a mechanism of domination only reaches its fullest expression in the characterization of the woman *writer* in the Reading Room, and here *New Grub Street* draws our attention once again to the different assumptions that accompanied the practices of reading and writing in the Victorian period.

Keeping Warner’s statements about the role of print in the public sphere in mind and returning again to Gissing’s depiction of Marian’s emergence into the literary world, we can begin to see the process of composition that Marian is engaged in as a furtive attempt at self-abstractioned publicity. Even though Alfred Yule tends to publish anonymously those articles Marian composes herself, the “recognizable name” (120) that Yule has among critical writers of the day and the fact that the “volumes and articles which bore his signature dealt with much the same subjects as his unsigned matter” (120) means that Marian’s publicity is mediated through the masculine identity of her father. To Alfred Yule, whether or not his daughter signs those passages of her writing that “were printed just as they came from her pen” is merely “a matter of business” (120). For Marian, however, the mechanism of her publicity as a woman writer is far more than a mere business matter, but a troubling crisis of gender identity that

Gissing uses the public space of the Reading Room to illustrate. Through his depiction of Marian's Reading Room struggles, Gissing gives us a sense of how the assumptions about the position of women in the late-Victorian literary market led to painful experiences of constraint, and this constraint corresponds to the restrictions of the public sphere later theorized by Warner and others.

Keeping Marian's relationship with Alfred Yule in mind, the specifics of her lament as Gissing recounts her craving for a life that better suits her are important: "She was not a *woman*, but a mere machine for reading and writing" (142).⁴⁴ Her negotiation of the Reading Room in a productive role and the self-abstraction that ostensibly permits her entrance into the public sphere are processes which have not only dehumanized her (in her transformation from organism to mechanism) but "de-feminized" her as well, thereby illustrating Warner's hypothesis that the self-abstraction of female bodies denies femininity. No wonder, then, that Gissing so often portrays the discomforts Marian feels as physical in nature – headaches, problems of sight, physical exhaustion. Emma Liggins identifies these elements of Marian's characterization as warning signs regarding the dangers of overwork in women, "a means of exploring (or exploding) cultural concerns about female fitness for intellectual study" (93). She points out at the same time, however, that the Darwinian struggle to compete and adapt in the pursuit of making a paying business of literature bears more heavily on the literary men in the novel than it does on Marian, as evidenced by the deaths of Reardon and Biffen and the blindness of Marian's own father.

We can better explain Marian's ailments by figuring them as symptomatic of her engagement with the public sphere and print culture. If inhabiting and making use of a space associated with the public sphere draws attention to the bodies of women readers, it does not

⁴⁴ Emphasis mine.

exert the same destructive influence on those bodies as the use of such a space does on the woman writer, at least in Gissing's imagining of the situation. In this case we can see Marian's sense of the Museum's burdensome gloom as one result of her anxiety about her transgression of Victorian gender boundaries. Her active production *as a woman* of public discourse in a space associated with the public sphere contributes to the blurring of the distinctions between public and private. Thus, Gissing's representation of Marian illustrates the degree to which her very identity itself becomes blurred through her participation in this process.

The images of restriction through which Marian comes to terms with the Reading Room further illustrate the dominating aspects of publicity for women writers. The two most prominent metaphors Gissing employs rely on the physical structure of the Reading Room for their effect. Marian's sense that the "radiating lines of desks" are but individual threads in a huge spider's web, the nucleus of which is "the great circle of the Catalogue" (144), emphasizes the degree to which she feels herself stuck, trapped amongst other readers and writers in a restrictive system that requires her to write, while at the same time demanding that she efface certain important markers of her identity and her body in the process. Other depictions of the Reading Room by Gissing's contemporaries also highlight the web-like appearance of the dome and desks, and an 1885 illustration in *Punch* shows several men ascending (aided by wings on which are written "Questions") towards shining busts of Garnett, Panizzi, and Bond (Principal Librarian from 1878 to 1888), while above the entire scene is a man tangled in a spider's web with the adjacent label, "The Reading Room Pest."⁴⁵ Furthermore, in Marian's apprehension that the walls will finally close in for good, that "in a moment the book-lined circumference of the room would be but a featureless prison-limit"

⁴⁵ "Interiors and Exteriors No. 5," *Punch* 88 (1885): 156.

(144), Gissing emphasizes the actual panoptical structure of the Museum Reading Room. The radiating lines of low desks, the circular shape of the room, and the elevated centre allowed the mass of Reading Room patrons to be broken up into orderly segments while at the same time facilitating a form of self-surveillance. In this way, the British Museum Reading Room is an illustration of Tony Bennett's claim (with reference to Foucault) that the nineteenth-century museum "embodied what had been, for Bentham, a major aim of panopticism – the democratic aspirations of a society rendered transparent to its own controlling gaze" (101). However, for Marian the panoptical restrictions of the Reading Room become more than merely physical. The woman writer feels herself dominated not just by the dimensions and design of the room, but by her economically necessitated entrance into the public sphere and the literary market in a position alien to her because of her gender.

It is important to remember that it is not women's writing in general that Gissing debases in *New Grub Street* – the characterization of Dora Milvain demonstrates this – but women's writing which transcends the private, domestic domain or "women's work" and takes part in the public sphere open primarily to men. The symbolic public sphere takes on concrete form within the physically public space of the Reading Room, thus providing a material setting in which Gissing can fictionalize his concerns about the feminization and democratization of the literary market and of public life in general.⁴⁶ To be present in the

⁴⁶ In reference to the dissolution of the public sphere, Hoberman notes that Habermas believed the "rational civic-minded individual" who constituted the public sphere "ceased to exist by the 1880s and 1890s" (179). In his essay, "The Pragmatic Ends of Popular Politics" (*Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992] 340-58), Harry Boyte attributes this late Victorian disintegration to "the growing replacement of a competitive capitalist economy with a monopolized economy dominated by large industrial and financial interests [which] undermined the power and authority of the commercial and professional middle classes," resulting in the break-down of the public into a "myriad of special interests" (343). In *Imagining Inclusive Society*, Pam Morris argues that the public sphere was already under such attacks much earlier, and that "the 1840s marked the point where the public sphere was transformed by the explosive pressure upon it of heterogeneous social voices: those of the organized working class, those of self-made industrial entrepreneurs, and, by the end of the decade, by the writing and claims of women" (21).

Reading Room as a woman reader could be a troubling experience in itself, but to be present and active as a woman writer brought with it an entirely new set of restrictions. *New Grub Street* both recognizes and perpetuates the widespread Victorian assumptions that link reading to passivity and consumption and writing to activity and production.

In his characterization of Marian Yule and his representation of her writing practices in the Reading Room, Gissing frees the Victorian woman writer from the charges of frivolity and mental promiscuity associated with women readers. Marian is allowed to take on an active role in her use of the Reading Room space, and this role is central to her characterization. However, instead of being liberated by her occupation in the literary profession and her shift from passive reading into active writing, Gissing shows us that the woman writer is pushed into another set of assumptions and restrictions hardly less threatening than those she would have faced as a mere reader, restrictions graphically illustrated by the spider-web and prison metaphors that Gissing uses to characterize the physical space of the Reading Room. In this way, *New Grub Street*'s contribution to the discourse of sickness and disease through which the late-Victorian Reading Room was often constructed is an indication of Gissing's interest in an economically necessitated form of women's writing in the literary market and the emergence of women into a public life and a public sphere that is already in decline.

How then are we to reconcile Marian's Reading Room experiences with her role in *New Grub Street* as a whole, and what do her struggles tell us about Gissing's objectives in the novel? Though one of Marian's functions in the novel is to elaborate the gendered definitions of writing and public space, we cannot forget that she is also one of the novel's most psychologically complex characters, who brings together "warmth, sensitivity, intelligence, and gentle concern for others" with "moral toughness in adversity" (Selig 47). P.J. Keating believes that she is, furthermore, one of the novel's only sympathetic middle-

class women, showing none of the petty-mindedness, materialism, and intellectual shallowness of other women characters “bred to refinement” (55). With this in mind, we need to determine how the process of self-abstraction Marian undergoes in the Museum Reading Room informs or complicates her relationship with Jasper, because this relationship is central to the novel as a whole, in terms of its plot as well as its broader thematic concerns.⁴⁷ For, although Marian is forced to *disembody* herself in the steps she takes towards publication in the Reading Room, Gissing makes his readers well aware of her physical presence in other scenes, particularly in those that involve Jasper himself.

That Jasper is physically attracted to Marian explains his reluctance, at the beginning of the novel, to get to know her, and he points out to his sister Dora that “she’s dangerous” to a man like him (Gissing 89), presumably because her physical beauty is accompanied by a lack of material wealth. Furthermore, during their meeting at the home of Marian’s uncle, Jasper finds a “particular grace” in Marian’s movement and decides that her “head and neck were admirably formed,” a fact to which her short hair draws attention (73). Even at her inkiest moments, in the Reading Room, Gissing draws our attention to her “thin” and “delicate” hands, which seem to be besmirched in some way by their contact with the “red, podgy” fingers of Quarmby, one of her father’s many hangers-on (122).

Though Jasper tries to convince himself and others that his admiration for Marian is the result of her intellect, it is clear that Gissing wants his readers to see the attraction as primarily physical, even sexual. Perhaps this is why Marian finds joy in her relationship with Jasper, as short as it is. She discovers in it a sense of power in the effect she has on him, despite his attempts to avoid her for the sake of “practicality.” “Of a certainty,” Marian

⁴⁷ Grylls maintains, for instance, that the juxtaposition of the Jasper/Marian relationship with the Reardon/Amy relationship anchors the novel’s central dilemma, which he defines as the “conflict between moral integrity and material success” (83).

decides, “there was a conflict between his ambition and his love, but she recognised her power over him and exulted in it” (213). She is not asked to efface her femininity in this relationship – instead, her physical body is an asset. Indeed, Marian is aware of Jasper’s physical attraction to her and revels in it because the attention she is receiving comes from a man so different from her father and his pedantic Museum acquaintances (the description of Quarmby’s discoloured and misshapen fingers on Marian’s young and feminine hand is surely meant to arouse a sense of impropriety, if not mild revulsion). She notes to herself one night after Jasper walks her home that “from the first his way of regarding her had shown frank interest” (213), and readers have already been made aware of such regard in an earlier Museum scene, as Jasper waits for Marian outside the ladies cloakroom: “Milvain had only to wait a minute or two. He surveyed Marian from head to foot when she appeared – an impertinence as unintentional as that occasionally noticeable in his speech – and smiled approval” (145). Clearly such impertinence signals sexual attraction, and Marian’s thoughts reveal that Jasper’s attraction is welcome and mutual, precisely because it depends on the femininity she must so often deny. Jasper, she judges, is the first man to approach her with “display of feeling and energy and youthful self confidence” (212), and she decides that Jasper is handsome as well, calling attention to his own physical qualities.

It is significant, especially considering Marian’s earlier complaint that she is more machine than woman, that Gissing concludes Marian’s interior monologue by stating that her “womanhood went eagerly to meet him” (212) in his approach to her. By engaging her femininity and her sexuality, Marian’s relationship with Jasper counteracts what John Goode calls the “desexualisation” she experiences in her professional life as a result of “the overlapping of social and sexual selection” (134-5).⁴⁸ Indeed, it is exactly her association with

⁴⁸ John Goode, *George Gissing: Ideology and Fiction* (London: Vision, 1978).

the restrictions of the Reading Room that she hopes Jasper can free her from as Chapter XIV comes to a close: "The unhoped was all but granted her. She could labour on in the valley of the shadow of books, for a ray of dazzling sunshine might at any moment strike into its musty gloom" (214). Jasper's attraction to Marian and the potential for a romantic relationship provides a kind of antidote to the sickness and gloom of the Reading Room and her writing, just as it provides a contrast to the pedantry and mechanical literary work she associates with her father. This is why Goode can credibly call Marian's ordeal of poverty "an ordeal of sexuality" (133) and claim that Jasper's ultimate rejection of Marian (because of her loss of the money she was to receive from her uncle's will) leaves her "sexually bereaved" (134). The avenue that opens up when Jasper begins to pursue her, one that should allow her a degree of freedom from the gendered restrictions of her profession, is closed once again when Jasper's practicality triumphs over his desire.

