REVIEW ESSAY

Victorian Readers

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VICTORIAN READERS

By Miriam Bailin

THERE IS, PERHAPS, NO RICHER ARCHIVE of Victorian reading experiences than Victorian literature itself. We know how Maggie Tulliver, child of the rural Midlands in the early years of the nineteenth century, felt when reading the *Imitation of Christ* in the bleak aftermath of her father's bankruptcy, how the young David Copperfield felt sitting on his bed in Suffolk, "reading as if for life" in the shadow of an abusive home life (56; ch. iv), and how a besieged Jane Eyre felt reading Bewick's *History of British Birds* in the window-seat at Gateshead; we know because Eliot, Dickens, and Brontë trace those feelings and their significance in vivid detail. We know more: Maggie's book, is a "little, old, clumsy book . . . the corners turned down in many places" with "certain passages" marked in "strong pen and ink," one of a job lot brought to her by Bob, the packman (301; bk. 4, ch. 3). We know that the novels available to David from the small collection on his father's shelf were largely picaresque tales from a hundred years earlier, *Gil Blas*, *Humphrey Clinker*, and *Roderick Random*; and that Jane was reading the second volume of Bewick's *Birds* with its evocative vignettes in the introductory pages, an edition whose letter-press the ten-year-old Jane "cared little for" (14; vol. 1, ch. 1).

It is one of those minor disciplinary ironies that frequent the practice of literary criticism that, for recent scholarship in the history of reading, these sources have lost some of their illustrative value – Maggie, Jane, David, Alton Locke, Jude Fawley and all the other protagonists reading as if for life in the Victorian novel, aren't, after all, "actual readers"; they are characters, each harnessed to the mechanics of plot, encrypted figures in a given text. The fictional reader – her spatial disposition, her reading matter, and her response to it – only takes on evidentiary substance once her likeness has been found and multiplied in diaries, autobiographies, publication catalogues, or library records. Yet, the shift of interest from represented reader to "real" or historical reader, from interpretation to cognitive process and affective response, presents us with readers who are just as elusive, and in many ways, even more unknowable than their fictional counterparts or than the implied readers of reception theory who stand in as competent gap fillers on the way to a valid reading of the text. Now it is the reader who is the indeterminate object of speculation rather than merely one of the coordinates to be considered in the production of the literary text. Literary historians who pursue actual readers are quick to acknowledge the elusive quality of their quarry and how the "common" becomes the curiously unknowable. How do we assess what an ordinary reader may have felt, might have screened out or taken in, rejected or assimilated? How is the reading experience grasped in both its individual and its aggregate manifestations? How do we, in other words, "catch them in the act?" (Bradley and John 11).

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In addition to these oft-noted methodological problems there is a problem of definition as well. Who is this common, general, real, or ordinary reader whose mind and body in the act of reading is under such exacting scrutiny? How is the object of inquiry defined or delimited? One principal way in which the subject has been addressed is through the examination of specific reading communities or designated demographic groups such as women (Kate Flint's *The Woman Reader: 1837–1914* [1993]), members of the working class (Jonathan Rose's *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* [2001]), or, as Richard Altick identified his subject matter in *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Publick, 1800–1900* (1957), those "humble people . . . who lived in the endless rows of jerry-built city houses and along the village street" (11-12). Another approach theorizes the different ways in which texts encode their own reception (Garrett Stewart's *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* [1996]). However literary historians choose to define general readers for the purposes of study, they are, either emphatically or regrettably, not "us." The gesture of distinguishing the historian of reading from the common reader arises inevitably and suggestively from the particular nature of the project and from an inherent peculiarity of academic literary criticism. Among the readers who had to be shown the door in order for the emergent discipline of literary study to get its foot in it were, not only the amateur man of letters and the journalist, putative rivals for the position of literary authority, but also members of a reading public whose enthusiasms were seen as ill-suited to critical inquiry. In order to reclaim these readers and perhaps literary critics' own proximate selves as worthy of scholarly attention, historians of the common reader have found it necessary to return again and again to this disciplinary history and to the gradual, but decisive, parting of the ways between academic reading practices and those of the general public. In the process of bemoaning that split – most often located in New Critical protocols – as the origin of a systematic disparagement of non-academic modes of reading, literary historians of reading have, in effect, disavowed the evolving history of their own reading practices.

