

# Introduction

THE FEELING OF READING



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*With Bewick on my knee, I was then happy: happy at least in my way. I feared nothing but interruption, and that came too soon.*

—Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847)<sup>1</sup>

Why is Jane Eyre happy? The answer might seem obvious: she is happy because, like us her readers, she is lost in a book. She is thus happy because, as Georges Poulet puts it, she is “thinking the thoughts of another”: her psychic landscape has been taken over by a text to which she willingly surrenders—a state of affairs that in the last few decades has come to seem at least as dangerous as it is pleasurable.<sup>2</sup> At least since Michel Foucault’s influence began to be felt in literary studies in the 1970s, readerly absorption has tended to be regarded as an insidious means by which we are interpellated into a social order. The project of literature, D. A. Miller writes, for example, “relentlessly and often literally brought home as much in the novel’s characteristic forms and conditions of reception as in its themes, is to confirm the novel-reader in his identity as ‘liberal subject.’”<sup>3</sup> At precisely the moments when we feel ourselves to be most free from social determinations—as, for example, when we are happily lost in a book—we are supposedly most thoroughly overwritten by ideology.

Despite Miller's and his coadjutors dire predictions, however, Jane isn't simply a passive audience. "Shrined in double retirement" in the window seat, hidden from the malicious cousins who threaten to interrupt her, she is less absorbed in the text before her than actively inventing her own narratives on the basis of the materials and psychic space it provides.<sup>4</sup>

The letterpress [of Bewick's *History of British Birds*] I cared little for, generally speaking; and yet there were certain introductory pages that, child as I was, I could not pass quite as a blank. They were those which treat of the haunts of sea-fowl; of "the solitary rocks and promontories" by them only inhabited; of the coast of Norway, studded with isles from its southern extremity, the Lindenness, or Naze, to the North Cape. . . . Of these death-white realms I formed an idea of my own: shadowy, like all the half-comprehended notions that float dim through children's brains, but strangely impressive.<sup>5</sup>

Jane barely registers the text in front of her, instead deriving her happiness from her ability to make up her own stories on the basis of what she half-reads and only dimly understands. Further, rather than a problem to be rectified, this antisocial, inaccurate, and pleasurable reading is offered in the text almost as a badge of honor: an indication that Jane is interesting and imaginative, and hence someone with whom we might want to identify both ourselves and our reading practices.

The essays collected in *The Feeling of Reading* suggest that Jane's experience in this scene might ultimately be paradigmatic—or at least symptomatic—of Victorian reading much more generally. Together, these essays demonstrate that in the mid- to late nineteenth century, reading was commonly regarded as at least as valuable as an affective experience as it was as a way to convey information or increase understanding. They underscore the intended activity of the reader and the extent to which she or he was expected and encouraged to participate in the production of the text. And they illuminate the ways in which text and world were commonly conceived as productively opposed to one another rather than as cognitively or experientially linked. By virtue of a renewed attention to feeling rather than knowing, a very different world of reading comes to light—one in which the intended reader's reactions to the text may be "micromanage[d]," as Garrett Stewart has argued, but in which that micromanagement involves autonomy as well as determination, escape from as well as assimilation to the world outside the text.<sup>6</sup>