The question that remains to be answered is how badly Marian is treated by the narrative and by Jasper's change of heart. Besides the obvious insult of being rejected by the man she hoped to marry, the degree to which her ultimate position in the novel is meant to inspire pathos is still up for debate. The last readers hear of Marian, she has been granted a position as an assistant librarian in a provincial town. This turn of events, arising from the help of one of her father's literary friends, saves Marian and her family from the workhouse, where the unfortunate Mr. Hinks and his wife now preside (486-7). The move appears to be a blessing for Marian, as she had until this point struggled to support her mother and her now blind father by her writing, eventually falling ill (with "attacks of nervous disorder") and being forced to draw upon the capital she received from her uncle's will (486).

Critics disagree, however, on whether or not Marian's outcome is ultimately a positive one. Keating notes for instance that, in a sense, Gissing is fulfilling Marian's wish to labour

with her hands rather than write, but he contends that her new position “does not represent freedom,” and that “as a country librarian she is finally condemned to the very world she had longed to opt out of” (48). David Kramer, too, would have us believe that Marian only accepts her position as country librarian “bitterly” (319), though there is no evidence of bitterness in the text itself.⁴⁹ Other, more recent studies of Gissing have taken an alternate view. Emma Liggins claims, for instance, that Gissing offers a more positive resolution to the professional woman’s story than some of the New Woman novelists with whom she compares him (98). She notes that “librarianship, a potentially more lucrative and certainly more secure profession than journalism, did not require formal training at this stage” and could provide acceptable openings for educated middle-class women (98-9). Liggins feels that although Gissing refuses “frustratingly” to show Marian’s lifestyle as a librarian, “the fact that the educated heroine is now being paid to occupy a public intellectual space, and more importantly on her own terms, suggests [Gissing’s] recognition of the professional woman’s capacity to profit from her intellectual powers” (99). Liggins also agrees with David Kramer that Gissing is ahead of his time in his positioning of Marian in a public, intellectual role (99).⁵⁰ In fact, women were rarely if ever discussed as suitable choices for librarians until well after the 1880s, and the majority of popular articles on women librarians were published in the 1890s.⁵¹ While Kramer still holds that Marian is settling for her final position, thus implying that the narrative punishes her to some extent, he and Liggins both propose, in contrast to Keating, that Marian’s new occupation can be read in a positive light.

⁴⁹ David Kramer, “George Gissing and Women’s Work: Contextualizing the Female Professional” *English Literature in Transition: 1880-1920* 43 (2000): 316-30.

⁵⁰ Kramer claims that Marian is “settling unhappily for what is actually pioneering work” (319).

⁵¹ See, for instance, “Work and Workers. By the Actual Workers. [X. - Women as Librarians],” *The Monthly Packet* 84 (1892): 43-7; “Paragraphs [Women Librarians],” *The Englishwoman’s Review* 218 (1893): 208; “Employment [Notes] [Educated Women as Librarians],” *Hearth & Home: An Illustrated Weekly Journal for Gentlewomen* 386 (1898): 791; Maud A. Biggs, “Article III. – Women as Public Librarians,” *The Englishwoman’s Review* 238 (1898): 155-8.

Despite Marian's pioneering new role, however, it is hard to see her position at the conclusion of the novel as anything but a banishment because she seems to have gone the way of Reardon, Biffen, and Alfred Yule, all of whom were unable to compete in the seemingly evolutionary struggle of the modern literary market. Readers are left only with the victors: Jasper and Amy Milvain, Dora and her husband Whelpdale. In truth, however, Gissing might have made Marian's narrative end quite differently if he had wanted her banishment to be complete, and in this way, the location of her assistantship is significant, because Marian is no longer in London, even though there were several public libraries for her to work at in the metropolis in the 1880s. We should remember that Marian expressed a muted preference for rural life earlier in the narrative, in conversation with Jasper. Remarking on the misery of London's winter weather, Jasper notes that Finden (where the two met initially) might be better this time of year, to which Marian replies, "If the weather were bad, it would be bad in a natural way; but this is artificial misery!" (145).

It is also true that much of the strictly physical discomfort Marian feels in the Reading Room she herself associates with the sickly, yellow fog that blocks the light from the dome and seems to seep into the atmosphere of the room itself. Largely products of the city's many coal furnaces, these fogs truly are instances of artificial rather than natural misery. Considering these details, we might see Marian Yule as a less fortunate precursor to Gissing's Henry Ryecroft, another writer who escapes the trials of New Grub Street for the natural world of rural England. Taking Marian's new intellectual position and her liberty from the "artificial misery" of London into account, we can revise Keating's estimation of her outcome and see it, in fact, as a form of freedom. Marian may not be entirely free from books and pedantry, but she is supporting her family with a form of intellectual labour that her education has prepared her for, and she is free from the machinery of repression inherent in the form of

literary production she has been involved in. A complete picture of Marian's role in *New Grub Street* must take these factors into account.

Reading, Writing, and a Man's Business in "Spellbound" and "Christopherson"

In terms of its contribution to the discourse on literacy, *New Grub Street* does more than show readers the potential effects of reading and writing on femininity. It also attends closely to the intersection of literacy and masculinity. Martin Danahay argues that *New Grub Street* dramatizes the demise of work – here, literary work – as an “exclusively masculine enterprise, and registers Gissing's pessimism about the status of the male writer as more and more women entered the workforce” (143).⁵² Danahay suggests that the attacks on the image of the man of letters depicted in the novel also issue from the steady industrialization of writing, which transformed the definition of literary composition from a “craft” into another of the myriad forms of Victorian “material production” (143), thereby altering forever the market for which Jasper Milvain, Edwin Reardon, and Alfred Yule produce and their positions within this market. Reardon demonstrates most clearly the novel's analysis of the Victorian conflation of manliness and literary success and the manner in which the new realities of the literary marketplace could compromise a writer's masculinity. As Reardon himself observes while looking back on his shattered literary career, “a man has no business to fail; least of all can he expect others to have time to look back upon him or pity him if he sink under the stress of conflict” (Gissing 271). According to the ideology to which Reardon subscribes, then, it is unmanly to fail as a writer, and just as he believes that his fellow authors will ignore him in his defeat, Reardon also senses that society in general is hostile to an unsuccessful man. As he explains in a conversation with his wife, “The world has no pity on a man who can't do or

⁵² Martin Danahay, *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art, and Masculinity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

produce something it thinks worth money. You may be a divine poet, and if some good fellow doesn't take pity on you you'll starve by the roadside" (222). Society, he maintains bleakly, "is as blind and brutal as fate" (222), but he blames himself for his lack of productivity and recognizes that this weakness is a strike against his manliness.

The concepts of success, productivity, and manliness are linked for Reardon because he bases his view of himself as a man almost entirely on his ability to work. When he is no longer able to support himself and his family through his writing, he recognizes this failure as a black mark on his masculinity. As Danahay explains, Reardon's return to the life of a clerk signals a loss of masculinity because it takes him out of a professional class and places him back amongst the wage earners profiting from the expansion of literacy and education, many of whom were women. While the professions were gendered as masculine by means of "accreditation and control of entry into the field" (145), the ranks of clerks were quickly being filled with educated women – a phenomenon Gissing later explores in *The Odd Women* (1893). Clerking had become a "feminized" occupation by the 1880s and 1890s because the work of clerk had "always been 'feminized' in opposition to the ideal of sweaty, muscular labour carried out in the outdoors" (147). Although he has already equated success and manliness himself, Reardon blames Jasper Milvain for the idea's circulation and for infecting Amy with it, thus turning her against her husband. "Your way of talking," Reardon tells Jasper during a chance meeting near the home of Amy's mother, "has always been to glorify success, to insist upon it as the one end a man ought to keep in view. If you had talked so to me alone, it wouldn't have mattered. But there was generally someone else present" (Gissing 279).

Reardon's anger at Jasper here is misplaced, however, because in his celebration of success Jasper has only voiced a common point of view regarding the necessity of a middle-class man to succeed in the realm of work. Amy's brother John Yule accepts a similar

definition of manliness, for instance, when he complains about Amy's having to move back in with the family as a result of Reardon's failure to make a living by his writing. Someone, John Yule declares, must go to Reardon and make him aware that "he's behaving in a confoundedly ungentlemanly way" (261). His comment here, and his encounter with Reardon later on when he himself takes on the task of setting his brother-in-law straight, are interesting in this context because Yule *appears* in many ways to be a paragon of Victorian masculinity. Readers are told, for instance, that Yule returns to his mother's home "from his gentlemanly occupations" between six and seven in the evening (259). Yet, the superficiality of these manly "occupations" becomes clear only when the narrator describes John's "sanctum" in the next paragraph: "Behind the dining-room was a comfortable little chamber set apart as John's sanctum; here he smoked and entertained his male friends, and contemplated the portraits of those female ones who would not have been altogether at their ease in Mrs. Yule's drawing room" (260). John Tosh identifies such masculine sanctuaries, more common in the domestic space as the nineteenth century wore on, as responses to the perceived feminine authority of the middle-class home (109).⁵³ John's room is a kind of silent masculine protest against the "stifling conventions" (109) of the Victorian drawing-room and a mark of his traditional manliness. His appearance of gentlemanliness and independence (though in reality he is supported by a small legacy of his mother's) makes his comments to Reardon all the more painful for the writer-cum-clerk.

The equation that *New Grub Street's* masculine characters make between work and gender identity was frequently made elsewhere in Victorian society, where work was seen primarily as a masculine duty (though in reality it may have been a necessity for all). In its Victorian manifestation, Danahay points out, the Protestant work ethic internalized the

⁵³ John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Pearson, 2005).

compulsion to work “as a mark of masculine morality,” so that a reluctance or inability to work could be seen as emasculating, as well as socially and morally sinful (8). Danahay is building, in part, on Herbert Sussman’s formulation of Victorian masculinity, which holds that “normative bourgeois manliness is defined as success within the world of work inhabited solely by other [men]” (Sussman 4).⁵⁴ According to Sussman, the ideal bourgeois man is defined as a hard-working husband, with an emphasis on masculine self-discipline and self-denial.

Painfully for Reardon, his wife recognizes his failure of masculinity as well, and she remarks on his apparent lack of strength and discipline early in the novel, just as his downfall begins: “You are much weaker than I imagined. Difficulties crush you, instead of rousing you to struggle” (Gissing 93). Amy’s next comment calls Reardon’s manhood in to question more overtly, as she asks, “But don’t you think it’s rather unmanly, this state of things? You say you love me, and I try to believe it. But whilst you are saying so, you let me get nearer and nearer to miserable, hateful poverty” (93). Again, Reardon’s inability to manage his domestic situation economically is put forward as an injury to his manliness, and now that his professional failure has emasculated him, Reardon feels his only hope to win back his masculine identity in this relationship can come from some physical display of tyrannical authority: “He had but to do one thing: to seize her by the arm, drag her up from the chair, dash her back again with all his force – there, the transformation would be complete, they would stand towards each other on a natural footing. With an added curse perhaps –. Instead of that, he choked, struggled for breath, and shed tears” (248). If he had been able to bring himself to the point of violence, Reardon feels, he might have “overawed her” and made her feel, “Yes, he is a man, and I have put my destiny into his hands” (248). Reardon is not the

⁵⁴ Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995).

man to do such things, however, and his failure to use violence might be seen as “a marker of his effeminacy in conventional Victorian gender ideology” (Danahay 152-3).⁵⁵

In recent years, critics have paid considerable attention to Gissing’s investment in what Danahay calls “conventional Victorian gender ideology” and to the author’s representation of gender and its performance in contemporary society. As the discussion of *New Grub Street* above illustrates, Gissing’s novels clearly call for such investigations because they so frequently insist on bringing to light the complications of gender identity for both men and women at the turn of the century. As this chapter moves away from *New Grub Street* and towards Gissing’s short fiction, I would like to address more directly the ways in which Gissing’s writing explores the difficulties faced by Victorian men as they endeavour to manage their masculine identities in the face of new pressures placed on them in both their public and private lives. Just as this form of gender management is at issue for *New Grub Street*’s Edwin Reardon as he struggles to write, it is in the background for male characters in “Spellbound” and “Christopherson” as they struggle with their positions in the world of work. In each story, Gissing explores the relationship between gender, work, and literacy that he began in *New Grub Street*, but he shifts his focus from the impact of writing on masculinity to the impact of reading, casting a critical eye on the larger effects of education and mass literacy on English society at the turn of the century.