The distance required by academic study in general from its objects of investigation, thus, becomes particularly fraught when those objects are themselves readers of literature. I don't refer here to the recent self-lacerations over symptomatic reading versus surface reading within the profession itself, but to the apparently requisite exercise of positioning those practices which have shaped the discipline in relation to the emotional investments or cursory consumption of the ordinary reader however "ordinary" may be defined. The divergence between specialized literary analysis and common reading might be seen less as a cultural dilemma which critics ruefully acknowledge than an opportunity to think the differences through and how they might, by implication or direct address, coincide with yet another disciplinary preoccupation, our responsibility to address our work to a broader literate public.

In *Heart Beats: Everyday Life and the Memorized Poem* (2012), Catherine Robson's reconsideration of the gap between university and general reading communities serves as the ground on which she seeks to establish the value and significance of her own enterprise. Prose has managed, she argues, to secure a foothold in academic inquiry by means of critical trends which find cultural or ideological significance in novels no matter the judgments on their merit. Poetry has not benefited from these shifts in approach, largely, she claims, because of the persistence of the technique of close reading as the methodology best suited to its study. The "best-loved poem" tends to be considered a bad poem not worthy of critical

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attention and the reasons for cherishing it sentimental or untutored. Redirecting attention to the roles verse plays "off campus" might, Robson suggests, "develop our understanding of what poetry can mean to people" and "promote new ways of writing about such bonds" (26). By marking this territory as her own, Robson avows her own "conflicting allegiances"— the fact that her subject matter has required her, as she puts it, "to learn how to appreciate works that were initially impervious to my habitual practices" (26).

Heart Beats directly confronts the methodological complications of investigating the institutional and pedagogical rationales for the widespread practice of verse recitation in British and American schools alongside more speculative and even intuitive reconstructions of how children may have felt while reciting the poems in the recitation canon. The manifold pleasures of reading this book lie in Robson's deft handling of these complications and the mixed genres she employs to present what she refers to as the institutional history and the emotional history of poetry recitation. The former marshals the documentary sources of printed materials in support of an argument about the expediency and supposed benefits of verse recitation in mass education; the latter moves into the imaginative territory of (yes) fiction to consider the responses of those whose feelings about the poems they recited or about the act of mandatory recitation itself are largely unrecorded. Those anonymous students in less prestigious schools, the Maggie Tullivers of the Revised Code, are summoned before us as hypothetical instances of their own conflicting allegiances to poems that might as easily inspire as repel them. In her account of how poor children, from Kansas to Cornwall, might respond to poetry that bore no relation to their own lives, Robson also brings to bear her own childhood encounters with poetry in West Yorkshire and those of her grandmother, educated at a Board school in "one of the poorest districts of London's Bethnal Green" (162). The autobiographical turn in this section and the pressure of a perspective at times intensely personal and always companionable are what give the book its own memorable heartbeat – these qualities, and the reservoir of anecdote that any study of verse recitation calls up in those who once were summoned to give Casey another turn at the bat or to exhort their classmates to "be a man, my son," with whatever peculiar internal adjustments of perspective such poems required. Robson both performs that sort of reminiscence and investigates what it might suggest about how poems are experienced over time and in different settings.

Part One of *Heart Beats* charts the rise of poetry recitation in English and American schools roughly from 1875 to the mid-twentieth century. As Robson points out, in previous centuries the acquisition of literacy was linked to religious instruction. The adhesiveness of verse was seen as playing a key role in the process of instilling religious and moral sentiments in children and preparing them for their Christian education. From this initial survey of the early history of verse memorization in education, Robson traces the changes on both sides of the Atlantic in the program of studies devised for a growing and more socially diverse population seeking to rise in status and, among other goals, to gain confidence in their reading and speaking abilities. The anthologies devised for that purpose, she argues, formed the basis of the verse-heavy lesson books which became a staple of mass education by offering both a readily available course of study shorn of doctrinal emphases and the prestige that adhered to vernacular poetry and, by association, to the long-established importance of Latin and Greek poetry in the education of the elite. The rest of Part One traces the variety of ways in which the recitation anthology was compiled and then canonized through commercial and institutional requirements. What proved expedient was found to be advantageous and thus

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became customary. This section of the book also explores in exemplary detail the range of justifications and criticisms surrounding the value of the practice of verse recitation and the kinds of poetry considered suitable for the purpose. In these long ago debates one recognizes those that still go on at every level about what, in essence, reading literature is *for*.

