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Rereading the English Common Reader: A Preface to a History of Audiences

Jonathan Rose

In 1957 Richard Altick introduced his pioneering book *The English Common Reader* as a "preliminary map of [a] vast territory, still virtually unexplored, which awaits the researcher. . . . There is room," he ventured, "for literally hundreds of studies which are here merely sketched."[1] More recently, however, Altick lamented that over three decades "not much has been done to expand the scope of the *ECR*, which I constantly find cited in footnotes but with no indication that the author . . . is trying to fill in the map I outlined."[2]

Actually, some scattered historians have pressed forward the study of public libraries, mechanics' institutes, the book trade, the newspaper and periodical press, popular education, the economic and social history of authorship and publishing, and all the other subfields that Altick opened up for study.[3] In fact, we have reached the point where *The English Common Reader* is now labelled the "old book history"—a field that concerned itself with chronicling publishing firms, recovering library catalogues and borrowing records, calculating levels of literacy, and generally trying to determine which books a given body of readers owned or read. Today, as David Hall has noted, there is a "new" book history, in which "the act of reading has emerged as a subject of concern; that is, not merely the what but the how, or process of reading. We have come to realize that modes of using and understanding print changed over time." Margaret Spufford has described this process in seventeenth-century England, William Gilmore has done the same for the Connecticut Valley after the American Revolution, and Robert Darnton is studying the history of reading throughout early modern Western Europe. New book historians

[1] Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago, 1957), 8-9.

[2] Correspondence with the author, 2 May 1988.

[3] Much of this work is surveyed in Robert Darnton, *The Kiss of Lamourette* (New York, 1990), ch. 7.

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focus on such issues as the "reading revolution" that moved across the Atlantic world around 1800, when there was an exponential leap in the production and consumption of books and periodicals, when reading became a daily habit rather than a special occasion, and when communal reading aloud gradually gave way to silent and solitary reading.[4]

But in an important sense Altick is entirely right to feel that his field has been neglected. Where the old book history studied what people read and whether they could read and the new book history studies how they read, neither has really explored mass intellectual responses to reading. *The English Common Reader* actually devoted only one chapter to "The Self-Made Reader," but all the rest of the book pointed towards that subject. And since then hardly anyone has systematically attacked the basic question that Altick raised: How do texts change the minds and lives of common (i.e., nonprofessional) readers?

Of course, critics of all stripes, from literary historians to the most avant-garde theorists, have tried to discern the ideological messages that books transmit to readers. But in doing so they usually commit at least one of the following common fallacies of reader response:

first, all literature is political, in the sense that it always influences the political consciousness of the reader;

second, the influence of a given text is directly proportional to its circulation;

third, "popular" culture has a much larger following than "high" culture, and therefore it more accurately reflects the attitudes of the masses;

fourth, "high" culture tends to reinforce acceptance of the existing social and political order (a presumption widely shared by both the left and right); and,

fifth, the canon of "great books" is defined solely by social elites. Common readers either do not recognize that canon, or else they accept it only out of deference to elite opinion.

My own research into British working-class readers—and other recent studies in the history of reading—do not bear out any of these assumptions. Even when literature was deliberately written as propaganda, it often had no appreciable impact on the politics of the reader—or an impact entirely different from what the author or publisher intended. Authors that we now regard as "elitist" frequently had a far greater influence on the mass reading audience than "popular" authors, even when the latter clearly sold more books. Uneducated readers were often

[4] David D. Hall, "The History of the Book: New Questions? New Answers?" *Journal of Library History*, 21 (1986), 27-36; Margaret Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and Its Readership in Seventeenth-Century England* (Athens, Ga., 1982); William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England 1780-1835* (Knoxville, 1989).

capable of discovering the "great books" on their own, without following the lead of educated opinion. And far from reconciling them to the status quo, the classics were more likely to stir up ambitions and dissatisfactions among common readers.