While “Spellbound” depicts the struggles of a lower-class “book-butterfly” whose addiction to reading newspapers and magazines in London’s free libraries prevents him from

⁵⁵ Herbert Sussman’s definition of Victorian masculinity, one that he derives predominantly from the writings of Carlyle and Samuel Smiles, suggests a counter-reading to Danahay’s here. In Sussman’s view, “manliness” is opposed to “maleness” in Victorian writing about masculinity, and while maleness is defined “in essentialist terms as the possession of innate potency or ‘untutored energy’,” manliness is “defined not as this essence but as hard-won achievement, a continuous process of maintaining a perilous psychic balance characterized by regulation of this potentially destructive male energy” (Sussman 25). Thus, while Sussman would see Reardon’s failure to succeed in the world of work as a failure of masculinity, his reluctance to strike Amy here shows his possession of a form of manliness celebrated by other Victorian writers. In this instance, however, I think Danahay’s reading of the scene is more in line with Gissing’s objectives.

finding employment and pushes his household to the edge of financial ruin, “Christopherson” presents the transformation of an independent gentleman into a loafing bookworm whose obsession with his musty volumes threatens to kill his wife. In contrast, Gissing presents the wives of these characters as remarkable women who support their households financially, replacing their incapacitated husbands in public life and in the traditionally masculine role of breadwinner. In this way, “Spellbound” and “Christopherson” may be read as attempts to show the negative effects of misdirected literacy. Gissing defines the bibliomania and desultory reading that plague his characters as social diseases of reading, diseases which threaten to undermine the gendered definitions of character and work underpinning Victorian society.

Gissing began writing “Spellbound” in March of 1896, and it was published only a few months later, in October 1897, in *The English Illustrated Magazine* at the request of the editor, Clement Shorter, who had previously published several of Gissing’s stories.⁵⁶ The story traces the steps of a recently sacked draper’s salesman, Percy Dunn, in his negotiation of the streets of London as he tries, half-heartedly, to find a job to support himself and his wife. It is evidence of Gissing’s preoccupation with work in his later fiction that Dunn’s lack of employment marks him physically. He is “ill-fed and anxious” in appearance, and the narrator explains that “one could imagine him a clerk or a shopman badly in want of a place” (165).⁵⁷ Yet despite the straits he has found himself in during his “two months of undesired leisure” (168), Dunn spends most of his time in London’s free libraries, leaving his wife under the impression that he is looking for work. Ultimately, “Spellbound” ends much as it began, with

⁵⁶ Christine Huguet, introduction, “Spellbound,” by George Gissing, *Spellbound: George Gissing*, ed. Christine Huguet, 2 vols. ([Oss.]: Equilibris, 2008) 163-4.

⁵⁷ George Gissing, “Spellbound,” *Spellbound, George Gissing*, ed. Christine Huguet, 2 vols. ([Oss.]: Equilibris 2008) 165-76.

Dunn dreamily reading periodicals while his wife and her younger brother maintain his household.

“Christopherson,” published in *The Illustrated London News* five years later, also deals with the problems of gender and unemployment, but it takes as its main character a man who began life at a much higher point on the social scale than Percy Dunn. Christopherson is a gentleman ruined by business dealings at the age of forty and forced thereafter to “earn his living as a clerk or something of the kind” (184), until an unnamed illness puts an end even to this.⁵⁸ He now spends his time loafing around second-hand bookstalls, as his second wife – once the governess to his now-deceased daughter – supports the couple through her work in a Tottenham Court Road shop. As with “Spellbound,” Gissing foregrounds the subject of work in the story’s initial episode, in which the narrator recalls his first meeting with the story’s subject. He explains that on the day he first met Christopherson, he had been working tirelessly at some unspecified employment, and that while the “spring languor” of the weather had “troubled his solitary work in the heart of London,” he was not persuaded to quit until after sunset (179). When the narrator subsequently crosses paths with Christopherson at a bookshop in Marylebone Road, he takes him at first glance to be a beggar because of the “respectful nervousness of his voice” and the shabbiness of his dress (180). Thus, Gissing makes it clear not only that work is important to the narrator, but that, like Percy Dunn’s, Christopherson’s own inability or unwillingness to work is instantly recognizable in his manners and physical appearance. In this way, both stories insist on the centrality of work in daily life in their early scenes, and because work was so closely linked to questions of gender identity, the stories show Gissing’s interest in the problems that a failure or inability to work could introduce to an otherwise healthy masculine identity.

⁵⁸ George Gissing, “Christopherson,” *The Day of Silence and Other Stories*, ed. Pierre Coustillas (London: J.M. Dent, 1993) 179-93.

The ideal of bourgeois masculinity that Danahay and Sussman outline in their work – the image of the middle-class man as a hard-working husband gifted with self-discipline and capable of self-denial – forms the thematic core of both “Spellbound” and “Christopherson.” These images of masculinity are presented most forcefully in “Christopherson.” I have noted, for instance, that the narrator’s dedication to work launches “Christopherson,” but the most obvious model of traditional masculinity can be found in the character of Pomfret, a mutual friend of Christopherson and the narrator. Readers are introduced to Pomfret when he arrives at Christopherson’s tiny flat to help him move. The struggling couple rent from Pomfret’s aunt, and the nephew has taken an interest in Christopherson, much as the narrator will do. Gissing describes Pomfret as “a tall, wiry fellow, whose sandy hair, light blue eyes, jutting jawbones, and large mouth [make him] a picture suggestive of small refinement but of vigorous and wholesome manhood” (182). His association with muscular, physical activity further emphasizes his manliness. Leaving Christopherson’s stifling and cramped apartment with the narrator, for instance, the transplanted Yorkshireman remarks, “Eh, but it’s a grand day! I’d give something for a walk on Ilkley Moors” (184). Pomfret’s association with physical expression is strengthened later when, angered by Christopherson’s failure to work and by his treatment of his wife, he claims that he “should have punched his head before now” if Christopherson had not been a gentleman (184).⁵⁹

When measured against the ultra-masculine figure of Pomfret, the limitations of Christopherson’s manliness are even more pronounced. In contrast to Pomfret’s “rugged strain” (186) and his vigorous voice and expression, Christopherson speaks “nervously, [and] brokenly with now or then a deep sigh or a crow of laughter” (183). Indeed, nervousness is the

⁵⁹ Shortly after this scene Pomfret learns that the Christophersons, who are supposed to be moving to the country to improve Mrs. Christopherson’s health, will be staying in London because the husband cannot bear to leave his library behind in the move. He explains that situation to the narrator while “sputtering and growling” (186), again showing his attempts to restrain potentially destructive energy within him.

term used to describe him most consistently, thus linking his characterization to Victorian debates about masculinity and nervous disorders that were themselves intertwined with the subject of work.⁶⁰ Janet Oppenheim examines these debates about “manly nerves” in her study of Victorian depression and nervous disorders, in which she explains that the possibility of nervous breakdown in men “made a mockery” of the stereotypical gender distinctions routinely depicted in everything from popular literature to medical texts and anthropological analyses; masculine nervousness had the potential to reduce “male victims to passivity, removing them from business activities and public affairs, rendering them utterly inactive” (141).⁶¹

As Oppenheim puts it, the kind of susceptibility to nerves that Christopherson shows throughout the story could not be countenanced by the “secular creed” of manliness that pervaded late Victorian Britain (150). This creed of self-control and discipline “took a man’s public success or failure as an accurate index of his private worth and judged worth in terms of economic value, not moral worthiness” (151). Christopherson’s social and financial ruination is a measure of his personal failure of masculinity (as was the case with *New Grub Street*’s Edwin Reardon), a failure for which his nervousness acts as an outward sign. Indeed, Christopherson’s problematic manliness can also be seen in his appearance, as he lacks the “vigorous and wholesome” physique of Pomfret. The narrator’s first impression is of a man of about sixty: “his long, thin hair and straggling beard were grizzled, and a somewhat rheumy eye looked out from his bloodless, hollowed countenance” (180). His gaunt and sickly appearance and his obvious nervousness characterize Christopherson as a failed man.

⁶⁰ Gissing does much to emphasize Christopherson’s nervousness and timidity. In the initial scene his voice is said to contain a “respectful nervousness” (179), and shortly afterwards his speech is alternately described as “uncertain,” “tremulous,” “timid,” and “anxious” (180).

⁶¹ Janet Oppenheim, *Shattered Nerves: Doctors, Patients, and Depression in Victorian England* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991).

When nervous disorders made men economically inactive, the consequent breakdown could be seen as a “social as well as a personal catastrophe” because an incapacitated man was thought to fail “both his own dependents and society as a whole” (Oppenheim 151). While Gissing does not say directly that a nervous breakdown has caused Christopherson’s public inactivity, he makes it clear that Christopherson lacks the kind of self-command associated with his friend Pomfret, and he demonstrates the extent of his nervous weakness in his temporary breakdown at the story’s climax. Christopherson and his wife have been offered a place with some relatives in the country, a move that will improve Mrs. Christopherson’s health, but the chance is ruined because Christopherson is so attached to the books he will be forced to leave behind. When his wife’s health deteriorates significantly, Christopherson rightly blames himself in a hysterical outburst before the narrator. He sobs, and with tears streaming down his face he wildly casts a great pile of books out of the window, cursing his unnatural attachment to them, while the narrator holds him and begs him to “control himself” (191).⁶²

In the minds of readers, Christopherson’s absence from public life and his unusual domestic situation compound the damage done to his masculinity. Since the unspecified “sickness” – quite possibly the result of depression or anxiety – caused him to quit his position as a clerk, Christopherson has “only loafed” (185), according to Pomfret, while his wife’s work in a Tottenham Court Road shop supports the family. As a paragon of traditional manliness, Pomfret cannot abide this state of affairs, claiming that Mrs Christopherson meets his ideal of a lady: “How her husband can ‘a borne to see her living the life she has, it’s more than I can understand” (184) “By - ! I’d have turned burglar,” he explains, “if I could ‘a found

⁶² It appears that Christopherson has been heading towards a mental breakdown for some time, partly as a result of his wife’s illness and his obsession with his books. When the narrator goes to visit the couple, upon his hearing that their chance to escape London has been dashed, the landlady tells him that Christopherson “would soon break down: he looked like a ghost and seemed ‘half-crazed’” (189).

no other way of keeping her in comfort" (184). But instead of such masculine displays of valour, Christopherson uses much of his wife's small income to buy books, adding to his already gargantuan and unhealthy library. Gissing uses the unwholesomeness of Christopherson's library as a symbol of the unnatural and unhealthy relationship that the man has to his books. A booklover himself, even the narrator is shocked by the volume of books in the couple's tiny apartment and by the physical effect they have on anyone who enters it: "The window being shut, and the sunshine glowing upon it, an intolerable stuffiness oppressed the air. Never had I been made so uncomfortable by the odour of printed paper and bindings" (182). Upon entering the couple's bedroom (similarly full of books) he remarks, "the bookishness of the air made it a disgusting thought that two persons occupied this chamber every night" (183). Christopherson's unnatural attachment to these piles of books is key in Gissing's depiction of his compromised masculinity.

While "Spellbound" lacks a model of masculinity the likes of Pomfret, the relationship between manliness, class, and work similarly propels the narrative. Percy Dunn realizes the precariousness of his position as an unemployed man when he considers his wife's necessary return to work at the beginning of the story. His comment to her, "I'm not going to live on your earnings. That's not my sort; I'm not one of that kind," shows that he is well aware of the expectations placed on him as a married man (168). He does not believe in "married women going to work-rooms" (168). His awareness of these expectations compels him briefly to try to stop his loafing in the free library and to ask himself, "with no base intention," whether he can "live on his wife's wages. Impossible, of course" (168).