Part Two is comprised of three "case studies" each with a poem at its meditative center. Felicia Hemans's "Casabianca" (1826), Thomas Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard" (1751), and Charles Wolfe's "The Burial of Sir John Moore after Corunna" (1817); each provides the occasion for wide-ranging speculation about the effect of poems which formed a preeminent place in the individual lives and national culture of generations of schoolchildren, and how we might place them within current criteria of reception. "Casabianca," most famous perhaps for its first line, "A boy stood on the burning deck," is, according to Robson, "British culture's favorite performance piece" (93). As such it serves as a focus for a discussion about the differing reception and rhythmic experience of a poem when it is accompanied by the variety of sensations that once accompanied a young student's performance of it in front of a class and under the possible threat of punishment if he failed in his purpose. I have referred to the chapters that make up Robson's case histories as meditative because the discussion of each poem is built from a series of fluid associations that arise from the poem rather than, as in Part One, from a series of steps in a developing argument. Though anchored in a set of preoccupations about the corporeal experience of the poem, its particular subject matter, its absence or recuperation within the academic canon, and the cultural context that may have shaped a student's responses to it, the effect is ruminative (Robson refers in her introduction to "peregrinations" [16]) and chary of assertion. The discussion of Hemans's poem, for instance, moves from the "physical and psychological sadism" (99) it portrays to a discussion of the ubiquitous use of physical punishment in British schools and the vivid representations of such punishment in works of literature specifically in relation to lessons performed out loud. Robson notes the discrepancies between Hemans's poetic account of the death of the young midshipman and the historical accounts that refer to his fate, and she posits a connection between Hemans's representation of this event and her household full of sons whose vulnerability she couldn't help but ponder after the desertion of their father. The motif of this case study, then, are the bodies of children, blown up in battle, coerced into recitation, physically punished for errors committed, marching through the anapestic rhythms of a poem about obedience and suffering. Indeed, Robson concludes the chapter with an oracular vision "of all the children that take their places in this particular history" among them "all those nameless boys and girls who have mounted a wooden platform summoned to recite 'The boy stood on the burning deck'" (121).

The chapter on Gray's "Elegy" has social class as its core concern, in particular the poem's mixed messages about class that Robson traces through generations of its reception. Here, as elsewhere, Robson finds considerable pathos in the plight of latter-day students of the mute, inglorious kind, who found themselves required to recite a tribute to their own obscurity. The final study of "The Burial of John Moore" addresses that poem's after life in the debate about war memorials after the massive carnage of the Great War. If the effect of Robson's method can at times be a bit dizzying, while the frequent resort to rhetorical questions about the effect of poems on individual children can, on occasion, frustrate rather than stimulate, Robson makes more than good on her promise to illuminate the "vital connections" (1) that poetry has formed among reading communities and individuals during the decades in which the memorized poem held sway.

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Like *Heart Beats*, Sarah Winter's *The Pleasures of Memory: Learning to Read with Charles Dickens* (2011) is concerned with the ways in which literature enters public discourse as a mode of mass education, social cohesion, and democratization. The ordinary readers with whom Winter is primarily concerned are the members of an untutored public who went to school to Dickens before there was a national education system in place, and found in him the laureate of their better nature. Focusing in particular on the serial form to which Dickens was so committed, Winter argues that Dickens's novels fostered a reading practice that offered an alternative to forms of institutional indoctrination and encouraged instead more broadly defined humanitarian sentiments. Winter contends that reading Dickens could make people not only feel good, but do good, by creating communal bonds and encouraging a "social reformist agenda" (3). This strikingly affirmative presentation of what literature is good for is based on the cognitive effects of reading as well as on Dickens's unrivaled popular appeal and concern for the poor and dispossessed. Winter finds in Dickens's serial fiction a form of ethical mnemonics by which the accumulation of impressions over time, reinforced through repetition and recollection, form a collective reading experience which in turn serves to instill the principles of social justice that the fiction espouses. If Dickens, like Wordsworth, taught his devotees how to feel, those feelings were in part engendered by "memory techniques" which drew upon eighteenth- century theories of associationist psychology and Romantic aesthetics (4). Though the title of Winter's book, appropriately enough given its subject matter, invokes both the memoir and the primer, this is a densely argued and at times abstruse work, (no "peregrinations" here) which makes many claims about Dickens's role in creating a socially aware constituency of readers, in legitimizing serial fiction as a literary genre, in deploying celebrity authorship in the formation of an international, non-partisan, mass readership, and in developing a participatory form of reading that offers, in her view, a "viable alternative" to the specialized reading practices of the academy (6).