Ten years ago Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offered a challenge to historicist critics whose “scholarship rel[ies] on the prestige of a single, overarching narrative: exposing and problematizing hidden violences in the genealogy of the modern liberal subject.”<sup>7</sup> Taking Miller’s *The Novel and the Police* (1988) as a way to demonstrate the problems posed by New Historicism, Sedgwick claims that his argument is problematic, first for logical reasons, because (as she admits that Miller would concede) it is “entirely circular: everything can be understood as an aspect of the carceral, therefore the carceral is everywhere.”<sup>8</sup> Second, his argument poses political problems, since having “an unmystified, angry view of large and genuinely systemic oppressions does not *intrinsically* or *necessarily* enjoin on that person any specific train of epistemological or narrative consequences.”<sup>9</sup> And finally, it offers aesthetic difficulties, for the insights yielded by his “strong theory” are ultimately less pleasurable than those generated by his local insights.<sup>10</sup> In place of the paranoia of New Historicism, therefore, Sedgwick offers something she calls “reparative” reading. “The desire of a reparative impulse,” she explains, “is additive and accretive. Its fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self.”<sup>11</sup> In urging critics to embrace a critical practice that offers “plenitude” to its object, and “resources” to its practitioner, Sedgwick provides a useful corrective to the suspicion that characterizes many Foucauldian readings. At the same time, however, “reparative reading” risks reproducing at least some of the limitations of what she calls “paranoid reading” insofar as both approaches threaten to establish the critic’s conclusions prior to her engagement with the text. Reparative reading may be opposed to paranoia in its effects, in other words, yet it too assumes a fundamentally ethical or expressive stance toward its object.

Over the past few years, many scholars of reading—several of whom are represented in this collection—have been formulating an approach to Victorian reading that is neither paranoid nor reparative but instead attuned to a different model of historical specificity: interested in what nineteenth-century readers and writers *thought* they were doing. Rather than asking how we “do” read, or in how we “should” read—the two options Sedgwick offers<sup>12</sup>—these critics have asked, how we are *expected* to read, a question that leads to some interestingly unpredictable answers. How did nineteenth-century readers and writers think about the experience of reading? What did they regard as its pleasures and dangers? And what does that tell us about the texts them-

selves? Answering questions like these requires that we remain attentive to the contradictions, exclusions, and blindnesses those projects sometimes involved. But on a fundamental level, it requires a willingness to accommodate ambivalence, ambiguity, and perhaps most important, surprise.

The critics represented here embrace a wide spectrum of approaches to reading. What they share, however, is a rejection of either strict historicism or dogmatic formalism. Instead of choosing a single camp, these critics put these two ways of defining the object of study into productive dialogue, asking both how we can reconstruct the alien historical circumstances of Victorian reading *and* how those distant reading experiences are restaged in attentive acts of reading in the present.<sup>13</sup> Together, the essays in this collection demonstrate how often an attention to the historical specificity of Victorian reading practices returns us to the issues of physical and emotional feeling. The last few years have seen an explosion of interest in reading and feeling, and the Victorian period has held a privileged position in both.

The nineteenth century saw a massive growth in literacy in Britain, so that by the end of the century the majority of adults were, for the first time, also readers. This development coincided with the vast dissemination of texts that solidified the set of affective expectations we still routinely bring to the experience of reading. Examining Victorians' interest in reading as a site of bodily response and affective experimentation, the contributors to this collection argue that Victorians did not just interpret but also "felt" the texts they consumed. Further, they argue that those feelings direct our attention in ways impossible to predict on the basis of either paranoid or reparative reading alone: toward a renewed interest in what reading can achieve that no other kind of experience can, and hence, too, toward the pleasure to be derived from the disconnection—as well as the connection—between world and text.

The collection opens with Nicholas Dames's argument for the revisionary effects of attending seriously to Victorian novel theory and criticism—forms of writing that still tend too often to be ignored or dismissed. In "On Not Close Reading: The Prolonged Excerpt as Victorian Critical Protocol," Dames reevaluates the common nineteenth-century critical practices of excerpting, or printing long passages of the text under review. For recent critics, this practice has often seemed like a lazy substitute for "close reading," the practice of finding minute but representative bits of text upon which to

practice the skills of rhetorical analysis. According to Dames, such accounts misunderstand the function of this form of citation. Turning to a variety of Victorian critics and theorists—Walter Bagehot, Geraldine Jewsbury, G. H. Lewes, Margaret Oliphant, and others—he argues that excerpt exists as a way of producing for the reader, in miniature, the affective processes involved in the temporal workings of long narratives. Rather than offering the “see, it works this way” epistemology of close reading, excerpt functions in Victorian reviewing and novel theory as “see, it feels this way.” Dames thus offers a new account of what Victorian critics considered significant about the texts they reviewed: feeling rather than thinking; temporality rather than isolated, individual moments. He also begins to suggest some of the limitations of our own criticism that, because of its embeddedness in epistemological concerns, refuses to excerpt or paraphrase as one way in which it refuses to *feel*.

