

Reader's Block: Response

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“By-the-by, that very word, Reading, in its critical use, always charms me. An actress's Reading of a chambermaid, a dancer's Reading of a hornpipe, a singer's Reading of a song, a marine painter's Reading of the sea, the kettle-drum's Reading of an instrumental passage, are phrases ever youthful and delightful” (Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* 605). Thus Eugene Wrayburn, in a novel that obsessively plays the symbolic value of literacy off against the interpretive challenge posed by nonalphabetic signs. “The streets being, for pupils of [Charley's] degree, the great preparatory Establishment in which very much that is never unlearned is learned before and without book” (263), the novel may not be able to distance itself as breezily as Eugene from the usage that allows Riah to “read his master's face” (281) or Charley to “call the fire at home, [Lizzie's] books” (636).¹ For Dickens, according to one of his shrewdest early readers, “London is like a newspaper”—if only, perhaps, in the semiotic density which makes the British Constitution indistinguishable from the traces of a horse (Bagehot 468).

Eugene's list calls attention to the metaphoricity of “reading” in Victorian culture, but its expansionism will sound equally familiar to readers of twenty-first-century cultural studies. Yet the imperialist extension of reading to encompass any interpretive act is only half the story. If, in John Plotz's words, the book is constitutively torn between its “metaphoric” and “metonymic” powers—put differently, its verbal content and material form—then the obverse of the Victorians' appeal to reading as a model for a broader range of hermeneutic practices would be their unease with the nonlinguistic functions that printed objects fill even, or especially, when not being read (472).

The tension between those two senses of “reading” is compounded by the question of who exactly the subject of that verb is. Looking at uses of the word in the literary criticism of the past twenty years, it may be too crude to hypothesize a shift from “reading” as a

noun used to describe the product of the speaker's own ruminations (as in "*Our Mutual Friend: A Lacanian Reading*") to "reading" as an activity delegated to others by a critic who describes it from a safe historical distance. Unquestionably, though, the inaugural NAVSA Conference tilted toward the latter sense of the word: apart from the occasional panel with a title as capacious as "Queer Readings," critics in Bloomington read—and theorized reading—over Victorian readers' and writers' shoulders. Thus, Andrew Elfenbein brought late-twentieth-century theories of reading comprehension into dialogue with Victorian debates about Robert Browning's legibility; Kelly Hager challenged recent historians' emphasis on novel-reading as a dangerous pathology (or thrilling transgression) by reconstructing medical defenses of the act; Emily Allen and Dino Felluga attacked the same historiographical consensus from a different angle by showing how central poetic figures such as Byron were to the debate over the somatic effects of reading; and Deb Gettelman unteased George Eliot's ambivalence about the readerly daydreams that—like the novel-reading that they both interrupt and impel—manifests at once passivity and hyperactivity, constituting a blank space as well as a rival narrative. Studies like these are finally beginning to carve out a niche (in Garrett Stewart's words) "between sociohistorical studies of the popular audience, on the one hand, and so-called reader-response criticism, on the other—between . . . purchasing or processing ends," or between redefining the text as "an affective structure of effected meaning" and displacing it "from linguistic effect to social artifact" (*Dear Reader* 8).

Departments of literature have usually defined the study of reading as a branch of literary criticism, but literary hermeneutics could just as easily be seen as a subset of book history.² As Eugene hints, the nominalization which makes "a reading" shorthand for "an interpretation" risks flattening out the specificity of books—both the ways in which their interpretation differs from the interpretation of nonverbal objects, and the aspects of their consumption that have nothing to do with their verbal content. If the book is only one of the many objects that can be read, conversely reading is only one of the uses to which books can be put.

The papers delivered by Stephen Arata, Nicholas Dames, and Stewart discuss responses to printed matter that define themselves in contradistinction to "reading" in most accepted senses of the word: whether the willing suspension of attention that Arata traces in the