These five fallacies are all rooted in a more fundamental methodological error—what might be called the receptive fallacy. That is, the critic assumes that whatever the author put into a text—or whatever the critic chooses to read into that text—is the message that the common reader receives, without studying the responses of any actual reader other than the critic himself. J. S. Bratton, for example, in *The Impact of Victorian Children's Fiction*, provides solid research into the contents, authors, editing, publishing, production, economics, distribution, stylistic motifs, conventions, and literary sources of Victorian children's fiction; but all that tells us practically nothing about its impact on readers; she leaves us to extrapolate that influence from the tangential information she provides.[5] Literary theorists usually treat readers as superficially as Franco Moretti, who grandly claims to have constructed a "sociology of literary forms" but offers only pronouncements based on no research: e.g., "The detective story dispels from the consciousness of the masses the individualistic ethos of 'classic' bourgeois culture." Apparently Moretti never thought to ask the masses how they read detective stories.[6]

One might have expected the school of reader-response critics to undertake this kind of sociological investigation. But for the most part they have only speculated about the reactions of hypothetical readers: Wolfgang Iser's "implied reader," Stanley Fish's "informed reader," Jonathan Culler's "qualified reader," Michael Riffaterre's "superreader." Even when they do focus on an actual audience, it is rarely "common." The readers that interest Jonathan Culler—"oneself, one's students, colleagues, and other critics"—are all members of the academic club; he is a bit shocked by the democratic notion "that one should rush out armed with questionnaires to interview the reader in the street."[7]

Recently, some German reception theorists have undertaken just this type of empirical investigation.[8] In a detailed comparative study of French and Hungarian responses to contemporary novels, Jacques Leenhardt and Peter Josza have demonstrated the value and practicality of accosting

[5] J. S. Bratton, *The Impact of Victorian Children's Literature* (London, 1981).

[6] Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays on the Sociology of Literary Forms* (New York, 1988), 134.

[7] Jonathan Culler, "Prolegomena to a Theory of Reading," Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crossman (eds.), *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton, 1980), 53-56.

[8] For an overview of these studies, see Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London, 1984), 134-46.

common readers with questionnaires.[9] One of the very few American scholars to attempt that kind of research is Janice Radway, who interrogated fans of romance novels for her monograph *Reading the Romance*. Where feminist critics like Ann Douglas had assumed that these confections were insidiously indoctrinating women with patriarchal values, Radway found they were nothing worse than harmless entertainment. If the readers discovered any political message at all in the novels, they read them as fables of female independence, not submission.[10]

Obviously, one drawback to Radway's method is that it can only be employed with contemporary readers. How could a historian conduct this sort of investigation? In *When Russia Learned to Read*, Jeffrey Brooks attacked precisely the question that Radway addressed—how did St. Petersburg shopgirls read the romances of A. A. Verbitskaia?—but lacking a batch of completed questionnaires, he had to fall back on guesswork.[11] William Gilmore likewise admitted that he could not enter the mind of the proletarian reader in Jacksonian America.[12] Jon Klancher was only able to deal with the audience that the English romantic writers *thought* they were addressing, or were *trying* to create; the actual audience is (he claims) unrecoverable.[13] Historians, writes Robert Darnton, "want to penetrate the mental world of ordinary persons as well as philosophers, but they keep running into the vast silence that has swallowed up most of mankind's thinking. . . . The experience of the great mass of readers," Darnton sadly concludes, "lies beyond the range of historical research."[14]

Now there I think Darnton is too pessimistic. Until recently, we lacked the evidence to crack this mystery. Richard Altick put his finger on the problem—"If only we had the autobiography of [a] pork butcher. . .!" he sighed—but very few memoirs of ordinary people were available to him in 1957.[15] In 1976 Carlo Ginzburg drew on Inquisition records to analyze the reading responses of a sixteenth-century miller called Menocchio. Granted, it is risky to infer too much from a sample of one heretical and quite extraordinary peasant.[16] By 1981, however, David Vincent had assembled 142 memoirs by early nineteenth-century British workers, and in *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom* he showed that they could be used to

[9] Jacques Leenhardt and Pierre Josza, *Lire la Lecture: Essai de sociologie de la lecture* (Paris, 1982).

[10] Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, 1984).

[11] Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Culture, 1861-1917* (Princeton, 1988), 159-60.

[12] Gilmore, *Reading*, 109.

[13] Jon P. Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832* (Madison, 1987), 174.

[14] Darnton, *Lamourette*, 177, 212.

[15] Altick, *Common Reader*, 244.

[16] Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, tr. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, 1980).

reconstruct a detailed history of reading response.[17] Together with John Burnett and David Mayall, Vincent has just completed an immensely useful bibliography, *The Autobiography of the Working Class*, which gives us ready access to nearly two thousand Mennochios in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain.[18] As a genre, the working-class autobiography originates around 1800—here too the reading revolution marked a watershed, when common readers began to write about themselves. And they are often wonderfully forthcoming about their reading experiences—not only what they read, but how they comprehended and reacted to their reading.