Winter's project leads her to address the dilemma so often encountered in histories of reading audiences that find their most salient evidence for the study of reading practices in the literary text itself – the dilemma that, in effect, places the literary critic in the awkward position of arguing for the relevance of her own practice while implicitly arguing for its supersession, or, at the very least, its secondary status. Her solution to determining what counts as substantiating evidence for how specific literary forms serve to construct their own reception is to position her readings of Dickens's novels under the rubric of the history of reading pedagogy. Doing so, she argues "can permit us to locate outside the literary text the kind of reading practice and response that one can find both depicted and patterned within it, while the effects of such pedagogies on readers can also be substantiated by a range of contemporary sources" (23). This rather circuitous rationale addresses the difficulties of operating within competing disciplinary approaches to locating the responses of actual readers both inside and outside of the text. Winter's avowed strategy of moving from textual pattern to reading pedagogy to commentary on the effects of such pedagogy in support of her inquiry does not in fact do justice to the finely grained readings of Dickens's novels that Winter presents in subsequent chapters and which underwrite her hypotheses about how, in effect, the fictive might become a model for the real.

In the chapter on *The Pickwick Papers*, for instance, Winter stresses the way in which the associative speech styles of characters like Jingles and Sam Weller serve not only as memory cues in themselves, but are defined in relation to earlier, still familiar comedic forms which have long served as modes of self-invention and as representations of urban

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experience. Moreover, Dickens's famous characters, like Sairey Gamp, reenact "Dickens's own associative faculty of invention," thus linking him to his famous characters and those characters in turn with the celebrity author "Dickens" (115). In a complex teasing out of effects, Winter argues that memorable characters, verbal tics, associative comedic logic, author-surrogates, every-day language, and serial reading, all combine to "produce fictional memories that produce real emotions, which the audience or readers may in turn appropriate as their own" (126). In all of Winter's explorations of memory techniques in Dickens's fiction, the co-extension of fictional memories and readers' actual memories serves as the key dynamic in the transformation of the reading experience into collective social action or shared belief.

The Pleasures of Memory like *Heart Beats* addresses the effects, intended and unintended, of the canonization of popular literary works in the school curriculum during the period of its first institutional organization. The transformation of the celebrity author to the canonized author in the classrooms of turn-of-the-century America and Britain necessarily subjected Dickens's fiction to institutional pedagogical norms and objectives. During the same period in which Dickens's fiction was steadily declining in prestige in intellectual circles, the school Dickens was becoming a cultural institution, a personification of the rationale for the inclusion of English Literature in the school classroom. In her survey of the anthologized Dickens in American public school readers published between 1890 and 1919, Winter notes that the selections were drawn primarily from the early works which stressed the love of home, compassion for the poor, a sense of responsibility for those less fortunate, and the celebration of domestic virtues. The mass marketing of Dickens as a classic in individual volumes or in sets to adult readers worked in tandem with his presence, in excerpted or abridged form, in a standardized curriculum to solidify his posthumous reputation as the vehicle for democratic and humanitarian ideals. The school Dickens, Winter argues, was presented as a ready-made culture-bearing entity no longer tied to the anti-didactic, intimate, and dynamic processes of reading that once gave it its cultural force. Insofar as Dickens's work has retained an integral place in contemporary culture, she notes in the "Afterward," it has been through its continuing capacity to foster, through differing forms of performance and appropriation, a popular and heterogeneous constituency of readers. It is to the credit of what I am tempted to call Winter's hermeneutics of trust that she finds room in her analysis to link "common readers and professional scholars" in a shared rather than divisive endeavor through the memorable pleasures of reading (323).

In *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction* (2007), Nicholas Dames, like Sarah Winter, is interested in the temporal experience of reading. How does duration – occasioned both by length and format – affect response? To some extent, they share a methodology as well, though they employ it toward different ends. For each, a general or collective cognitive response can be inferred from the form of the novel itself. Moreover, both the novel and its reception are understood as embedded in a historically conditioned view of the operations of consciousness. Whereas Winter concentrates on the ways in which the mnemonic encoding of Dickens's serial fiction gradually reinforces specific affective responses and forms of sociability, Dames makes a more general and significantly more speculative claim for the ways in which the Victorian novel's "pure seriality" (13) determines patterns of consumption which correspond to the temporal demands of modernity itself, in particular to "industrialized, mechanized life" (7). His study, then, does not concern itself so much with the way narrative form engages a social world beyond itself except

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insofar as the "social" can be understood as a mode of consciousness, i.e. the way we think now.