aesthetic theories of William Morris and R. L. Stevenson, or the displacement of affect by epistemology that Dames attributes to post-Victorian novel criticism, or the chiasmus in which (as Stewart shows) artists studiously avoid allowing viewers to replicate the reading inscribed, but tirelessly represent the postures and gestures that accessorize—and stand in for—reading itself. Learning to read means, among other things, learning when not to. The sheer bulk of many Victorian genres (both fictional and non) requires their consumers to skip and to skim, to tune in and zone out.³ If those rhythms have proven harder to theorize than readerly engagement, it's not simply because by definition they leave no traces: no marginalia, no underlinings, none of the tears or semen that vouch for the responses to Rousseau unearthed by Robert Darnton (see Darnton 215-56). It's also because, as Arata and Dames argue, twentieth-century critics' accounts of Victorian theories of reading reflect their own professional and emotional investment in certain ways of reading, and certain vocabularies for describing (or naturalizing) their own practice. Arata shows how radically the "idleness" elicited by Stevenson and Morris challenges our ideas—at once prescriptive and descriptive—of what it means to read. Yet the same critics who dismiss the legitimacy of those reading styles refuse to elaborate any explicit theory of reading: in Dames's perverse formulation, post-Victorian resistance to affect means that "the job of the critic is *not to read*: to extract data from the novel that make up mental wholes, to avoid everywhere the temporal flow and affective identifications that infect novel-reading" (210).

Our Mutual Friend's interest in the reading of matter other than print matches its author's relish for uses of printed matter other than reading—including, most famously, the dummy bookshelves for which he designed titles like *History of a Short Chancery Suit* (21 volumes) or *Cat's Lives* (in nine) (for example, see Johnson 389). But Dickens was not alone. In "The Mind's Sigh," Stewart takes Sherlock Holmes to exemplify both of these symmetrical dissociations of an object (the book) from an act (reading): on the one hand the detective decodes nonalphabetical signs, on the other he deploys books as unread props, notably in the hands of his wax decoy. Dummy bookshelves or wax dummies: if metaphorical senses of "reading" imply disembodied cerebration, an interest in the size and heft of books seems just as inextricably linked to an inauthenticity synonymous with stupidity or even dumbness. (The book doesn't speak any more than the effigy, which in

fact is described in bibliographical language as a “facsimile” of Holmes: not the original alphabetical text but a purely visual reproduction of it, like Dickens’s unusable books or John Ruskin’s illegible bookshelves.) *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce*, Umberto Eco and Thomas Seebeok’s 1988 essay collection devoted to reading in the most grandly metaphorical sense, made clear how easily Holmes could become the poster boy for a cultural criticism that refused to privilege language except (and it’s an important exception) by making it the template for all other sign systems. It remains for bibliographers to follow up on the other side of the question. How do the material forms of printed matter mean? How does reading a book differ from reading a text? How does using a book differ from reading it?

The Victorian novel tends to answer those questions in a comic vein—or to use laughter as a way of avoiding them. Thus, where eighteenth-century predecessors and modernist or postmodernist successors claim bibliographical self-consciousness as their own, Victorian novels gingerly displace that awareness onto their characters—and rarely the most intellectually sophisticated. Captain Cuttle, who “made it a point of duty to read none but very large books on a Sunday, as having a more staid appearance” (Dickens, *Dombey* 595), is as sensitive to what Jerome McGann calls “bibliographical codes” as are Aunt Pullet and Mrs. Glegg (43). “If, in the maiden days of the Dodson sisters, their bibles opened more easily at some parts than others, it was because of dried tulip petals, which had been distributed quite impartially, without preference for the historical, devotional, or doctrinal” (364). This from *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), a novel whose fascination with nonlinguistic, even antilinguistic uses of books culminates in the oath sworn on a family Bible. However easy it is to read this scene as a face-off between Old Testament literalism and New Testament forgiveness, the Dodsons’ flower-pressing should remind us that their brother-in-law’s oath doesn’t in fact pit the letter against the spirit, but the object against the letter. Mr. Tulliver, that is, doesn’t so much misread the Bible as unread it, by relocating the book’s meaning from its printed words to the manuscript names added to its pages and the oral promises made in its presence. His understanding of the Bible as material object and social institution stands opposite Maggie’s paraphrase of the words that we ourselves may have read in a different copy of the same text: “‘O father, what?’ said Maggie, sinking down by his knees, pale and trembling. ‘It’s wicked to curse and bear malice’” (Eliot 356). From this perspective,

the literalist is not the father but the daughter: she's the one who ignores material container in favor of verbal content, he's the one who recognizes (to quote Natalie Zemon Davis) "a printed book [as] not merely a source for ideas and images, but a carrier of relationships" (192).