When Maggie Dunn's younger brother moves in and begins contributing to the household income, making up for Dunn's own failings, Dunn shamefully vows that he will find work "or not come 'ome at all" in an emotional outburst less extreme – but no less

noticeable – than Christopherson’s (171). His “voice and aspect” during this exchange are alarming to his wife, who has lately noticed “a growing strangeness in him, a lethargy which held him mute and seemed to weigh upon his limbs” (171). She fears, in fact, that he is suicidal.⁶³ These observations show that, although Gissing does not depict Dunn as nervous to the same extent that he does Christopherson, his actions and demeanour suggest that he too suffers from “manly nerves” or depression. Like Christopherson, Dunn appears “anxious,” and his fingernails (upon which he gnaws throughout the story) are “bitten to the quick” (165). Combined with this apparent anxiety are Dunn’s vacant expression and languid, almost purposeless movements, which make him appear at times to be sleepwalking (166). In his “disquieting eye” and “dull stare,” Maggie finds signs that “his wits are leaving him” (171). As with Christopherson, the presence of an “unmanly” psychological condition further damages Dunn’s masculinity.

Books and Idleness in “Spellbound” and “Christopherson”

Both of these short stories imply that the greatest threat to masculinity is *idleness*. While David Grylls argues persuasively in his examination of “Spellbound” that charges of idleness are “inadequate” to explain Dunn’s shortcomings because of the “weirdly non-volitional nature” of his actions (127), the concept of idleness is central to the story when we examine it in the context of Victorian views on work and masculinity.⁶⁴ Indictments of idleness in men had been common in the fashioning of male identity since the 1830s and 1840s, and they were strengthened in the mid-Victorian period by the notion of Muscular

⁶³ “Hearing him speak thus, she had visions of tragic calamity; he would drown himself, or commit ghastly suicide on the railway line. With all the animation of which she was capable, Maggie exhorted him to be hopeful” (171).

⁶⁴ David Grylls, “Addicted to Newsprint: ‘Spellbound’,” *Spellbound, George Gissing*, vol. 2, ed. Christine Huguet ([Oss.]: Equilibris, 2008) 119-32. Grylls does note, however, that Maggie’s brother’s productive action at such an early age “indicts by contrast Dunn’s incapacity” to work (126).

Christianity, which sought to combine physical activity and strength with Evangelical morality. Thus, arguing for the centrality of physical activity and labour in Victorian constructions of manliness, David Newsome identifies the phrase, "I act, therefore I am" as a fitting slogan for traditional Victorian masculinity (197).⁶⁵ While potential nervous disorders in the stories' central characters contribute to their idleness, this is only part of what Gissing is striving to achieve in these works. In fact, with "Spellbound" and "Christopherson" he adds a new feature to the discourse on masculinity and work by locating problematic modes of reading at the root of his characters' idleness. When positioned in a way that emphasizes their investment in acts of reading, these stories can be seen as extensions of the critique of mass literacy and popular modes of reading that Gissing advances throughout novels such as *New Grub Street*, *The Odd Women*, and *In the Year of Jubilee*.

In "Spellbound," the story in which Gissing deals most directly with popular reading models, idleness is a defining characteristic of the desultory form of reading Percy Dunn pursues. Gissing introduces his model of desultory reading midway through the story in his description of the revised Dunn household. After Maggie and her brother leave the flat for the day to work, Dunn heads for the free library in St. Martin's Lane, "ostensibly to search newspapers for a likely advertisement, but in reality to indulge in the form of idleness which had taken an irresistible hold upon him: to moon for hours over columns and pages of print, stupefying himself as with a drug which lulled his anxieties, obscured his conscience" (169-70). The idleness of Dunn's reading and its stupefying effect put Gissing's representation of desultory reading here in line with those models presented by commentators such as James Stephen, Stafford Henry Northcote, and Frederic Harrison in their reading guides and essays. Indeed, while Gissing never uses the term "desultory" specifically in "Spellbound," Dunn's

⁶⁵ David Newsome, *Godliness and Good Learning* (London: Murray, 1961).

library use is evidently meant to illustrate this dangerous form of literary consumption. Upon entering the reading room with the first rush of patrons in the story's first scene, Dunn holds the place in front of a newspaper for a minute or two, then draws back and stands apart, "gazing idly about him": "Then, with sauntering steps, he approached one of the publications which no one else cared to examine – the new number of a religious weekly – and over this he spent a quarter of an hour" (165). When a man in the next row retires from the paper he has been reading, Dunn steps into his place, "and so all through the morning, from paper to paper as his turn came" (165). His afternoon is spent reading in a similarly desultory manner in the magazine room, where he moves idly from review to review, reading what is in front of him whether the subject interests him or not.⁶⁶ This is quite clearly the acquisition of "loose, disconnected, unsystematic, gaseous information" that James Stephen speaks of with concern in *Desultory and Systematic Reading* (1853), closer to "idle loitering" than the "energetic activity" that Stafford Henry Northcote discusses in his lecture on the subject.

Percy Dunn appears to have been trapped in this particular form of idleness by the addictive qualities of newspapers and magazines and by the habit-forming practice of desultory reading they encourage, a point Gissing emphasizes shortly after Dunn finds work as an itinerant salesman. His new sales route leads him past the doors of a newly-opened public library: "It was like the sight of a public-house to the habitual drinker: he quivered under the temptation, and whipped himself forward; but his weary legs were traitorous. The reading-room, with its smell of new print, once more drugged his conscience, and there he sat until nightfall" (172). This passage also suggests that Gissing was acquainted with the models of reading as a habit and as a disease so popular in late-Victorian periodicals, recalling – for

⁶⁶ For instance, when Dunn is unable to do better, he takes "a spot at a chair devoted to an organ of vegetarianism. The subject had no interest whatever for him, but he opened the periodical and read therein, until a departing neighbour enabled him to exchange it for the *Westminster Review*" (166).

instance – the association made between reading and problem drinking in “The Vice of Reading,” discussed in Chapter 3. The article in question presents an unhealthy appetite for low forms of literature (sensation novels, miscellaneous periodicals, etc.) to be as destructive as “dram-drinking”: “The individual is surely as enfeebled by it, his taste corrupted, his will unstrung, his understanding soddened.” In showing Percy Dunn to be a confirmed desultory reader, Gissing has made him the victim of an addictive mode of passive reading that renders him idle and incapable of activity on a larger scale; his disease of reading is therefore the ultimate source of his compromised masculine identity, and we can understand his apparent anxiety and depression as the consequences of his unhealthy form of textual consumption. Dunn appears to represent the useless, shiftless, and forlornly habitual and indiscriminate reader described in “The Habit of Reading,” and he suffers from what H.V. Wiese called “the pestilence that walketh in the magazines.”

Christopherson too has been thrown into idleness by his attachment to books. Yet, there are important difference between him and Percy Dunn. For one thing, Christopherson is a “bookworm,” as he himself acknowledges when he first meets the narrator. He expresses no interest in periodical literature, spending all his time and money rebuilding the great library he sold off when he was forced to become a clerk. In contrast, Dunn is more properly a “newspaper worm” or what Northcote calls a “book butterfly” because of his extremely desultory reading methods and choice of reading material. He is, in the words of the author of “The Habit of Reading,” a “devourer of the flying leaves of literature.” Another key contrast is that Christopherson becomes self-aware over the course of the narrative and recognizes his idleness, unlike Dunn who too easily deceives himself that “he [has] enriched his mind” upon finishing an article from “one of the graver monthlies” (172).

Christopherson's apparent epiphany occurs during his near-hysterical outburst, when he acknowledges that he has given his wife nothing but "toil and care" since their marriage. "I lived in idleness," he cries, "I never tried to save her that daily toil at the shop" ("Christopherson" 191). But worse than the trouble he has given her is the degree to which he has "starved and stinted her to buy books" (191). "Oh the shame of it! The wickedness of it!" he cries, "It was my vice – the vice that enslaved me just as if it had been drinking or gambling" (191). Here again Gissing extends the popular model of reading as a vice into the realm of fiction, responding to it and reshaping it from its origins in periodical literature. Christopherson's comments also draw a clear link between his characterization and Percy Dunn's.⁶⁷ The habitual nature of these men's reading practices further damages their masculine identities because it so clearly shows their lack of the self-control, self-discipline, and self-denial. Neither Dunn nor Christopherson has the inner strength to overcome the temptations posed by print, to live up to their duties as men, and to engage in some form of work in order to sustain the domestic environments they return to, shamefully, every evening.

In Gissing's view, without the exercise of will, literacy is a detriment rather than an asset to men, and recent work on models of Victorian masculinity suggests that other commentators shared Gissing's opinion. For instance, Sussman identifies the figure of the monk as the "extreme or limit case" of what he calls the "Victorian practice of manliness as reserve" (3), the constant process of maintenance and control in which middle-class men were supposed to be involved. Similarly, Adams suggests that the models of masculinity he identifies in the writing of poets and men of letters "lay claim to the capacity for self-

⁶⁷ Grylls (2008) too notes the similarity that these stories show in their treatment of reading addiction, suggesting that "evidently, certain features of 'Spellbound' ... so fascinated Gissing that he was moved to reproduce them in a story written six years later" (122).

discipline as a distinctly masculine attribute" (2).⁶⁸ Control and self-discipline were also prized masculine attributes in the context of education. For instance, J. Milner Fothergill insists on the importance of these qualities in the practice of reading in his 1885 book, *The Will Power: Its Range in Action*.⁶⁹ "No man has ever attained real eminence," Fothergill writes in his chapter on the will in relation to self-culture, "who did not toil; and for sustained toil, a resolute will is needful" (52). Without will power and perseverance, no man can achieve intellectual prominence through his reading. His description of readers that lack will – "adult children," he calls them – recalls Gissing's Percy Dunn: "Having left school, instead of continuing their studies they begin to forget what they learned there; their knowledge, such as it is, falls away piecemeal, until at last they reach a condition of intellectual nudity. They read the newspaper without ever opening an atlas" (51-2). Like these adult children, Dunn assures himself after finishing an article from one of the weightier journals that he has enriched his mind, that he is "making up for the defects of his education" (172), but the unconscious nature of his reading practice shows that he is deluding himself.

Although the misuse of books and reading has damaged Gissing's characters, it is not reading *per se* that is to blame for their failures. Reading could also be represented as disciplined, masculine work in the Victorian discourse on education and literacy. There is nothing emasculating, for instance, in the practice of systematic and intensive reading that Ruskin prescribes in "Of King's Treasures," nor in the strenuous and controlled practice of clearing away literary garbage that Gissing's friend Frederic Harrison calls for in his *Choice of Books*. Christopherson's obsessive and undisciplined hoarding at the expense of his wife's health and Percy Dunn's desultory skimming of newspapers and magazines clearly run

⁶⁸ James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca & London; Cornell UP, 1995).

⁶⁹ J. Milner Fothergill, *The Will Power: Its Range in Action* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1885).

counter to these controlled and disciplined methods of attaining self-culture. Rather than manifestations of will power, the literary activities of Gissing's characters tend to crush what will power they once possessed, thus robbing them of the self-discipline needed to escape from the idleness that is emasculating them.

The concept of will is also fundamental in understanding the distinct conclusions of the two stories. While Dunn never does return to work again, instead reading "spellbound [and] hypnotised" ("Spellbound" 176) month after month while Maggie and her brother Willie sustain him and what was once his home, Christopherson realizes the error of his ways, sells his remaining books and moves with his wife to the country to restore her health. As a result of this reformation, the narrator reads in Mrs. Christopherson's face "the profound thankfulness of one to whom fate has granted her soul's desire" ("Christopherson" 193). Subsequently, although he does not actually return to work, Christopherson does manage to exercise self-discipline and to show some dedication to reconstructing the domestic sphere. Additionally, while Dunn remains in stasis, Christopherson is clearly transformed by his ordeal; the narrator explains, "the crisis through which he had passed had made him, in appearance, a yet older man; when he declared his happiness tears came into his eyes, and his head shook with a senile tremor" (193). It seems odd that two characters afflicted by such similar obsessions should end up so differently. Are bookworms really more easily reformed than newspaper worms? Are gentlemen, ruined or not, really more capable of surviving reading addictions than their labouring counterparts?