Dames’s interest in the text as a technology for the production of feeling is counterbalanced by Kate Flint’s, Leah Price’s, and John Plotz’s concerns with how texts served in the nineteenth century as a form of insulation *against* feeling. Kate Flint’s “Traveling Readers” reveals how readers used texts as a way to effectively block out the world outside the text. While we are all familiar with novel-reading as itself a form of imaginative transport, Flint examines the relatively ignored question of what happens when reading takes place elsewhere. Focusing on reading that occurs when one is away from “home,” and when the books themselves are neither set in, nor overtly relate to, the place in which one is consuming them, Flint argues that Victorian travelers commonly identified taking refuge in a book as an act of self-defense, a way to numb oneself against the foreignness that lies outside of the text. At the same time, Flint also demonstrates how understandings or experiences of texts change according to the location at which they are consumed. Her essay thus examines how well-traveled texts, written in English, were encountered and read by those who were themselves at a distance from the place in which these books were located. Ultimately, then, Flint warns against conflating the material history of the book and the history of subjectivity in reading, dependent though reading necessarily must be on the presence of reading matter in the first place.

Leah Price, too, is concerned with how the text can be used to insulate the reader against the world outside the text. And although in a very different register, she too sees that insulating effect as a way to think about the differences between book history and the history of reading. Her essay, “Trollope

and the Book as Prop,” asks how Victorian culture in general, and the realist novel in particular, defined the relation between the text (a linguistic structure) and the book (a material thing). More specifically, it tries to explain why Victorian writers had such a hard time keeping those two terms in play at once: why when the book-object is represented it’s rarely being read, while whenever reading is in fact going on, the material book gets reduced to a metaphor, a distraction, or a joke. Like Flint, then, Price is concerned with excavating usable models for rethinking the relation of literary criticism to book history as well as with remapping the relation between social practices (such as reading) and material culture (including books). Using Trollope’s fictional universe as a case study, Price asks what makes the consciousness of the reading character so hard to access, not just for other characters, but for Trollope’s own readers. Why does representing the act of reading mean abstracting the visible book? Conversely, why does representing the book (or the newspaper, or the magazine) mean reducing reading itself to an act? Novelists of manners, Price argues, share the challenge facing historians of reading: how to observe an activity against which the social defines itself.

If in Flint’s account travelers use books to block out the alienness of new environments, and in the texts Price examines, husbands and wives use newspapers and novels as a way to insulate themselves from the potentially oppressive intimacy of married life, in John Plotz’s essay, “Mediated Involvement: John Stuart Mill’s Antisocial Sociability,” free individuals use texts as a way to preserve all that is valuable about human interaction while staving off the fear that the pressure of other minds might impinge on one’s psychic autonomy. John Stuart Mill’s foundational *On Liberty* (1851), Plotz argues, transmutes that old demon of free thought, *custom*, into the new demon, *society*, a terrifying force that can either surround one in daily interaction or invade one’s mind so surreptitiously and insidiously as to make one serve as one’s own worst enemy. In this context, Plotz claims, reading comes to seem like a way to maintain genuine productive communication between uncoerced equals. At the same time, however, Plotz also shows how, in Mill, the experience of reading threatens to become an insidious agent of the social, a way in which the thoughts of others are smuggled into a putatively independent mind.