Or of the failure to relate—for Victorian novels routinely deploy books and periodicals as symptoms of estrangement. Thus, Anthony Trollope's *The Small House at Allington* (1864) can economically signal two honeymooners' emotional distance through their silent contest to see who can go longer without recourse to print:

He had the *Times* newspaper in his dressing-bag. She also had a novel with her. Would she be offended if he took the paper out and read it? The miles seemed to pass by very slowly, and there was still another hour down to Folkestone. He longed for his *Times*, but resolved at last, that he would not read unless she read first. She also had remembered her novel; but by nature she was more patient than he, and she thought that on such a journey any reading might perhaps be improper. (497)

His and hers, newspaper and novel: the railway carriage echoes the railway platform across which Johnny Eames and Adolphus Crosbie chased one another several chapters earlier, ending up at the W. H. Smith bookstall where Johnny "laid his foe prostrate upon the newspapers, falling himself into the yellow shilling-novel depot by the overt fury of his own energy" (371).⁴ Crushing each genre under the weight of a different combatant, *The Small House* shows less interest in analogizing men's newspaper-reading to women's novel-reading (as does, for example, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's near-contemporary novel *John Marchmont's Legacy* [1862]) than in pairing unread copies of each.

Even when Crosbie can no longer resist taking out his newspaper, "he could not fix his mind upon the politics of the day" (498). Yet however little impression the newspaper makes on the man who's holding it, it serves a more useful function for the woman in whose presence he's reading it—or rather, in whose presence he's performing the manual, facial, and ocular gestures that announce (whether accurately or not) that reading is going on. What Crosbie needs to take off of Alexandrina is his eye, not his mind: the newspaper provides an excuse for the two parties to ignore and be ignored. That conventionally agreed-upon signal for what Erving Goffman called "civil inattention" is ratified in turn by the novel's refusal to tell us what's in the newspaper being read (or not): the narrator seems no better equipped to specify "the politics of the

day” than Crosbie to concentrate on them. By emptying the newspaper of its content, the novel brings a public genre down to its own domestic level. (The battle of wills in which Crosbie’s *Times* is enlisted crowds out any more literal battles that its printed words might report.) At other moments in *The Small House*, newspapers function quite differently—moments where, for example, the narrator supplies summaries or direct quotations of journalistic articles that function as counterpoints to the plot that frames them. Here, though, such intertextuality is beside the point: the “paper” operates as an object rather than a text, an institution rather than a representation. What the newspaper “covers” isn’t current events, but its owner’s body. In this cynically social model of literacy, the side of the newspaper that faces away from the reader becomes more important than the side that he himself sees.

Yet the symmetry of this scene extends that emptiness to the genre that we ourselves are reading. Novel becomes for wife what newspaper is for husband: a way to divorce physical proximity from psychological intimacy. Conversely, *The Small House* itself makes us more intimate with literary characters than with our own relatives—as the newspaper, in Benedict Anderson’s account, does with almost equally distant readers (35). If the national community theorized by Anderson depends on the knowledge that strangers with whom one has nothing else in common are reading the same news at the same moment, Goffman’s ethnography of commuters during the 1954 newspaper strike—forced to look each other in the eye for the first time in their lives—suggests that the newspaper can also function as a prop to reconcile spatial proximity with psychic distance (Goffman 52).

A page screening husband from wife: this scene is everywhere in Victorian fiction. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) opens with Henchard and his wife walking “side by side in such a way as to suggest afar off the low, easy confidential chat of people full of reciprocity; but on closer view it could be discerned that the man was reading or pretending to read, a ballad sheet” (Hardy 1). In *The Prime Minister* (1876), Trollope once again establishes the lack of conjugal “confidence” by pitting a man’s newspaper against a woman’s novel:

Each was labouring under a conviction that the other was misbehaving, and with that feeling it was impossible that there should be confidence between them. He busied himself with books and papers,—always turning over those piles of newspapers. . . . She engaged herself with the children or pretended to read a novel. (361)