These questions can be answered by considering the role that will plays in Gissing's fiction more broadly. Critics of Gissing's fiction have often argued for the centrality of will power within it, frequently citing Gissing's early interest in Schopenhauer as a possible

source.⁷⁰ In discussing the apparent pessimism of Gissing's plots, for instance, David Grylls suggests that "for an author who believes that plans founder, that optimism usually equates to crassness, that passion is most often a source of pain, Gissing believes in effort and endeavour, in striving persistence and determination" (*Paradox* 6). Gissing's commitment to pessimism, Grylls argues, "coexists with his belief in will power" (14). In the light of this assertion, we can begin to see the question of will in these stories as an intersection between the concepts of idleness, masculinity, and reading.

Dunn and Christopherson exhibit no will power in their relationships with the printed page. They give in to their desires for pleasure – Dunn to the gratification of oblivion offered by desultory information and Christopherson to the pleasure of possessing once again a part of his great library, which will distinguish him from the other clerks and shabbily genteel men and women who surround him. That these pursuits have become obsessions, even addictions, is no defence for Gissing, who sees their lack of will in reading as the first step towards moral and social degradation. These stories suggest that if it is unmanly to display nerves and to break down emotionally, it is far worse to give in to temptations, whether of the flesh or of the page. Yet, while Gissing's stories show the dire consequences of a debilitated will, when read in conjunction they also call for perseverance and effort as a corrective to lapses of will and the loss of masculinity. "Christopherson" shows that an assertion of the will over books can begin to repair the damage done by an earlier slip. Ironically, Christopherson is able to achieve some level of success precisely because of the emotional breakdown he undergoes at the story's climax. Faced with the possibility of his wife's death, Christopherson is pushed to

⁷⁰ See, for instance, David Grylls, "Determinism and Determination in Gissing," *Modern Language Quarterly* 45 (1984): 45-68; Markus Neacy, "The Hope of Pessimism and the Will to Live in *The Unclassed*," *Gissing Journal* 34.1 (1998): 8-17; Markus Neacy, "Lost Illusions and the Will to Die in *New Grub Street*," *Gissing Journal* 34.2 (1998): 1-11; Markus Neacy, "The Coming Man and the Will to Power in *Born in Exile*," *Gissing Journal* 36.2 (2000): 20-30.

a crisis and must face the hard truth that he has “sold her life” for his books (“Christopherson” 191). When his wife recovers and the couple are again offered the chance to escape London in order to improve her health, Christopherson is finally ready to exercise his will and be rid of his books. Exerting some degree of manliness in his willingness to forgo his earlier obsession, he glories “in the *sacrifice* he [has] made” (192).⁷¹

So, while Christopherson does not re-enter the economic sphere in order to support himself and his wife, he displays some of the qualities that bolster the Victorian ideology of masculine labour, and in this way redresses his former idleness. In his eventual transformation, he follows a pattern in Gissing’s fiction, where “great effort of will ... is virtually always part of a campaign to make up for some initial setback, quite often an earlier weakness” (Grylls, *Paradox* 14). As well, Christopherson’s sudden, painful realization and subsequent change of behaviour makes the story characteristic of much of the short fiction he produced throughout the 1890s, in which the central characters were often “sociological misfit[s], whose epiphanic experience[s] open the floodgates to self-knowledge” (Rawlinson 157).⁷²

Unlike Christopherson, Percy Dunn is never pushed to such a crisis; his submission to his temptations outside the library happens quickly and without much of a fight, for instance, and he is never forced to exercise sacrifice or self-restraint in his reading habits. The result is that Dunn is much more a figure of satire than his counterpart; a flatter character, he appears less than human in Gissing’s final depiction of him, having entirely lost his agency in his spellbound pursuit of desultory thrills. As a final irony, Gissing shows Dunn reading an article on “Hypnotism” for *The Nineteenth Century* in the ultimate library scene, a journal he only

⁷¹ Emphasis mine.

⁷² Barbara Rawlinson, *A Man of Many Parts: Gissing’s Short Stories, Essays, and Other Works* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2006).

got his hands on by waking up a dozing labourer who has fallen asleep across its pages (174). Between the first page and the last, very little has happened to Percy Dunn, but Maggie and Willie seem content; the family has not been pushed out on to the street, financial issues are not pressing, and Maggie has nothing to complain of besides her uneasiness on Dunn's account (173). In their resigned acceptance, his family may be partially responsible for his final condition, but it seems unlikely (given Gissing's account of the extent of his "thralldom" to print) that any amount of pleading on Maggie's part would help.

The contradictory conclusions of these stories also suggest a generic distinction between "Spellbound" and "Christopherson." Understanding the nature of this distinction helps us to understand just what Gissing was trying to say about reading in each story. While both narratives are relatively undramatic, eschewing major plot events to focus more precisely on the individual psychological developments of the central characters, the obvious stasis of "Spellbound" implies that it is a different kind of work than "Christopherson" and a number of the other stories that Gissing wrote in the 1890s – such as "Lou and Liz," "Fleet-footed Hester," and "The Foolish Virgin" – in which the central characters face situations that force them to reveal some otherwise hidden aspect of their emotional and psychological natures. "Spellbound" more closely resembles the short character sketches that Gissing wrote for Jerome K. Jerome's magazine *Today* in March of 1895. This series of six sketches, entitled, "Nobodies at Home," was sold to Jerome by Gissing's agent, William Morris Colles, after Gissing mentioned to Colles an idea he had for a series of short stories depicting the lives of those who live in lodgings. The sketches were considerably shorter than "Spellbound," but the works seem to share a similar plan.

As Christine Devine points out in her essay on one such sketch, "By the Kerb" (1895), most stories in the series focus on one character. Each "reveals a lack of insight, and lack of

self-examination and therefore an inability on the part of the protagonists to bring about any change” (99).⁷³ Throughout the sketches, the characters are examined without obvious judgement from the narrator, but it is clear that the chief flaw of each is their “inability to have a moment of epiphany, to live ‘an examined life’” (105). Such an utter lack of insight and self-examination is exactly what keeps Percy Dunn from addressing his emasculating reading practice, from realizing (as Christopherson eventually does) that it has become a vice like any other vice thought to prey on clerks and labourers. “Spellbound” is also linked to the *Today* sketches structurally by the circularity of its narrative. Like “Spellbound,” which both begins and ends with Dunn inside a London free library, “By the Kerb” begins and ends with the down-and-out protagonist in Cheapside selling “Collar studs, three a penny” (“By the Kerb” 135).⁷⁴ Even more than “Christopherson,” then, “Spellbound” represents an example of Gissing’s foray into psychological fiction and an extension of the psychological/sociological sketches he began in 1895. Unlike “Christopherson,” it refuses to provide an obvious moral or chart a beneficial change in the protagonist.

The absence of any change in Dunn over the course of the narrative strengthens the case that “Spellbound” is primarily a satire. If Dunn is not intended to be a dynamic character, and if the story is not about his personal struggle to overcome the vice of desultory reading, then perhaps Gissing intends to critique the under-educated reader and his problematic methods of reading, thus restating Henry Ryecroft’s concerns about the cultural threats posed by England’s system of “semi-education.” Robert Selig’s view of Percy Dunn as a “*reductio ad absurdum*” of a reading public that lacks any discrimination in the materials it consumes

⁷³ Christine Devine, “‘By the Kerb’: Too Radical?” *Spellbound, George Gissing*, vol. 2, ed. Christine Huguet ([Oss.]: Equilibris, 2008) 99-107.

⁷⁴ George Gissing, “By the Kerb,” *Spellbound, George Gissing*, vol. 1, ed. Christine Huguet ([Oss.]: Equilibris, 2008) 135-9.

certainly buys into this satirical reading (30).⁷⁵ However, it is important to find more in the story's treatment of desultory reading than a mere confirmation of Gissing's best-known attitudes about popular literacy and the Victorian press. For one thing, the story is as much a satire on the critics of desultory reading as it is on the readers themselves. Gissing shows us what it would look like for a man to succumb to the "vice" or "habit" of reading to the extent that anonymous critics and well-known men-of-letters worried themselves over. Dunn is a more fully fleshed-out version of the "intemperate" reader and "newspaperised" man that Leonard Courtney writes about in "The Making and Reading of Newspapers," who does little but read newspapers and magazines all day long. By pushing Dunn's characterization to the limit, and showing him to act in the extreme ways that some critics of popular reading models suggested lower-class readers acted, Gissing exposes the hyperbole inherent in these journalistic accounts and shows that the bold claims made in these accounts are too extreme to be taken entirely seriously.

However, Gissing did not believe the concerns expressed by these writers were groundless, that the juggernaut of Victorian print culture and the limits of elementary education were not potentially dangerous to English culture. His belief that the response to these dangers was histrionic and excessively alarmist tempered his own concerns. Gissing was an avid library user and a confirmed fan of periodical literature himself, of course. In the extremity of Dunn's characterization, Gissing makes light of the tone of the debate on dangerous reading, even though he believes in the importance of the debate itself. Although he parodies the rhetorical lengths that some commentators went to in their discussions of destructive forms of reading, Gissing clearly believes that obsessive reading could become a form of idleness that was potentially very damaging.

⁷⁵ Robert Selig, "Gissing's 'Spellbound' and 'New Grub Street,'" *The Gissing Newsletter* 35 (1999): 27-31.

While “Christopherson” is a story about the redemptive power of will and self-sacrifice and the dangers of misdirected literacy in an age of books, “Spellbound” is a satire, developed through a psychological study of the obsessive mind, on popular concerns about lower-class readers and on the overwhelming abundance of periodical literature in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Both stories, however, contribute to the late-Victorian discourse on literacy by affirming the role of will in productive modes of reading. Gissing is clearly doing more in these stories than subscribing to Victorian class prejudices that saw common readers at a greater risk of adopting habitual and superficial modes of reading than their betters, and more than asserting the natural superiority of books over periodicals. By showing how dramatically methods of reading can destabilize gender definitions, “Spellbound” and “Christopherson” combine to make a significant contribution to the Victorian discourse on masculinity and literacy.

Conclusions

George Gissing’s commitment throughout his fiction to the representation of reading and writing and the particular dilemmas of those routinely involved in these acts reflects the profound effect that Victorian popular literacy had on his writing and on his worldview more generally. His engagement with the kinds of discussions about reading methods common in popular periodicals further clarifies his interest in the subject of literacy and its social and cultural ramifications. In *New Grub Street*, Gissing’s analysis of writing allows him to express his concerns about the business in which he was caught up and (in his depiction of Edwin Reardon, Marian Yule, and Mr Baker) to explore the degree to which the expansion of literacy could create complications for the personal identities of readers and writers, forced to reconcile their social and gender identities with their new positions within the literary

economy and the late-Victorian public sphere. “Spellbound” and “Christopherson” present the gender issues alluded to in *New Grub Street* in a different way by focussing specifically on popular definitions of masculinity through a literary medium – the short story or psychological sketch – that provides Gissing with an opportunity for exaggeration, distortion, and satire less available in the Victorian triple-decker. Furthermore, each of these works provides Gissing with an opportunity to clarify his views on those themes that interested him throughout his career – the role of the will in determining the course of one’s life, the pathetic consequences that result from lapses of willpower, and the struggle of the sensitive individual under the expectations placed on him or her by society.