These sources open up a new scholarly frontier. They will make possible a third generation of reading history—a history of audiences, which would reverse the usual perspective of intellectual historiography. It would first define a mass audience, then determine its cultural diet, and ultimately measure the collective response of that audience not only to particular works of literature, but also to education, religion, art, and any other cultural activity. Whereas reception histories have generally traced the responses of professional intellectuals (literary and social critics, academics, clergymen), audience histories would focus on the common reader—defined as any reader who did not read books for a living. The British working-class reader happens to be my subject, but this essay offers general encouragement and advice for the study of common readers in all classes and all nations. It illustrates some of the questions a history of audiences could tackle, and points out the methodological problems it may involve.

Although autobiographies will probably prove to be the richest sources for a history of audiences, they must be used with caution and balanced against other materials. Memoirists are not entirely representative of their class (whatever that class may be), if only because they were unusually articulate. Autobiographies were produced in every one of the several British working class*es*, ranging down to tramps and petty criminals, but a disproportionate number were written by skilled workers and especially the self-employed. Only one in ten nineteenth-century workers' memoirs were written by women, and the whole sample is skewed to the political left: the twentieth-century volume of the Burnett-Vincent-Mayall bibliography lists many more Communists than Conservatives.

[17] David Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography* (London, 1981), 109-95. Compare the similar use of diaries in Louise L. Stevenson, "Prescription and Reality: Reading Advisors and Reading Practice, 1860-1880," *Book Research Quarterly*, 6 (1990-91), 43-61.

[18] John Burnett, David Vincent, and David Mayall (eds.), *The Autobiography of the Working Class: An Annotated, Critical Bibliography* (3 vols., New York, 1984-89). For scholars who want to investigate upper- and middle-class readers, the potential sample is even larger: more than 6000 entries in William Matthews, *British Autobiographies* (Hamden, Conn., 1968).

We also must bear in mind that an autobiographer (like any other "nonfiction" writer) is liable to forget, misremember, remember selectively, embellish, invent, and rearrange events in the interest of creating an engaging story. The uncertainties are especially troublesome in the case of common readers, since we usually have no other sources to check their memoirs against. Flora Thompson's *Lark Rise* (1939)—perhaps the most widely read of all working-class memoirs, cited by every important historian of Victorian rural life—has been compared with parish, poor law, school, legal, and census records; and there are just enough discrepancies to give one a moment's pause.[19] To crosscheck and augment the data gleaned from memoirs, a historian of audiences could look to library records, reader surveys, the reports of educational bodies, and oral history projects.[20] It is not Micawberish to suggest that, if we look deliberately enough, we may stumble on a documentary gold mine—such as the Lenin Library archive of N. A. Rubakin, a popular educator in late Czarist Russia who corresponded with eleven thousand readers.[21]

A history of audiences could supply tests for the various theories of reading offered by phenomenological, deconstructionist, semiotic, reader-response, and Marxist critics. Already, it is becoming evident that many of these theories do not square with the praxis of reading, especially in connection with the provocative issue of canon formation. Do the "great books" embody universal moral values, psychological insights, and aesthetic standards; or do they represent an arbitrary cultural hierarchy imposed upon the masses by the ruling classes? Hayden White has argued that "the comic strip cannot be treated as *qualitatively* inferior to a Shakespeare play or any other classic text."[22] Janice Radway, who has recently moved on from Harlequin Romances to the Book-of-the-Month Club, asserts that critics have no right to dismiss the latter as "middlebrow." If literature professors insist on drawing such prejudiced distinctions, that, Radway concedes, is "understandable," so long as they do it in the privacy of the classroom; but they must recognize that Book-of-the-Month Club books "might be valuable to others because they perform functions more in keeping with their own somewhat different social position, its material constraints, and ideological concerns."[23]

[19] Barbara English, "Lark Rise and Juniper Hill: A Victorian Community in Literature and in History," *Victorian Studies*, 29 (1985), 7-35. Joel Wiener likewise corrected the autobiography of Chartist William Lovett in *William Lovett* (Manchester, 1989), 2.

[20] For example, much information on popular reading can be extracted from the oral history project on family, work, and community in Britain before 1918, conducted by Paul Thompson and Thea Vigne and housed at the University of Essex.

[21] Brooks, *Russia Learned to Read*, 326.

[22] Hayden White, "Method and Ideology in Intellectual History: The Case of Henry Adams," Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan (eds.), *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives* (Ithaca, 1982), 307-8.