Like the other books under review here, *The Physiology of the Novel* argues for the importance of restoring readers' minds and bodies to inquiries into literary form though without reference to an empirically specified reading audience. Dames's book recovers a "hidden species" (26) of Victorian novel theory that brought the study of human physiology to bear on the reading of novels and vice versa. Dames ties the neglect of such figures as G. H. Lewes, Alexander Bain, and E. S. Dallas in the history of literary criticism to the decisive turn away from the heuristic importance of the temporal flow of reading in favor of spatialized models of form. We return, in other words, to the schism Robson refers to between the formalism of turn-of-the-century academic criticism and the experience of the ordinary reader. In Dames's view, Victorian novel criticism, through its emphasis on the physiology of reading, reminds us of a perspective we have lost or, more precisely, that we are in the process of reclaiming.

In Part I, Dames provides an overview of Victorian novel theory informed by psychological or neurological understandings of literary reception with particular attention paid to the work of Alexander Bain and George Henry Lewes. For these theorists the novel presented an attractive field for study because it entailed the extensive exercise of silent reading during which the flux of consciousness could be mapped and the erasure of a distinction between automatic and conscious cognition most fully experienced. Novel reading was seen, in a sense, to mirror the "inner workings of the mind" (53), a view which in turn made the generic characteristics of the novel not just of scientific interest but also culturally significant. What Dames finds compelling about the attention paid to the reading process and to the capacious, intermittently suspenseful or digressive form of the nineteenth-century novel which shaped it, is the rationale it offers for the very aspects of the novel that many contemporary intellectuals and later novel theorists saw as defects. Novel reading could be seen as a dynamic process of relaxation and excitation, of intermittent attention and reverie, elicited by the rhythms suited to and expressive of the temporal exigencies of modern life. The consequence of this view for novel criticism was (and, in Dames's view, is) to direct attention to sequence and contiguity of effects rather than to figurative or structural patterns extrapolated from the novel as a whole.

If we step back for a moment from the preoccupation with academic literary study which seems always to shadow the study of the general reader, the shifting temporalities of reading engendered by the long novelistic form might also be seen as a reason for its continuing popularity even during periods of neglect in both the academy and other prestigious critical venues. Robert Graves's *The Real David Copperfield*, his 1933 revision of Dickens's novel, written in order to get to the "real" story without digression, repetition, sentimentality, didacticism, or tedious bulk, is not even a footnote in the history of Dickens's rise to his present status as not only "The Inimitable" but the Global Novelist in Chief. The physiological theories of reception that Dames explores, though they make a compelling place for both tedium and bulk, cannot finally account for the popularity of the novel on this massive scale, but instead take that popularity as a given, a rationale for their cognitive inquiries into literary form. Since, as Dames explains, their scientific approach to the process of reading posits a general reader whose attachments to characters, whose individual experience and class position are ignored in the interests of discerning a generic response to a set of generic attributes, the insights into the relation between the novel and cognition leaves much about

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both empirical readers and the novels they read by the wayside, much as Graves's modernist *David Copperfield* failed to recognize the expansive pleasures of what he called the "extinct Dear Reader" (5).

In Dames's readings of individual novels which employ the physiological emphases of his chosen theorists, he suggests ways of repairing some of the limitations of their approach through a more thorough account of the social context surrounding the reading process. Dames links each author's characteristic form to a conscious strategy for harnessing the temporality of the reading process to explorations of aesthetic response and to cultural value. His criteria for selection thus also implicitly allows Dames to investigate those attributes of the novel which the previous theories failed to consider – among them, the reinstatement of the author as a self-conscious maker of meaning and the interpretative value of representation itself.

In his discussion of Thackeray's novels, for instance, Dames notes that Thackeray repeatedly represents scenes of readers who are either absorbed or distracted, (the two states of mind can be simultaneous), and constructs narratives that invite inattention rather than alert concentration. Rather than seeing this as all of piece with Thackeray's cynicism about his own profession, Dames suggests that Thackeray was attempting to "manage distraction" (83), to consciously alternate scenes that invite or represent reverie with those that interrupt them, thus restoring a rhythm or pulse to the narrative. Relating these movements of consciousness in represented form, both verbal and visual, in Thackeray's novels, Dames discusses the role of attention in physiological novel theory and more generally in the preoccupation of Victorian psychology with the attention spans of modern subjects in their everyday lives. Thackeray in this reading becomes a champion of the freedom of restorative mental drift. In subsequent chapters George Eliot is shown to offer a nuanced contemplation of the problems inherent in elongated form both for the consumers of art and its producers; George Meredith's staccato rhythms and syntactical oddities are shown to emphasize smaller units of comprehension which Dames sees as "an attempt to produce social cohesion out of textual fragmentation" (176). And, in the final example, George Gissing's *New Grub Street* becomes the focus for a discussion about changing novel formats and a new cultural and physiological emphasis on speed reading at the end of the century.