In Gissing’s fiction we see, much more clearly than in Eliot’s fiction, the culmination of the three general levels of Victorian discourse I examine in this dissertation. Educational prose, popular journalism, and fiction come together in Gissing’s novels and short stories, helping to expose the interconnectedness of these genres in the creation of literacy models. Gissing’s work charts the progress of nineteenth-century education as it adds new “common readers” to the literary market and permits new (though often troubling) opportunities for literate men and women – I am thinking here not only of Mr Baker and Percy Dunn, but of Marian Yule as well. His fiction also explores the embodied experience of readers and writers, a common theme in the descriptions of literacy skills offered by writers in the popular press, while at the same time addressing the psychological effects of literacy in the manner of George Eliot. This commitment to the social, psychological, and physiological effects of literacy makes Gissing a key figure in any study of the history of literacy and education.

Conclusion

A New World of Readers and Writers

I.

In his 1901 article in *The Contemporary Review*, "Reading for the Young," H.V. Weisse provides some indication of the massive effect popular literacy was thought to have had on Victorian culture. Weisse takes for granted the nearly universal literacy rates present in Britain at the turn of the century and claims that the popular ability to read and write, in Britain and elsewhere in the world, has created a new way to gauge the progress of the human intellect, perhaps even the human race. "When one regards the meaning of speech, writing and the multiplication of written utterances," he explains, "there can be no doubt as to the enormous importance of the nature of the thing so reproduced and scattered at random over the world" (829). Furthermore, Weisse maintains, the "printed book, which puts in readily comprehensible form before a man the utterances, thoughts, speculations, histories and emotions of his fellow man, may be taken as embodying the present limit of civilisation, and as such it is capable of the most enormous activity and power" (829).

The goal of my dissertation has been to show that Victorian popular literacy changed the definition of reading and writing and that evidence for this transformation is found in the construction of new and diverse models of reading and writing in Victorian prose genres. Weisse's comments outline nicely some of the dominant attitudes about the place of reading and writing in Victorian culture I have identified. For instance, one of the central assumptions of my dissertation is that a certain ambivalence regarding the role of literacy in British culture is a defining characteristic of discourse on the subject, especially after the 1860s when educators began to make real strides in reading instruction. Illustrating this point, Weisse refers in the same sentence both to the "enormous importance" of written communication in

the transmission of ideas and judgements *and* to the troublingly uncontrollable behaviour of this “thing so reproduced and scattered at random over the world.” Weisse’s diction here implies both a lack of system in distribution (in the scattering of reading matter) and a lack of classification (in the randomness of the dispersal). At the same time, however, he goes so far as to suggest that the printed book – the mass production of which appears to cause him much concern throughout his article – embodies the “present limit of civilisation.”

As well, although the choice of books was important to critics, the Victorian discussion of literacy tended to privilege method over material. Much could be read profitably, critics and educators frequently observed, if only a reader’s method was sound. Though Weisse does believe that *what* people read is an important factor in their development, he also suggests that a major problem of modern writing is that it engenders troublesome methods that will negatively affect future reading. Some books or magazines are damaging, he insists, because they negatively affect *how* one reads in general. For instance, the danger of inexpensive and ephemeral periodical productions lies in their cheapness and “innate impertinence,” factors that “act not only as an inducement to partake of unwholesome mental pabulum, but they unfit the mind for the digestion of anything more wholesome or profitable” (830). The mind of the boy or girl that has “fed” on this “rank herbage,” Weisse maintains, “is one of indifference towards anything that is difficult to find, difficult to masticate, and perhaps uncomfortable to an easy conscience, lying, as it were, a little uneasy on the intellectual and moral stomach” (830-1). The content of these books and magazines is destructive, but more destructive are the reading methods they encourage.¹

¹ Weisse also maintains that, even when reading is confined to “good” books, too much reading can present a problem. The chief danger for young people is that reading can become “a habit, pure and simple,” breaking down their ability to discriminate between solid reading material and dangerous or wasteful material (838).

Another aim of my dissertation has been to demonstrate that the work of defining what literacy meant to Victorian culture was achieved through the interaction of three major prose genres: educational writing, popular periodical literature and reading guides, and fiction. Without understanding how these genres worked in concert to create models of reading and writing, contemporary critics cannot grasp the full significance of these models. Weisse's article is a useful one to conclude on, therefore, because it manages to bring together these three central genres. Published in a widely read monthly journal that spoke to the concerns of the wealthy but reform-minded middle-class, the article advertises its preoccupation with the subject of education in its very title, while at the same time providing some insight into contemporary attitudes towards fiction.

The question of what children should read becomes for Weisse the central problem of education, and reading is made the basis upon which all forms of education stand – intellectual, moral, and even civil. The still developing intellect of the youth, Weisse maintains, can be “thrown off its moral balance” by the “morbid introspections of the problem novel” (836).² The misuse of literacy can also result in antisocial behaviour and contribute to the breakdown of society with the “result of worthless books” exhibited “in acute form in the lunatic asylum and the police court” (836). Weisse's assertions here put enormous pressure on educators and publishers, even if he fails to identify who is ultimately responsible for the moral and civil consequence of misdirected literacy. That Weisse ignores the existence of all other means of transmitting knowledge to British youth speaks once again to the manner in which literacy had become planted in the popular Victorian imagination as the primary

² Weisse seems to be referring to the work of naturalist authors with his reference to “problem novels.” He mentions with disapproval books that put forward “as interesting problems what are really sordid difficulties in the life of an animal, difficulties of whose existence everyone is aware, and with which the right-minded man tries to cope in the inmost privacy of his heart and mind” (831). He accuses such books of “enlarging upon human errands in photographic nakedness of form and detail” (831).

requirement for the creation and maintenance of civilization and culture. In this attitude we see the seed of those complaints made by writers such as W.B. Hodgson and Flinders Petrie, who suggest that reading and writing take too central a role in the education of British children and that literacy is too often seen as the “present limit of civilisation” rather than one tool through which culture and civil society are transmitted.

Contemporary attitudes towards fiction make up another prominent aspect of Weisse’s commentary here, in more ways than one. In discussing popular reading material, he lumps the novels that are most readily available to young readers into the category of “very cheap and accessible literature of the day” (829), valuable only in so far as they are not magazines or daily papers. However, Weisse’s article provides insight into the novels and short stories I examine in Chapter Five and Six in a more abstract manner, as well, because his commentary on popular reading models is itself a kind of fiction. Though there may be some truth to his claims about the effects of reading and writing on the intellectual, moral, and social character of young people, there is no indication that Weisse consulted even the *Publisher’s Circular* (as Joseph Ackland did in his “Elementary Education and the Decay of Literature,” an article that makes similar claims) or any other document offering data on contemporary reading patterns. His representation of literacy’s effects is based not on empirical or experimental data, but on sentiments and images depicted in other texts – educational treatises, other magazine articles, novels and short stories. These sentiments and images provide a web of representation into which Weisse fits his own views on popular literacy and its consequences.³ In this way, Weisse’s depiction of mass literacy and its consequences corresponds to George Eliot’s definition of fiction as “an arrangement of events and feigned correspondences according to

³ It is important to note here, for the sake of clarity, that Ackland’s use of the *Publisher’s Circular* does not mean that his own view is not a semi-fictional representation of the current literary economy itself.

predominant feeling” (505).⁴ It is the representation of literacy, the popular attitudes towards it and the “predominant feeling” regarding its effects that Weisse makes the subject of his piece (intentionally or not), and it is this set of attitudes that I have been examining in my project. Though I am interested in the measurable changes to literacy rates and the volume of newspaper, magazine, and novel publishing, the real focus of this study has been the transformations of the Victorian mental landscape caused by these changes, as registered in the period’s prose.

Literacy and Control, Both Personal and Social

In examining the response to popular literacy and the representation of reading and writing in Victorian prose genres, my dissertation has brought to light a number of themes central to the discourse on literacy and education. Some of these I have outlined above in my commentary on Weisse’s article, but others require a more detailed discussion. The theme of control, for instance – both of the self and of the masses – is one that stands out prominently in the discourse on literacy. In Weisse’s article, this theme is evident in the author’s concerns about the random scattering of print and his recognition that the reading practices of Victorian youth need to be restricted in order to remain safe. In educational literature, issues of control arise most obviously in the aspirations of early Victorian educators to regulate children’s moral and religious characters through the use of reading material and teaching methods. Providing elementary school children with Bibles, biblical extracts, or overtly moralizing narratives as initial reading texts, educators hoped to impress into working-class children beliefs and qualities that they considered to be productive of order and social cohesion. The

⁴ George Eliot, “Notes on Form in Art,” *The Victorians: An Anthology of Poetry and Poetics* ed. Valentine Cunningham (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) 504-506. Taken from one of Eliot’s unpublished notebooks, the essay was written in 1868.

methods used to teach reading and writing also represented attempts to wrest control away from the family and what David Vincent refers to as the “domestic curriculum,” that system of education all children were provided with in the home before their “official” schooling began.

When elementary schools made a more diverse selection of educational materials available (primarily after the 1860s), including secular narratives, standard literary classics, and illustrated texts, attempts to control school children through the instillation of ideologies of gender, class, and nation persisted in Victorian board schools. While the extensive use of oral instruction was partly a by-product of overcrowded schools and the need to teach a large number of children at once (and to keep these children focussed on the simple tasks at hand), it was also an effective means of limiting individual responses to literature and of guiding interpretation. Silent reading, which might have made it easier for children to connect what they were reading with their own experiences and the knowledge they had acquired from the domestic curriculum, was rarely part of the elementary school experience, even during the more forward-thinking 1880s and ‘90s. The drive to control the experience and expression of children is evident in the restrictions placed on composition as well. Elementary writing tended to mean copying physical models of characters and learning how to spell, usually by rote. When composition was taught, the expressive elements of writing seem to have been restricted by the methods used to teach it, such as the “heads” or outlines provided for students to stitch together narratives. These methods of controlling individual expression in education rest on the assumption that the content of a child’s expression would be either valueless or harmful. They display an implicit belief (becoming more explicit at times) that controlling aspects of education would facilitate the control of the masses.

A distrust of common readers is also pronounced in periodical literature and popular reading guides. For instance, we uncover in the ubiquitous consumption model of reading (and

the related models that link reading with the consumption of addictive and disease-inducing substances) the belief that *uncontrolled* reading will result in *uncontrollable* readers and citizens. While in a normal person Nature controls the relationship between need and appetite (for food and drink on a physical level, or for intellectual stimulation in the case of an appetite for reading), in the literary gourmands frequently represented in magazine articles about the expansion of the reading public and the growing availability of fiction and other ephemera, Nature has lost control and the appetite has become “unyoked,” leading the reader to read without satiation. If readers become what they read, as critics so often suggested, then a mass of readers feeding themselves on immoral, sensational fiction or meaningless trivialities would not bode well for the future of the nation. Uncontrolled reading was thought to produce a chaotic mass of uncontrollable Britons, as James Stephen’s lecture on desultory reading suggests with its references to foreign revolutions.

Systematic reading was one means of doing this. For many commentators, reading systematically meant reigning in one’s natural, wandering propensities when it came to reading and insulating oneself against the multitude of distractions offered by the Victorian publishing industry. Stephen’s image of the “mental observatory” on the “chart of human knowledge,” a continual reference point to which readers could always return if they felt themselves wandering too far from their initial plan of reading, acts as a symbol of both literary and imperial control. His commentary also draws out the notion of self-control that was bound-up with definitions of systematic reading. Stephen points out, for instance, that with a mental observatory firmly in place, one may indulge in desultory habits with advantage “if only he indulges with self-control,” and he continually refers to the proper “self-denying” use of the power of literacy. Writing has associations with control for those writers that comment on it in the popular press, partly because of its relationship with systematic study.

While Victorian critics tended to see writing as a more specialized skill, E. Noble worries in “Readers and Writers” that the pace of literature’s progress and circulation is “too killing,” thus intimating that writers need to be controlled almost as much as readers. Conversely, George Wilson’s commentary on writing as a series of natural processes and his depiction of forms of writing unmediated by modern technology seem to take the practice of writing out of human hands, but they do so without presenting this loss of control as threatening in any way.