In *The Claverings* (1867), all that the two bitterly opposed brothers share is a use of books to avoid human interaction. "The rector was reading,—or pretending to read—a review"; meanwhile, "At their meals [Sir Hugh] rarely spoke to [his wife],—having always at breakfast a paper or book before him, and at dinner devoting his attention to a dog at his feet" (114, 372). And in *The Golden Bowl* (1904), "the Princess pretended to read; [the Prince] looked at her as he passed; there hovered in her own sense the thought of other occasions when she had cheated appearances of agitation with a book" (James 571).⁵ Those "other occasions" point outward from Henry James's novel to a literary tradition whose point of origin may be the Newcomes' breakfast table:

"How interested you are in your papers," resumes the sprightly Rosey. "What can you find in those hard politics?" Both gentlemen are looking at their papers with all their might, and no doubt cannot see one single word which those brilliant and witty leading articles contain. (Thackeray 853)

If Clive Newcome's replacement of text ("words") by object ("paper") prefigures Crosbie's reduction of news to shield, reciprocally Braddon's novel *The Doctor's Wife* (1864), published in the same year as *The Small House at Allington*, echoes Alexandrina's hesitation about reading in her new husband's presence. "There were no books in the sitting-room of the family hotel; and even if there had been, the honeymoon week seemed to Isabel a ceremonial period. She felt as if she were on a visit, and was not free to read" (108). Both brides want to get out a book, and both recognize this desire as disrespectful to their husbands. But there the similarity ends. Where Braddon makes the presence of another human being an impediment to reading, Trollope makes it the reason for reading. Where Braddon contrasts self-indulgent reading with ceremonial visiting, Trollope parses reading itself as a ceremony.

Contrary to what sentimental celebrations of reading aloud might lead us to expect, then, reading becomes social when it's least sociable. Maud Churton Braby's 1909 conduct book *Modern Marriage and How to Bear It* decrees that when a man is at his club, "the wife can have a picnic dinner—always a joy to a woman—with a book propped up before her, can let herself go" (qtd. in Flint 100). In choosing a book as the marker of freedom from the husband's gaze, *Modern Marriage* sanitizes the Victorian fictional convention that made reading a symptom of marital breakdown. Yet its reasoning bears an equally uncanny resemblance to an 1857 conduct book that advised women

traveling alone that “civilities should be politely acknowledged; but as a general rule, a book is the safest resource for ‘an unprotected female’” (qtd. in Flint 105).⁶ The oppressively intimate home becomes a mirror-image of the excessively public railway carriage: whether husbands or fellow-travelers, men’s presence is what the book makes bearable.

This is not to say, of course, that the books that represent such scenes imagine starring in them. On the contrary, the bibliographical materialism that earlier novels so openly embrace—from the literalism of *Tristram Shandy’s* (1759–67) “one page . . . which MALICE will not blacken” (378) to *Northanger Abbey’s* (1818) “tell-tale compression of pages” (203)—is exorcised once the novel chooses to contain it within particular characters’ consciousness. (And to do so in a sufficiently satirical mode to cure readers of any lingering temptation to emulate them.) The novel’s traditional framing of quixotic over-reading gives way here to a new inscription of under-reading or even pseudo-reading whose best emblem is the waxwork Sherlock Holmes. The eighteenth-century fear that fiction might crowd out its reader’s awareness of her immediate surroundings—as in the 1795 article in *The Sylph* that pictures mothers “crying for the imaginary distress of an heroine, while their children were crying for bread” (qtd. in Taylor 53)⁷—finds its mirror-image in Trollope’s understanding of silent reading as conjugal performance. If the book can absorb, it can also repel. And if the act of ignoring one’s family can serve as a yardstick for interest in a book, the act of engaging with a book can also provide a gauge for hatred of one’s family. When Denis Diderot described *Clarissa* (1747–48) as “a gospel brought onto earth to sunder husband from wife, father from son, brother from sister,” he measured the novel’s power against the strength of the social ties that it could override (1066, my translation). Trollope merely reverses means with end.

Does this imply that the only meanings we can ascribe to reading must be parasitically borrowed from its content or its context? Certainly it’s hard to think of another practice whose connotations so stubbornly resist generalization: as Arata points out, reading can signal distraction as easily as attention, sloth as easily as work. In fact, he shows, the Victorians used it to signify both at once: for Morris as for Stevenson, the mind can be emptied only through strenuous concentration. Even within the late-Victorian debates about attention that Arata analyzes, different emphases—aestheticist self-culture against functionalist data processing, for example—lead to diametrically

opposed models and metaphors. No single narrative can encompass the many uses to which the Victorians put the written word: to get a job, to save one's soul, to form a self, to place a bet, to pass an exam, to snub a fellow traveler.