There is an inevitable circularity in an argument which depends for its cogency upon a reciprocity of influence between physiological science and the generic attributes of the novel, each of which are seen as mediated by the reader's reception and the social environment within which that reception is shaped. This is a methodological and epistemological tangle which more narrowly focused studies bracket by concentrating their attention on one set of relations or another. To my mind, Dames never quite makes the chain of determinations among cognitive, cultural, and literary forces sufficiently clear, in part because such imbricated causalities remain subject to open-ended theoretical questioning in general, and in part because the analytic methods and objectives of cognitive science and literary criticism are not easily transferrable even when the shared focus is the reading process. Still, the suggestive value and interpretative ambition of Dames's investigations into the "actual rhythms and practices of novel-reading" (3) more than justify the attempt to cross and re-cross disciplinary boundaries.

Andrew Elfenbein's article "Cognitive Science and the History of Reading" (2006) explicitly addresses the challenge of such cross-disciplinary approaches in order to make a case for "the significance of the scientific study of reading for literary critics" (484). Like Dames's Victorian physiologists, the cognitive psychologists whose work Elfenbein employs

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in his study of text comprehension screen out the formal attributes and social determinants that make up an interpretative field for literary critics in order to grasp the fundamental and shared micro-processes involved in reading any text. For this procedural reason and others of a more epistemological kind, attempts to locate continuities between literary and basic cognitive operations within the expanding field of cognitive literary criticism have always had to contend with the place of cultural experience in an empirically grounded inquiry into mental processes. By adopting current descriptions of reading competence – the processing of textual information into mental representations – used by cognitive psychologists, Elfenbein contends that a flexible vocabulary for investigations into the history of the reading experience can be found.

Elfenbein first elaborates with commendable clarity the models by which many cognitive psychologists currently understand the complex process of textual comprehension or the formation of memory representations of a given text. The move from contemporary readers to historical readers is a methodological hurdle Elfenbein seeks to clear by focusing on the concept of what psychologists call "standards of coherence" which draw on such factors as a reader's skill, general knowledge, purpose, and alertness. Although cognitive psychologists conceive of these standards in terms of individual choice and ability, Elfenbein sees them as "the site at which a history of culture intersects with the cognitive processes involved in reading" (490). Because many of the factors that shape individual comprehension are socially and culturally determined, Elfenbein argues, the standards of coherence of historical readers can be reconstructed and used to "interpret their local reading strategies" (490-91). The poetry of Robert Browning serves as Elfenbein's test case because it accrued a conspicuous amount of commentary specifically related to its difficulty and to the strategies required to understand and evaluate it or for failing to do so. Elfenbein's exemplary Victorian readers of Browning are Margaret Oliphant, Thomas McNicholl, George Brimley, and William Morris, each of whom reviewed Browning's work for influential British periodicals. Elfenbein's premise in examining their reviews is that their differing aesthetic positions affected their micro-processes in reading.

According to Elfenbein, Browning's work presents a particular cognitive challenge for those reviewers who employ "transportation" as their standard of coherence for poetry (491). Oliphant's ability to experience emotional transport is defeated by the effort required to decode his syntax. McNicholl's standard of coherence is transportation as well but only transport afforded by the intellect not the emotions. Here, too, Browning's poetic voice proves an insurmountable obstacle because of the absence of adequate internal and external background knowledge available to connect the reader's inferences about a poem's meaning. Brimley is defeated by Browning's lack of Coleridgean unity – his poetry's resistance to the application of a comprehensive strategy of coherence such as genre or the integration of parts to the whole. Morris counters these views about the notorious difficulty of Browning's poems by grouping poems into thematic categories and thus paying little attention to anything in Browning's poetry that does not relate to the themes he has identified as central. The cognitive limit on each of these standards of coherence, according to Elfenbein, is the demand made on memory capacity – each response requires "divergent uses of cognitive resources" (496) which succeed or fail to produce "cognitive materiality" or a comprehensible mental representation of the text (499).