[23] Janice Radway, "The Book-of-the-Month Club and the General Reader: On the Uses of 'Serious' Fiction," *Critical Inquiry*, 14 (1988), 518-19.

Similarly, Barbara Herrnstein Smith (past president of the Modern Language Association) insists that "The endurance of a classic canonical author such as Homer . . . owes not to the alleged transcultural or universal value of his works but, on the contrary, to the continuity of their circulation in a particular culture." They survive only because they have been "repeatedly cited and recited, translated, taught and imitated, and thoroughly enmeshed in the network of intertextuality that continuously *constitutes* the high culture of the orthodoxly educated population of the West." The classics are irrelevant to people who have not received an orthodox Western education, Smith asserts. It is an undeniable "fact that Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare do not figure significantly in the personal economies of these people, do not perform individual or social functions that gratify their interests, *do not have value for them.*" It is also unquestionably a "fact that other verbal artifacts (not necessarily 'works of literature' or even 'texts') and other objects and events (not necessarily 'works of art' or even artifacts) have performed and do perform for them the various functions that Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare perform for us."[24]

Here Radway and Smith fall into the error that Radway herself so rightly showed up in *Reading the Romance*: they dogmatize enormously about the sociology of reading without bothering to study actual readers. They really do not know what functions Homer, Book-of-the-Month Club selections, comic books, or any other verbal artifacts perform for their respective audiences. Moreover, their theories cannot explain autodidacts like Will Crooks, the Edwardian Labour Member of Parliament. Growing up in extreme poverty in East London, Crooks stumbled across a copy of the *Iliad*, and was dazzled:

What a revelation it was to me! Pictures of romance and beauty I had never dreamed of suddenly opened up before my eyes. I was transported from the East End to an enchanted land. It was a rare luxury for a working lad like me just home from work to find myself suddenly among the heroes and nymphs of ancient Greece.[25]

According to Barbara Herrnstein Smith, this should not have happened. Crooks was not orthodoxly educated, and he was not particularly enmeshed in the network of intertextuality that includes classical literature. All the same, Homer spoke to him—and that is about as radical a transcultural leap as one can imagine. Smith claims that we respond to a great book only because it tends to "*shape and create* the culture in which its value is produced and transmitted and, for that reason, to perpetuate the conditions of its own flourishing."[26] If she wants to defend that argu-

[24] Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 52-53.

[25] George Haw, *The Life Story of Will Crooks, MP* (London, 1917), 22.

[26] Smith, *Contingencies*, 50.

ment, she will have to explain how the *Iliad* created the culture of the East End—without using italics as a substitute for evidence.

She will also have to account for other accomplished proletarian classicists: for example, Thomas Cooper, the Chartist shoemaker who authored one of the best-known workers' autobiographies, and Tom Barclay, Leicester's intellectual bottle-washer.[27] Of course, such autodidacts were hardly typical of the British working class, but they did constitute a fairly substantial minority. In her 1907 sociological study *At the Works*, Lady Bell estimated that one out of eight working-class households in Middlesbrough included someone who "read books that are absolutely worth reading," and three out of ten families were "fond of reading." A decade later Arnold Freeman, a settlement house warden, interrogated 408 Sheffield workers and classified twenty to twenty-six percent of them as intellectually "well-equipped."[28]

Throughout the Victorian period and well into the twentieth century, the British working class maintained a vital autodidact culture that, quite independently of ruling-class cultural hegemony, found inspiration in the canonical works of Western culture. The literary diet of worker-intellectuals was sometimes suggested by clergymen, settlement house residents, university-bred instructors in continuing education classes, and periodicals like *Cassell's Popular Educator*. Usually, however, they were introduced to books by friends, schoolmates, teachers, workmates, or relatives—that is, by other members of the working class. Peter Miles has shown how Robert Tressell's socialist novel *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* (1914) was disseminated by word-of-mouth and by simply passing along battered copies of the book.[29] The same process of grassroots cultural transmission brought *Hamlet* and *The Origin of Species* to the workers.

"Until now intellectual history has chosen to account for the dissemination of ideas and values by the easy trickle-down hypothesis," observes William Gilmore. "Its foundation assumption is that the dissemination of ideas, and hence of reading, and of specific types of reflection, proceeded in a hierarchical two-step fashion, from elites to the masses and from

[27] Thomas Cooper, *The Life of Thomas Cooper* (London, 1882), 5, 33, 59-60; Tom Barclay, *Memoirs and Medlies: The Autobiography of a Bottle-Washer* (Leicester, 1934), 19-20.