I've been belaboring that last function because a historian can identify so easily with the position of the bystander in whose presence print is being conspicuously consumed. Victorian readers sometimes look as blankly undecipherable as strangers on a train, shielded from our gaze by the very books and periodicals that we're investigating. And as with the estranged honeymooners, what separates us from the faces we're trying to glimpse over a novel or a newspaper is their proximity, not their distance. Yet the Victorians didn't just read differently than we do, they also wrote about reading in different terms. Dames's plea for a new affective criticism appeals to Victorian novel theory as a mirror in which we can recognize our own scholarly practices, but also as an alternative to some of the assumptions about the relation of verbal structures to psychological states that we've inherited from the generation that came after them. The physiological critics whose work Dames reconstructs see fiction less as a (spatial) "engine for the production of knowledge" than a (temporal) "machine for the production of affect" (210). Leapfrogging over a mid-twentieth-century criticism that bracketed the reading on which it depended—though that fact may be as obvious as a purloined letter—Dames's genealogical detective work provides recent reader-response theory not just with ancestors, but with countermodels.

If any common denominator unites Victorian representations of reading, it may be precisely their juxtaposition of the familiar with the baffling. At the end of the century, when William James wanted to explain "the stupidity and injustice of our opinions, so far as they deal with the significance of alien lives," the example that came to mind was reading:

Take our dogs and ourselves, connected as we are by a tie more intimate than most ties in this world; and yet . . . how insensible, each of us, to all that makes life significant for the other!—we to the rapture of bones under hedges, or smells of trees and lamp-posts, they to the delights of literature and art. As you sit reading the most moving romance you ever fell upon, what sort of a judge is your fox-terrier of your behaviour? With all his good will toward you, the nature of your conduct is absolutely excluded from his comprehension. To sit there like a senseless statue when you might be taking him to walk and throwing sticks for him to catch! What queer

disease is this that comes over you every day, of holding things and staring at them for hours together, paralyzed of motion and vacant of all conscious life? (4-5)

That James can describe reading (however ironically) as “senseless” suggests how counterintuitive the embodied reading theorized by Dames’s physiological critics seemed by 1899. For James as for Trollope or Arthur Conan Doyle, reading foils intimacy (and fools sharpshooters) because it’s both instantly recognizable and profoundly impenetrable. His image points to one of the central difficulties of a history of reading: how to analyze an activity that’s too close for comfort. What’s alien here is not simply the relation of readers to illiterates (human or canine), but also one reader’s relation to another. Writers on reading have lamented its illegibility or savored its ineffability as far back as Wilkie Collins’s 1858 essay “The Unknown Public.”⁸ Nowhere is this unknowability more graphically demonstrated than in the visual representations of reading that Stewart describes—or rather, as he polemicizes, in visual representations of the external correlates to reading. Ruskin’s draftsmanship practice involves representing a bookshelf in such a way that the spines of books are marked with something recognizable as lettering but illegible as letters—a neat emblem for the challenge of getting across the fact that reading is going on without falsifying that experience by conveying its content. Our own ability to read (some, at least) of the texts that the Victorians did may give us a false sense of being able to replicate their responses and unresponses. What makes reading hard for scholars to study is not (or not only) that it’s alien: the complementary challenge is to establish enough critical distance from a field whose message is also its medium.

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NOTES

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¹Another commentator explains that “reading is often identical with study, as when one is said to *read law*” (“Reading” 317).

²On this tension, see McDonald 121.

³For an extended version of this argument, see Price.

⁴On the relation between novel and newspaper in Victorian culture, see Altick and Rubery.

⁵Thanks to Sianne Ngai for suggesting this example to me.

⁶Many thanks to Kate Flint for suggesting these examples to me.

⁷Compare Garrett Stewart's reading of one image of a reading woman as "the charged site of an almost primal exclusion: the return of the repressed moment when your mother's voice first went silent to you, her face angled away, as she entered a compelling world without you, a space of disconnection from which you were eventually to model your own interiority" ("Painted Readers, Narrative Regress" 141).

⁸For an analysis of the investments that have made social historians eager to imagine reading as an unknowable act, however, see Henkin.

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