Eliot and Gissing explore the relationship between literacy and social control in their fiction, with Gissing doing so more obviously because his works dramatize and parody the concerns about uncontrolled reading expressed in the periodical press. In “Christopherson,” for instance, the scene in which the title character hysterically loses control of himself, casts a great pile of books off a table, and begins weeping, provides evidence that Gissing was aware of the perception in late-Victorian culture that the regulation of one’s reading was a sign of the regulation of one’s self. In both *Christopherson* and *Percy Dunn*, Gissing explores the degree to which uncontrolled reading habits might lead to the breakdown of Victorian institutions such as work and the family, but he does so while registering his distrust of these institutions and the control they themselves had over men and women.

In *New Grub Street*, the compulsion that Marian Yule feels to write surely has something to do with the control that the literary marketplace has over her. Her feelings of constraint, transmitted in large part through her father’s will and the demands he places on her – sometimes as his assistant and sometimes as his partner – appear to be a condition of her participation in that marketplace. Marian’s only freedom from this often painful sense of restriction comes with her removal from London and from the “valley of the shadow of books” in the novel’s conclusion. Though there is little in *New Grub Street* about the necessity of controlling one’s reading habits (indeed, many of the characters profit from the

unrestrained, middlebrow reading of the masses), Gissing still registers the theme of control by bringing attention to the problems experienced by men and women obliged to produce reading material.

In *Romola*, Eliot depicts literacy and education as means of controlling the populace. Tito Melema makes use of his scholarly abilities to manipulate his personal and political relationships in Florence, using his knowledge of Greek to insinuate himself into Romola's home and the offices of city officials while at the same time relying on the ignorance and illiteracy of others (such as Tessa and Baldassare) to insulate himself against any threats that they might cause him. In a similar fashion, Savonarola uses literacy in his attempts to maintain his position of authority in unstable political times. The literacy he manipulates is not traditional, though. Rather it is supernatural, located in his alleged ability to read and interpret the "Sacred Book" of prophecy that he claims God has made legible to him. In *Romola*, a character's power is in large part dependent on his or her ability to make use of the ability to read. This fact is displayed vividly in the character of Baldassare, whose failure to read from Rucellai's copy of Homer during his impromptu reading test ends the brief ascent to power that Eliot had drawn out for him over the preceding chapters. Furthermore, in Eliot's exploration of memory and reading in this novel and in *Daniel Deronda*, she represents more than once the struggle of characters to control their ability to read and to remember and shows, particularly in Deronda's and Baldassare's inability to read at various times throughout their respective narratives, the painful consequences that might issue from the unhinging of these mental processes.

The Psychological Implications of Literacy in Victorian Prose

Each of the prose genres I examine makes clear statements about the psychological effects of reading and writing on individuals, by which I mean the effects critics claimed literacy could have on the subjectivity and character of the reader or writer. Repeatedly, literacy is shown to affect the subject's impulses, desires, memories, and sensations, inasmuch as these aspects of character were determined by the mind. While contemporary critics such as Sally Shuttleworth, Allan Christensen, Andrew Elfenbein, and Nicholas Dames have explored the relationship between reading and the questions central to the various disciplines that made up Victorian psychology, my project demonstrates that literacy's perceived effects on the mental life of men and women were generated in a vast network of representation incorporating a number of important discourses. The reading and writing models I examine throughout are important conceptual sites at which to discover these psychological implications.

Eliot's novels provide a useful jumping off point for this theme because she explores, in the character of Baldassare, the impact of literacy (and in Baldassare's case, trauma-induced illiteracy) on an individual's psychological state, making clear her belief that the ability to read could create more than just intellectual changes within readers. Indeed, Eliot registers literacy in *Romola* as identity forming, and Baldassare wonders when he awakes on the morning after his literacy and memory are returned which identity he is now in command of: the literate scholar or the lost old man. Furthermore, when Baldassare loses control of his mental functions and is rendered illiterate once more, he seems to revert to a less sophisticated psychological state. At several times he is referred to as an animal (a tiger), and his final murderous actions as he pounces on Tito in one of the novel's concluding scenes certainly demonstrate his psychological deterioration. Eliot's views on the psychological effects of reading are apparent in *Daniel Deronda* as well, especially in the scene depicting Gwendolen

Harleth's descent into hysterical madness after reading Glasher's letter. While the content of this letter has an obvious part to play in Gwendolen's psychic shock, the passive and wrapt manner in which she reads the letter is also an important factor in her response. In addition, Mordechai Cohen seems to hope that literacy and education will have psychological consequences on his student, Jacob, as he tries to teach him Hebrew. Though there is little evidence of an intellectual effect on the boy, Mordechai continues to hope that the words he inscribes in Jacob's memory will guide him one day because of a shared heritage, marking his psyche in more subtle but durable ways.

A number of Victorian educators also clung tightly to the notion that literacy could have psychological implications beyond the intellectual abilities it gave children, and it was partly this belief that guided the kind of training offered in elementary schools. J.M.D. Meiklejohn observes in his *Problems of Teaching to Read*, for instance, that the aim of education is the formation of habits. Along with the habitual ability to combine a certain collection of letters together into a recognizable word, educators hoped that the systematizing process of reading and writing lessons would also create desirable psychological habits in children. Furthermore, the use that Matthew Arnold makes of the term "improving" surely speaks to these assumptions about the psychologically transformative capabilities of literacy (and education more broadly). For Arnold, men and women were perfectible, and elementary education should then be called on to improve more than just a child's intellectual abilities and stock of knowledge. The process of humanizing girls and boys implies psychological and emotional transformations as well as intellectual ones, and Arnold's statements about the "civilizing" effect of an elementary school on a geographical area makes similar claims.

In some ways, then, educational discussions (firmly under the sway of Mark Hampton's "educational ideal") tend to draw attention to the beneficial psychological

transformations afforded by training in reading and writing. In the majority of the periodical literature reviewed in this dissertation, however, readers are offered statements about reading and writing that suggest the practices have psychologically negative consequences. As Weisse's article shows, some journalists and authors charge allegedly dangerous forms of reading (such as habitual reading, desultory reading, or novel reading) with psychologically damaging qualities. At times, critics bestow upon misdirected literacy skills the ability to psychologically degrade the practitioners, in much the same way (perhaps paradoxically) that Baldassare was made to revert to a psychologically primitive state as a result of his loss of literacy.

We see this tendency in "The Reading Room Outrage," the parody about the British Library introduced in my discussion of *New Grub Street*. The author of this light piece shows that the habitual Reading Room user is physically affected by his forced withdrawal from his habitual haunt, but he also undergoes a form of psychological reversion. The troubled reader is eventually reduced to the level of an infant, crawling back to his house from a bookseller to seek special approval from the Library's trustees to allow him to use the room during the annual closure and eventually spending his nights in the cradle of the Reading Room's great wastepaper basket. Similar forms of psychological reversion are evident in descriptions of reading addicts, who are sometimes figured as animals and insects – birds, worms, and butterflies – or as members of more primitive societies. For both Noah Porter and John Ruskin, reading with attention could provide a form of salvation from the psychic degradation produced by some forms of reading, by refocusing the reader's intellectual powers to defend against distracting and damaging forms of stimulation.

Because they respond quite clearly to characterizations of reading models in the press, Gissing's "Spellbound" and "Christopherson" also make explicit statements about the

negative psychological consequences of reading. Exploring press perceptions of the consequences of misdirected literacy in "Spellbound," Gissing implies that desultory reading can result in insanity. This connection was made by other critics of the period, as well. For instance, M.G. Mulhall notes in his essay, "Insanity, Suicide, and Civilization," that the "close relationship between insanity and civilization" is evident in "the fact that where schools and newspapers are few the number of insane is small, the ratio rising in the various countries so regularly that we might almost say the circulation of daily papers determines the proportion of lunatics" (901).⁵ Despite Mulhall's specious reasoning, his article illustrates some of the concerns expressed in Gissing's stories. In "Christopherson," too, Gissing identifies his main character's relationship with books as the cause of his psychological distress. The nervousness that characterizes Christopherson's behaviour throughout the narrative is an expression of Victorian assumptions about "manly nerves" and the possibility of a masculine form of hysteria. In *New Grub Street*, Gissing depicts the less commonly considered effects of *writing* on the subject's mental state, most noticeably in his characterization of Edwin Reardon and Marian Yule. In these characters, Gissing depicts the psychic damage that economically-motivated writing can have on sensitive intellectuals. The restrictions under which both of these troubled writers are forced to work, coupled with the stringent requirements of the late-Victorian literary market, make them feel imprisoned.

While the compulsion Marian and Reardon each feel to write is one source of their psychological trauma, their particular social and gender identities are also significant. For one thing, both characters struggle as members of the lower-middle class to uphold the appearance of respectability, Reardon more so than Marian (as he faces pressure from a wife born into a wealthier family). For Marian, the complications of this precarious social situation are

⁵ M.G. Mulhall, "Insanity, Suicide, and Civilization," *Contemporary Review* 43 (1883): 901-8.

compounded by Victorian gender ideologies and assumptions about what role women should take on in the literary market. But assumptions about gender are no more kind to Reardon, whose failure at writing is taken as a mark against his manliness. Thus the compulsion to write contributes to what Adrian Poole identifies as a psychology of “exile” in Gissing’s work (173).⁶ Instead of binding these writers to the increasingly literate and knowledgeable society in which they live, the practice of writing makes them feel their detachment from society all the more acutely. That Gissing shows other characters in similar social positions in *New Grub Street* who do not suffer this emotional and mental trauma demonstrates his belief that a subject’s response to his or her literary activities is determined at least in part by his or her individual character.

In their journal articles, both George Wilson and F.W.H. Myers allude in their own ways to the beneficial psychological effects of writing. Wilson sees the kinds of writing that average men and women undertake in their daily lives as versions of a more profound process constantly going on in the natural world. At the very least, then, his model of writing is neutral in regards to its effects on the psyche of the writer. However, we might also see this model as psychologically healing, in its ability to connect the writer to a series of greater and more profound natural processes. For Myers, automatic writing – though clearly a different species of written expression than the quotidian writing most people practise – can contribute to a sense of psychic cohesion by making evident and permitting communion with the otherwise hidden aspects of character that Myers identifies as “the *secondary self*.”⁷ We might credit writing’s ability to concretize and objectify aspects of subjectivity with the effects Myers attributes to it. For Flinders Petrie, however, the overwhelming effect of writing on individual

⁶ Adrian Poole, *Gissing in Context* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975).

⁷ Of course, by revealing the existence of this “other self,” the process of automatic writing could also be psychologically fracturing as well, though Myers’ emphasis is on the benefits of the practice.

psychology is negative. He attributes to writing the ability to deaden the memory of the senses and to transform thought into senseless and corrupt carcasses of thought. The rupture that writing creates between the writer and “Nature or the reality of things” can only be destructive to the writer’s mental life, hence his claim that reading and writing are “crippling arts.”

Literacy and Purpose in Victorian Writing

The question of *why* men and women read – for what purpose – is a complex one in the Victorian discourse on literacy, but it is a theme that recurs throughout the period’s prose and throughout this dissertation. The term has multiple meanings in the discourse on literacy. It could refer to any reason an individual might have for taking up a book or a pen, but it was also defined in discussions of reading and writing as resolution or determination. This latter definition implies a value judgement, as reflected in R.F. Horton’s 1890 article, “The Responsibility of Reading.” According to Horton, the power of reading provides “admission to society of all kinds, to society of all ages” (507), and because it is so powerful, it demands to be used, with resolve and determination, for personal improvement. To strengthen his claims, Horton quotes the author and politician Arthur Helps on the importance of “purpose” in reading: “It is only by some self-discipline, by some concentration of purpose, by realizing that the magic faculty is not a convenient device for passing heavy hours, but a golden stair that leads to high places, that any progress can be made towards that company [of intellectual greats of the past] of which we have been thinking” (qtd. in Horton 509). When the term “purpose” is used in this sense, it is connected to the themes of self-control and social control outlined above. Reading with purpose is reading with self-discipline, and this attribute is frequently called on to avoid falling into the habit of passive or desultory reading.