Like the preceding authors, both Catherine Robson and Herbert F. Tucker are concerned with what the Victorians thought literary texts can do to or for readers that other forms of experience cannot. But unlike the others, they are interested in Victorian ideas about the specificity of poetry in general, and of

rhythm, in particular. In “Reciting Alice: What Is the Use of a Book without Poems?” Robson asks in what ways the dominant modes and forms of juvenile education in this period might have structured—even while failing to fill—the learner’s mind. To explore one aspect of this huge topic, Robson places *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) in relation to an important contemporary pedagogical practice, the memorization and recitation of poetry by young children. Restoring the history of verse-memorization and recitation Robson claims, allows us to see that the educational practices of the past created vast numbers of properly *prosimetric* minds—consciousnesses that were structured according to the forms of poetry as well as prose. Such forms are both omnipresent and strangely free of content, thus enabling the humorous substitutions of Lewis Carroll’s text. Substitutions like these, Robson demonstrates, have been a recurring by-product of an educational practice that emphasizes form while leaving content surprisingly underdefined.

While Robson emphasizes the infectiousness of rhythm and rhyme—so readily accessible that years after memorizing them, adults have trouble getting them out of their heads—Herbert Tucker is interested in the sheer exhaustion involved in reading poetry. In “Over Worked, Worked Over: A Poetics of Fatigue,” Tucker argues that from the earliest Victorian years, poets renegotiating their contract with a diffuse, even fugitive readership turned traditional versification to purposes that remain palpably legible as, in ergonomic terms, modes of stress management. “Over Worked, Worked Over” examines the long Victorian investment in exhaustion and tracks how this thematic obsession expressed what was at once an aesthetic and an ethical concern for poets who made it a test of the serious artist to tire readers out: to put them through their paces while not quite exhausting their patience. Through a close engagement with some major works of Tennyson—a master at striking this prosodic balance—Tucker demonstrates how Victorian verse practices a calisthenic of focus and relaxation, work and recess. Tucker then moves on to consider some historical analogues of this very Victorian obsession, focusing most closely on Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s industrial experiment in the poetics of fatigue, “The Cry of the Children” (1843). Demonstrating how the poem cranks out a staccato factory rhythm and then threatens to jolt this mechanical rhythm with a series of interruptions we might think of as work stoppages, Tucker shows how socially resonant the idea of the exhausted reader could become in the hands of a master poet. In their ensemble the examples show that the layered repetition that is prosodic structure offers us vital access to how the Victorian reading of verse *felt*.

The final three essays in the collection shift our attention back to fiction, asking what kinds of literary or psychic effects the Victorians imagined to be unique to fiction or fictionality. In his essay, “The Impersonal Intimacy of *Marius the Epicurean*,” Stephen Arata argues that readers reluctant to call Walter Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) a novel—and there are plenty—generally mistake the nature of the affective response the text demands from its readers. Nearly everyone agrees that *Marius*’s character is presented in a positive light and that his life story possesses an intrinsic interest, yet Pater’s narrative techniques seem designed precisely to block all avenues to readerly identification. The foregrounding of the links between sympathy, right feeling, and the moral education of the reader helped make the realist novel the preeminent popular art form of a liberal humanist Victorian culture. Pater, by contrast, embraces an antihumanist aesthetic; in *Marius* he turns away from the representational strategies of the realist novel in order to create instead relations of “impersonal intimacy” between readers and fictional characters. *Marius the Epicurean*, Arata argues, reflects (and enacts) Pater’s beliefs concerning the nature of narrative and its role in the formation of readers’ subjectivities. Pater rejected models of depth psychology that emerged in the 1860s, which in turn led him to reject the humanist bases of realist fiction. One key effect of his narrative practice in *Marius* is that it works to displace readerly “feeling” in favor of an aesthetic grounded in bodily affect or sensation.

My own essay, “Reading and Re-reading: Wilde, Newman, and the Fiction of Belief,” argues that in “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” (1889) and elsewhere, Oscar Wilde argues for the difficulty of holding beliefs *except* as fictions: as ideas that might or might not be true—and, even more important, that might or might not be our own. Further, he implicitly claims to base this argument on an (admittedly idiosyncratic) reading of the work of John Henry Cardinal Newman. Leader of the Oxford movement, famous convert to Catholicism, vociferous antiliberal and author of *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870) among many other works, Newman is usually regarded as seeking to defend the utter reliability and knowability of belief. Yet in “The Portrait,” Wilde suggests an alternative understanding of Newman: as committed to belief’s status as a kind of fiction, insofar as it is vicariated through an aesthetically pleasing and erotically desirable other. Wilde’s reading of Newman, I argue, has the potential to provide us with a different way of thinking about the relation between belief and the experience of reading fiction. Rather than providing a way to understand others’ beliefs, as some critics have argued,



fiction enables its readers to experience what it *feels like* to hold a belief. As a result, it encourages them to take on that belief as if it was their own—a state that ultimately seems indistinguishable from believing it “for real.”