The translation of the critical vocabulary of Victorian reviewers into the cognitive terms of Elfenbein's conceptual models can be jarring. Oliphant's baffled response to

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Browning's "marvelous convolutions of words" is laid at the door of his syntax which "inhibits a meaningful incorporation of cohort activation into her memory representation" (492). William Morris's prescriptive thematic emphasis is seen to exercise "a low degree of concept activation" (494). One might adopt Oliphant's own characterization of Browning's poetry as "marvelous ugly, yet somehow true" to describe such translations from one kind of discourse to another (qtd. in Elfenbein 492). But in what sense "somehow true"? This, of course, is the question that underlies all such inquiries into the minds of readers whatever the means employed. Here, the question remains whether standards of coherence and the reading strategies they produce, considered outside of the specific objectives of scientific inquiry into neurological processes, are not simply alternate ways of describing the interpretative process without any clear superadded benefit for historians of reading. Looking for thematic patterns among instances within an author's work, looking for a set of generic attributes that make a work cohere, imposing an aesthetic criterion against which the work is to be judged (transportation, organic form) are each part of an ongoing history of modes of literary comprehension. Can the articulation of the micro-processes that take place at levels outside of our conscious awareness be brought usefully to bear on this history? For Elfenbein, the answer to that question lands us back into the territory of the assignment of ethical and intellectual values to different modes of reading that Dames also admonishes us to resist (*Physiology* 255). New Critical formalism is, as usual, invoked as the disciplinary blind spot that has stigmatized modes of reading that fail to organize textual information according to its own totalizing principles. The losers in the preferential treatment given to global coherence over local insights or the use of particular kinds of background knowledge such as literary precedent or the citation of authorities rather than individual affective response, are the ordinary readers "in historical archives in the classroom, or in non-academic settings" (498). This much, it seems fair to say, has long been recognized, and the recurrent invocations of the limitations of the "old" formalism as the argumentative pivot of inquiries into the practices of general readers begins to seem as supererogatory as invocations of the hermeneutics of suspicion for similar purposes.

Elfenbein's specific claim for the utility of the vocabulary of cognitive science is the way it makes legible the extensive mental labor entailed in reading practices that have been and continue to be condescended to as passive, naïve, or reductive. Moreover, attention to the micro-processes of reading alerts us to the extraordinary demands made by metacognitive strategies involved in the practice of contemporary literary criticism as well (499). Thus, in Elfenbein's view, and that of literature department mission statements everywhere, the cognitive benefits of literary study offer a more grounded or robust sense of usefulness for humanist inquiry located in the, as yet, untapped value of standards of coherence other than our own.

Andrew Murphy's *Shakespeare for the People: Working-Class Readers, 1800–1900* (2008), proposes to read the minds of ordinary readers through the more familiar recourse to the social history of readers found in Robson's *Heart Beats* and to the relations between particular authors and the formation of group identity found in both Winter's and Robson's studies. Like them, Murphy prefaces his examination of the uses of literacy within the context of the patchy but steady expansion of education in nineteenth-century Britain and developments in publishing which made literature cheaper and more widely available. The Victorian working-class readers, who are the object of Murphy's study, found in Shakespeare, much as Winter claims that her readers found in Dickens, a source of inspiration for a

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socially progressive, even radical agenda. Shakespeare became a common cultural property whose work could serve as a privileged lingua franca for working-class issues and concerns. Unlike the critics whose works I have previously discussed, however, Murphy draws his scholarly evidence for a description of "the actual reading experience of working-class readers" (5) almost exclusively from autobiographies rather than from inferences drawn from analyses of the works themselves, the institutional settings within which reading took place, or from the commentary of professional intellectuals. Following the lead of Jonathan Rose who declared in the preface to *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (2001) that autobiographies are the most useful sources with which to gain access to the "minds of ordinary readers in history, to discover what they read and how they read it" (1), Murphy has examined a working sample of about one hundred-and-fifty autobiographical texts.