However, even when it seems that writers are using the value-neutral version of the word, the associations that “purpose” had with discipline and resolve could carry over. In the unsigned article, “Contemporary Literature,” published in *Blackwood’s* in 1879, for instance, the author discusses the various uses that contemporary readers make of books, magazines, and newspaper, expressing concern about the mechanization of the publishing industry and the rising tide of print. After discussing the obsessive reading of a “literary *gourmand*,” who reads rapidly and without an obvious aim, the writer goes on to repeat, “that the impulsion of inexorable necessity, or of a purpose to be accomplished in some stated time, are really what give savour to reading” (250). Here, purpose is associated with “inexorable necessity,” and thus while the writer refers to “a purpose” – seemingly using the first sense of the term – he imbues the word “purpose” with value through association. Reading to while away the time before bed hardly seems a suitable purpose as far as this writer is concerned, though it is *a reason* for reading.

Well-known critics and anonymous journalists alike seemed to believe that many inexperienced or new readers lacked purpose in reading. This is the contention of an 1889 article on the National Home Reading Union, a late-Victorian organization designed to provide direction in reading for the increasing number of literate Britons.⁸ The Union was devised, according to its prospectus, “for the purpose of developing a taste for Recreative and Instructive Reading among all classes of the community, and directing Home Study to definite ends, so as on the one hand to check the spread of pernicious literature among the young, and on the other to remedy the waste of energy and lack of purpose so often found among those who have time and opportunity for a considerable amount of reading” (qtd in Britten 98). The article’s author claims that the Union’s intention is to solve a common problem – the fact that

⁸ James Britten, “Home Reading” *Month* 68 (1889): 97-103; cf. J. Churton Collins 193-211.

the “opportunities of culture” (103) are available to so many, but so often shunned in favour of “blood-curdling titles in penny numbers” (97). Though these problematic readers have a purpose in seeking out “blood-curdling” tales and other sensational works – entertainment or some other form of stimulation – Britten and the founders of the Union feel that this purpose is not the *right* purpose, and that the common reader (regardless of class) needs to be directed to a higher one to ensure that time and ability are not wasted.

In educational writing, the concept of purpose lurks in the background of discussions throughout the period regarding the material provided for children in elementary school readers. What one believes elementary school should provide for students in terms of reading material is largely dependent on what one sees as the purpose of reading, reading instruction, and education in general. For many educators, the purpose of teaching reading was the inculcation of social and moral precepts that would foster obedience and order. According to this rubric, the proper purpose of reading for those members of the working-class who made it through these schools was instruction, often of a religious character, and the methods used to teach reading, based on repetition and memorization, suited these ends. For Matthew Arnold and other critics (such as J.M.D. Meiklejohn and W.B. Hodgson) who saw greater potential in elementary education, however, the true purpose of reading was the expansion of the intellect and the sympathies. Reading and education should perform the same role as “Culture” – leading to the pursuit of perfection by getting to know the best that has been thought and said. The authors of school readers kept this purpose of reading in mind more often from the 1860s onwards as they tried to instil a desire to read in their audience.

George Gissing’s short stories tend to reflect the sentiments about purposeful reading and the problems of lack of purpose in reading common in popular periodicals. Percy Dunn’s reasons for reading – to avoid the trouble posed by work and to satisfy a compulsive urge for

the stimulation provided by newspapers and magazines – would hardly be seen as appropriate by the majority of critics whose work I examine in my second section. Dunn recognizes this himself, of course (his omnivorous reading habits must have led him to articles on popular reading habits in the press), and tries to convince himself that he has a higher, more acceptable, purpose in reading and that he is making up for the limitations of his education. Gissing's stories show us that reading with purpose tended to mean "reading like a man," and as such they reveal the frequent, implicit masculine bias of systematic reading models. Eliot's study of Baldassare's literacy and illiteracy in *Romola* contributes to this discussion as well. In the throes of his amnesia and illiteracy, Baldassare is weak and lost, displaying none of the prized qualities of bourgeois manliness. When he regains his ability to read, however, the aging scholar recognizes that the city of Florence is once again "material that he [can] subdue to his purposes," and he demonstrates this in his purposefulness in pursuit of Tito. The ability to read thus redirects and manages his resolve and determination until he is once again stricken with amnesia. Throughout each of the genres I examine in this study, the notion of purpose emerges as a central problematic in the Victorian discourse on literacy.

II.

The presence of these recurring themes in the widely-circulated conceptual models I have examined throughout this dissertation underscores the extent to which popular literacy transformed the definitions of reading and writing for a diverse collection of Victorians. While it is true that developments in elementary education and working-class literacy are primarily responsible for driving national literacy rates up by the end of the century, these developments also changed the way that reading and writing were defined *in general*, for men and women situated across the entire social spectrum. The preoccupation with reading displayed by

middle-class journalists and novelists writing for a predominantly middle-class audience helps to illustrate this fact. Thus, although literacy amongst the elite was well established before the mid-nineteenth century, what it meant to be an elite reader or writer changed dramatically as a result of the redefinition of literacy skills caused by popular literacy's ascension. The redefinition of these activities in Victorian prose and the subsequent redefinition of the categories of reader and writer were accompanied by alterations to other categories as well. As I have demonstrated throughout this study, popular literacy not only changed the relationship between readers and writers, it also helped to change the way Victorians viewed relationships between the classes and between the sexes.

By exploring these changing relationships as they are presented in the conceptual models of reading and writing constructed in Victorian prose, I hope that my work will add to the research of other scholars who have begun to evaluate Victorian theories of reading and writing. Stephen Arata's work on reading and idleness takes part in this project, as does Kate Flint's study of the representation of women's reading, Andrew Elfenbein's work on cognitive science and theories of reading in Victorian poetic criticism, and Nicholas Dames' study of the interaction between Victorian physiology and theories of novel reading. My research contributes to this critical tradition by exposing the textual and cultural processes through which common metaphors of reading and writing were constructed, by demonstrating that scenes of reading in Victorian fiction tend to mean much more to the development of a novel's characters, narrative, and thematic interests than may first appear, and by showing that the critics and journalists who discussed reading always drew their theories from a vast hermeneutic network comprised of literary, pedagogical, and psychological discourses.

My project has also opened up some viable directions in which future research might proceed. Perhaps the most pressing avenue for further study is the relationship between

literacy and masculinity in Victorian prose. It is important to address this relationship because while critics such as Margaret Shaw, Kate Flint, Catherine Golden, and Jennifer Phegley have demonstrated in detail how definitions of femininity are inscribed in models of reading and, conversely, how images of reading women are used to construct definitions of feminine subjectivity in Victorian writing, no comprehensive study exists that examines the degree to which definitions of masculinity underlie models of reading in both scholarly and popular discussions. As I have shown in my discussion of Gissing's investment in popular reading and writing models, these practices were often given value in Victorian discourse specifically through their association with widely accepted ideals of manliness. Furthermore, as concerns surfaced in the final decades of the nineteenth century regarding the health and vitality of the nation's men, reading practices were called on to bear the weight of sustaining ideals of manliness for the benefit of the future health of the nation. These conceptual links between gender identity and literacy need to be explored in a more comprehensive manner than my current project permits. The process of resituating models of manliness within the discourse on reading and education would further the critical effort to understand the full impact of popular literacy on the Victorian consciousness.

The findings of my dissertation might also help to mount an examination of reading and writing models constructed in the context of Britain's imperial expansion in the latter part of the Victorian period. This project would explore how the models of literacy I have located were transmitted to Britain's colonies through print and pedagogical methods and how they interacted with "native" literacy models or with the oral cultures of the colonies in question. Research along these lines would also examine how Western definitions of language were responsible for popular Victorian models of reading and writing and how other, non-Western views on language might complicate models of literacy popular in Britain in the second half of

the nineteenth century. Such a study would contribute to important work in this area by Gauri Viswanathan, whose *Masks of Conquests: Literary Studies and British Rule in India* looks at the institutionalization and ideology of English studies in India under British colonial rule.⁹ Viswanathan shows that the philosophies behind literacy that I study in my dissertation were directed towards colonial subjects, and how Britain's colonial expansion into India was responsible for the inclusion of English studies in schools in the home countries. As I have shown in my survey of models of literacy in elementary education, the increasing reliance upon canonical English literature as a means of teaching reading was a major component in the secularization of reading instruction after the 1860s and in the drive to create a habit of reading in working-class students.

If, as many postcolonial writers and theorists have argued, the language taught by imperial authorities to colonial inhabitants tends to be appropriated and articulated in new ways, ways that can undermine the hegemonic ideals that such language was intended to fortify, then presumably the pedagogical philosophies and literacy models that were so important to the British education system could be given a similarly dual purpose in a colonial context. A study of the application of popular literacy models and pedagogical philosophies to the colonial education system would also take into account recent work on language and empire by Rachel Gilmour and Christine Ferguson, in order to further our current understanding of the role that literacy played in governing the relationship between social and national groups in the latter stages of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ The diversity of these potential projects shows, I believe, how central the issue of literacy was to the social and cultural

⁹ Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Studies and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia UP, 1989).

¹⁰ Rachel Gilmour, *Grammars of Colonialism: Representing Language in Colonial South Africa* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Christine Ferguson, *Language, Science, and Popular Fiction in the Victorian Fin-de-Siècle: The Brutal Tongue* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

developments of the period and how important it is for current scholarship to adequately identify what reading and writing meant for Victorians as mental and physical acts in themselves.

Of course, we are still trying to define these acts, their value, and their potential dangers in the twenty-first century. As was the case in the nineteenth century when new technologies of production and distribution altered the relationships between individuals and books, current communication and entertainment technologies have called the value of literacy and the uses made of it into question. One can only imagine how Gissing or Harrison would have felt about the emergence of *Twitter* as a medium of news and communication, a form of communication so ephemeral that it allows for the transmission of no more than one hundred and forty characters and is named after the incessant chirping of a bird. It is also the case that, over a century after Stephen, Ruskin, and Harrison published essays expressing grave fears about the state of reading, some of the same questions are being asked. For instance, a recent article by Martin Levin in *The Globe and Mail* entitled “The Way We’re Reading Now” (a reference to Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now*, with a photo of the novelist accompanying the article), asks if there is “some sort of schizophrenia abroad in the books world.”¹¹ Levin points out in his article (an article, it should be noted, that I first read on my phone, on a beach, thanks to a borrowed wireless internet signal from a nearby house) that publishers are lamenting the drop in sales of all books that are not hugely popular publishing phenomena. The best-selling books he does mention have all been transformed into huge film franchises as well. Levin also notes, “we hear ad nauseam that young people, young males especially, are giving up reading in favour of activities more likely to result in repetitive strain injuries,” and he mentions in an aside that “(nobody’s ever suggested that turning a page every

¹¹ Martin Levin, “The Way We’re Reading Now,” *The Globe and Mail Online* 11 August 2009, 12 August 2009 <<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/blogs/shelf-life/the-way-were-reading-now/article1248481/>>

couple of minutes was harmful to your health; no warning stickers on books).” However, as my research shows, this final statement is not true; in fact, reading was frequently identified as a physically dangerous activity in the Victorian period, and a mentally dangerous one as well.

Educators, critics, and novelists alike worried about the dangers of reading throughout the nineteenth century, just as they worried about the lack of education provided for the nation’s youth and the activities young men found to fill their time in the absence of reading. Forgetting the history of these fears, as Levin seems to do, leads one to ignore the fact that the questions asked in the nineteenth-century debates about reading are still relevant. Does technological innovation offer more and better opportunities for systematic reading, or only more distractions? To what extent will the nation suffer if young men and women give up reading and writing in favour of other activities? Is too much reading harmful to individuals? Is it more or less harmful than not enough reading? Who should properly be considered a writer, and who should be classified as a reader? Should all interaction with text be considered reading? What is the relationship between reading and entertainment? Is everyone who writes really a “writer”? By examining a wide range of Victorian prose to show how writers and common readers defined the practices of literacy, my dissertation shows the diverse ways in which these questions were answered at various stages in the period, providing a map of what literacy meant in the latter part of the nineteenth century that can help us to understand what it means today.

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