In the final essay in the collection, “Reading Feeling and the ‘Transferred Life’: *The Mill on the Floss*,” Garrett Stewart argues that reading and feeling are not meant to be separate things in Eliot’s novel. Focusing on the heroine’s disappointed lover, Philip Wakem, the “hump-backed” romantic intellectual, Stewart argues that, as with any reader outside the text, Philip’s participation in the fantasies and fears of the heroine is inevitably twofold. It begins in passive imagination and then formulates itself to cognition as a kind of sympathetic “belief” (Philip’s word) in the Other. Amounting to a disquisition on the fiction of “romantic disillusionment,” Stewart claims, Philip’s focalizing service in the internalization of Maggie’s suffering is crucial for Eliot’s rhetorical design. It spotlights the role of temporality and ironic disjunction in the sacrificial subjectivity of Eliot’s plotline, where the scapegoated subject becomes objectified in her dashed promise, evacuated of desire before her own eyes. Beyond his role in articulating one horizon of disenchantment’s bitter totality in this failed Bildungsroman, Philip’s wrenching emphasis on the “gift of transferred life” through feeling defines an affective circuit—opened even (or especially) by his frustrated passion—that does more than embody the cathartic motive for Eliot’s overarching plot. It performs for us the ethical imperative to “enact” the other’s existence in the very processing of her or his words.

Like the Victorians, we are witnessing a vast shift in popular practices and conceptions of reading. In an age of the Web, text-messaging, Twitter, and the Kindle, many have asked how changing protocols of reading will affect our culture more generally. The essays in this collection may not answer this question directly, but they do begin to suggest the nature and the range of practices against which new developments need to be evaluated. They also help clarify how another moment of vast technological change responded to analogous questions. Perhaps most important, they indicate how we might begin to move beyond the rather limited range of terms in which reading is all too often described. In broadening our conceptual vocabulary, the essays in this collection help us begin to reconceive the variety of ways in which texts work. Texts in these essays serve not just as sources of information or even as objects of identification. Instead, they function as barriers, windows, screens; as affective, erotic, and aesthetic objects; and as temporal and rhythmic experiences that may have no real-life substitute or corollary. Reading emerges

from these essays as one of the most intriguing and mysterious of practices not just because of its apparent privacy or individuality, but also because of the significance of its consequences, and because those consequences—affective, cognitive, social, and political—can never be fully determined in advance.

#### NOTES

1. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847; London: Penguin, 2006), 11.
2. Georges Poulet, "Phenomenology of Reading," *New Literary History* 1, no. 1 (1969): 55.
3. D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), x. Also see Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," in *Essays on Ideology* (London: Verso, 1979), 1–60.
4. Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 10.
5. Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 10–11.
6. Garrett Stewart, *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 21. The literature on Victorian reading is far too vast to be summarized here. For overviews, see Leah Price, "Reading: The State of the Discipline," *Book History* 7 (2004): 303–20; and Rachel Ablow, "Victorian Feeling and the Victorian Novel," *Literature Compass* 4, no. 1 (2007): 298–316.
7. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You," in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 18.
8. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 14.
9. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 4.
10. "Who reads *The Novel and the Police* to find out whether its main argument is true?" Sedgwick asks. Instead, we read for the "wealth of tonal nuance, attitude, worldly observation, performative paradox, aggression, tenderness, wit, inventive reading *obiter dicta*, and writerly panache" that "shelter in the hypertrophied embrace of the book's overarching strong theory" (Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 14).
11. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 27–28.
12. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 2.
13. Thanks to David Kurnick for this formulation.