[28] Naturally, Lady Bell and Mr. Freeman were following their subjective Edwardian upper- and middle-class definitions of culture, and Freeman's was a bit generous: he classified as "well-equipped" some workers who were thoroughly respectable but had few intellectual interests. On the other hand, Lady Bell tended to err on the side of restrictiveness: she found that a quarter of working-class families read only novels, and she wrote them all off as culturally deprived. Lady [Florence] Bell, *At the Works* (London, 1907), ch. 7. [Arnold Freeman], *The Equipment of the Workers* (London, 1919), ch. 3.

[29] Peter Miles, "The Painter's Bible and the British Workman: Robert Tressell's Literary Activism," Jeremy Hawthorn (ed.), *The British Working-Class Novel in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1984), 2-10.

'high' to 'popular' culture." But as Gilmore illustrates, books and ideas were actually diffused through a web of cultural institutions and personal networks that were often created and controlled by common readers, who recognized "high culture" even when no professors were there to point it out to them.[30] In 1815 Vermont's Windsor District had not quite thirty college graduates among a population of seventeen thousand, mostly farmers and workers; but within a few years the area could boast ten lending libraries, two debating societies, several series of public lectures, a theater club, a music society, and a lyceum.[31]

Similarly, by the early twentieth century South Wales was served by a network of Miners' Institutes—worker-run adult education centers offering libraries, evening classes, lectures, and theatrical productions. Will Jon Edwards remembered discussions of Shakespeare, Darwin, Marx, and Herbert Spencer down in the pits. At times he heard some fairly incisive literary criticism: "Meredith is a poet who sings with a harp," one collier observed; "Kipling is a nobody who sings what he can sing with a mouth-organ although he does talk of tambourines."[32] This is not to imply that there was a seminar down every mineshaft: you had to gain admission to the right pit. Walter Haydn Davies recalled that, at his mine,

> The conveyor face down the Number 2 Pit was a university, the surface of Number 1 Pit a den of grossness. Night after night in this Alma Mater, well-read intelligent, clean minded men discussed the burning topics of the day, the changing religious trend, the theory of evolution, the nature of spiritualism, Christian Socialism, Communism and all the other isms that then did abound. The ideas expressed by Charles Darwin, R.J. Campbell, Sir Oliver Lodge, Keir Hardie, Ramsay Macdonald, Karl Marx, Noah Ablett were treasured in their minds as well as in the books they carried in their pockets.

Incidentally, it was no anomaly that Walter Haydn Davies was named after a classical composer; that was a custom that reflected the musical culture in which Welsh miners were steeped. "In fact," he remembered, "in one family there was a Handel, Haydn, Elgar, Verdi, Joseph Parry, Caradog, Mendy (short for Mendelssohn) and an unforgettable Billy Bach, together with an only daughter Rossini (called Rosie for short)."[33]

As David Vincent demonstrated, the autodidact usually directed his own reading in a highly idiosyncratic and random manner, somehow managing to discover the classics on his own.[34] He might, like young Manny Shinwell, pick up Dickens, Meredith, Hardy, Keats, Burns, Darwin, Huxley, Kant, and Spinoza from rubbish heaps and tuppenny

[30] Gilmore, *Reading*, 163.

[31] *Ibid.*, 103, 289.

[32] Will Jon Edwards, *From the Valley I Came* (London, 1956), 46-48, 67.

[33] Walter Haydn Davies, *The Right Place—The Right Time* (Llandybie, 1972), 64-66, 101-5.

[34] Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, ch. 6.

second-hand bookstalls.[35] Like George Howell, the Victorian bricklayer and trade unionist, he could grope his way through the canon "on the principle that one poet's works suggested another, or the criticisms on one led to comparisons with another. Thus: Milton-Shakespeare; Pope-Dryden; Byron-Shelley; Burns-Scott; Coleridge-Wordsworth and Southey, and later on Spenser-Chaucer, Bryant-Longfellow, and so on through a numerous class of writers."[36] Working people often made a point of reading the books their employers warned them not to read: that was how Flora Thompson discovered Byron's *Don Juan*.[37] Far from following hegemonic lines laid down by cultural elites, workers were so independent in their choice of books as to provoke endless hand-wringing among the university-educated. Even Arnold Freeman, who dedicated his life to working-class education, despaired over what he considered to be the unsystematic reading patterns revealed in his 1918 survey.[38]