Evidence for historical reading practices compiled from autobiographies, both published and unpublished, presents its own difficulties, of course. Murphy confronts these difficulties in detail, first by directly confronting the issue of who his ordinary readers were. Indeed, one of the solid pleasures of Murphy's scholarship lies in his careful presentation of the terms, methodological assumptions, and logistical considerations that guide every aspect of his inquiry into the history of working-class reading. Acknowledging the debates surrounding the "meaning and utility of the term 'working class'" itself, Murphy makes the case for his definition and for its continuing value as an analytic category for the history of reading (7). Among the limitations of autobiographical evidence that he examines, Murphy cites issues related to sample size, gender breakdown, geographical range, and the emphasis on print records rather than on performance. In bringing these voices to our attention, despite these limitations, Murphy also brings to life the history of education, commercial publishing, and politics that accompanied the reception of Shakespeare among this community of largely self-taught readers. The inadequate provision of education for the poor throughout the nineteenth century, for instance, is given the specificity and weight of individual experience considered in relation to the political tensions that arose in all official discussions of educational policy in Britain. The consequences of doctrinal struggles within church schools or the societies which in the early period dominated the instruction of the poor are given anecdotal heft through the recorded experiences of men and women whose social circumstances are carefully delineated. Murphy's chapter on reading provides diverse testimony about where and when working men and women found time and space to read, and on the support or lack of support readers found within the family circle or on the job. This chapter also begins to focus more directly on Shakespearean enthusiasts among the working classes and examines their diverse responses to the playwright's work. The fourth, and perhaps most distinctive chapter of *Shakespeare and the People*, records the importance of Shakespeare to those who wished to enlist his works in the furthering of a radical agenda. Murphy claims that "Shakespeare might be said to have become almost a kind of literary patron saint for the Chartist movement" (139). Chartist publications adapted Shakespearean passages to contemporary political controversies; the *Northern Star* inaugurated a series called "Chartism – From Shakespeare" in 1840, and a breakaway branch of the Leicester Chartist organization referred to itself as the "Shakespearean Chartist Organization" (144). The specifics of these appropriations both on the public and personal level, as well as their contribution to political dialogue and achievement make a fascinating case for reception history as history *tout court*.

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The enormous variation in approaches and topics within the broad area of the history of reading has been usefully and ably addressed by several essay collections which offer overviews of the field, notable among them, Rachel Ablow's edited collection of essays *The Feeling of Reading: Affective Experience & Victorian Literature* (2010), and Matthew Bradley and Juliet John's *Reading and the Victorians* (2015). Ablow has brought together several influential Victorianist scholars in the field including Leah Price, Kate Flint, and Garrett Stewart. As the title of the collection suggests, the essays focus on "issues of physical and emotional feeling" (4). Price and Flint remind us that books are objects not just portals to the reading experience; Herbert Tucker brings the long poem into view as a reading project whose temporal demands are inscribed and mediated by its form, and Garrett Stewart examines the role of Philip Wakem in *The Mill on the Floss* as surrogate for the extra-textual reader of Maggie's suffering, the recipient of her "transferred life" (179). Essays by Catherine Robson and Nicholas Dames present material drawn from the work reviewed above. *Reading and the Victorians* is broader in scope insofar as it seeks to "channel" the diverse approaches to the history of reading along with their methodological tensions into "productive proximity and debate" (10). The introductory essay offers an excellent account of Victorian anxieties about reading and literacy, our contemporary academic investment in studying Victorian reading, and the value of continuing to read the Victorians. The editors conclude with a thoughtful engagement with the problems inherent in the pursuit of "the ephemeral, elusive, un-captured process of reading," which in their canny formulation, "becomes an alarming synecdoche for all that lies lost and unrecovered behind any written text we may read" (4). The essays are divided into sections, each of which addresses a different aspect of Victorian reading. Entries range from Simon Eliot's detailed account of the vicissitudes of reading by candlelight, to Matthew Bradley's investigation of the way in which using the electronic catalogue of Gladstone's marginalia affects researchers' assumptions about Gladstone's reading habits, to Clare Ellis's description of a contemporary reading group's engagement with *Great Expectations*.

In her essay, "Reading: The State of the Discipline" (2004), Leah Price refers to the history of reading as "less a field than a battleground," (304), and perhaps my own occasional sparring with the approaches taken by the books I have reviewed qualify me as a combatant. If so, I am an admiring one. As these works amply demonstrate, the history of reading has served as a spur to investigate ever widening circles of relationship: relations between the physical book and the reader, between communities of readers and the "author-figure," between the school child and the canonical text, between distribution networks and access to reading matter, between the inscribed reader and the actual reader, between private and public reading, between the brain and the book. The enterprise in all of its manifestations seems well worthy of the attention and ingenuity Victorianists continue to devote it. Excursions into the extensive contexts built up by histories of Victorian reading can also return us to the readers in fiction like Maggie Tulliver – her access to education determined, her attention span measured, her position relative to a lighting source surmised, her feelings inferred – and we can find her once again, dreaming over her book, with a heightened sense of the complex interplay of forces that make her at once so representative and so memorable.

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