My study of working-class readers is still far from complete, but a concise summary that mostly squares with my own preliminary findings may be found in a 1906 survey of the first large cohort of Labour Members of Parliament. The 51 MPs were asked to name the books and authors that had influenced them most, and 45 of them responded as follows:

17 John Ruskin
16 Charles Dickens
14 The Bible
13 Thomas Carlyle
12 Henry George
11 Walter Scott
10 John Stuart Mill
9 William Shakespeare
8 Robert Burns, John Bunyan
6 Alfred Lord Tennyson, Giuseppe Mazzini
5 Charles Kingsley, T. B. Macaulay, James Russell Lowell
4 Adam Smith, William Cobbett, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, W. M. Thackeray, J. R. Green, Charles Darwin, Henry Drummond

Interestingly, only two MPs mentioned Karl Marx, while five cited at least one of the ancient Greeks or Romans. Granted, the 45 respondents were all politicians, all male, and all on the leftward half of the political spectrum; if our sample had been more representative of the working class, the above list would have included more literature and less politics and economics. Generally, Victorian working-class intellectuals read more

[35] Emanuel Shinwell, *Conflict without Malice* (London, 1955), 24-25.
[36] George Howell, draft autobiography, Bishopsgate Institute, vol. B, b/4, f. 4.
[37] Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford* (Harmondsworth, 1987), 414-15.
[38] Freeman, *Equipment*, ch. 3. A similar observation is made in Bell, *At the Works*, ch. 7.

American literature and less Greek and Roman literature than their middle-class counterparts.[39]

However, with the exception of Henry Drummond and the Webbs (who may have involved copyright problems) every one of the authors listed above would be included in Everyman's Library, the series of shilling classics launched by J. M. Dent just after this survey was conducted. In other words, the writers cited by these MPs were nearly all canonical, as that term was defined by a major publisher in 1906. Rarely did these men refer to newspapers, the novels of Harrison Ainsworth, or anything commonly labelled "popular culture." Five of the forty-five respondents made no pretense to intellectual culture, asserting (a bit defensively) that they had been educated in "the school of life." Beyond that, there is no real basis for what Barbara Herrnstein Smith calls "the fact that other verbal artifacts (not necessarily 'works of literature') . . . have performed and do perform for them the various functions that Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare perform for us." When they were asked what had inspired them to create a new social order, these men pointed to a selection of "great books."

A history of audiences could put some sorely needed discipline into the study of popular culture—and it might begin by abolishing the term "popular culture" as vague and misleading. Morag Shiach has shown that, for as long as intellectuals have discussed "popular" or "folk" or "mass" culture, they have never been able to offer any firm and unslippery definitions of those categories.[40] In attempting such a definition, Ray B. Browne, the dean of American popular culture studies, manages to contradict himself several times in the space of two sentences:

> Popular Culture is the culture of the people, of *all* the people, as distinguished from a select, small elite group. It is also the dominant culture of minorities—of ethnic, social, religious, or financial minorities—simply because their way of life is, by and large, not accepted into the elite culture of the dominant group.[41]

Popular culture, then, is the culture of all the people *and* of minorities. This would presumably include nearly all culture except that of the British working class, which was neither the whole population nor a minority within it. It excludes any "small elite group," though that is by definition a minority, and rentier intellectuals would certainly qualify as a "financial minority." Students of popular culture create this kind of muddle when they try to sort all culture and all audiences into two bins: "high culture"

[39] "The Labour Party and the Books That Helped to Make It," *Review of Reviews*, 33 (1906), 568-82.

[40] Morag Shiach, *Discourse on Popular Culture* (Cambridge, 1989).

[41] Ray B. Browne, "Popular Culture—New Notes Toward a Definition," Christopher G. Geist and Jack Nachbar (eds.), *The Popular Culture Reader* (3rd ed.; Bowling Green, 1983), 13.

and social elites are tossed together into one category, while all culture that is not "high" is labelled "popular" and is assumed to have a mass audience. Even when great books clearly have a mass readership, they are usually excluded from popular culture monographs: Jeffrey Brooks appreciates that Maxim Gorky and Leonid Andreev were "genuinely popular" writers, and that Leo Tolstoy was the author most highly regarded among Red Army soldiers, but Brooks deliberately puts them aside to concentrate on cheap tales of romance and banditry.[42]

Ray Browne cannot account for the Victorian workers who attended Shakespearean drama, or for the Victorian aristocrats who frequented boxing matches. A growing number of cultural historians, however, are discovering that what we call "high" and "popular" culture can both spill across class lines.[43] A history of audiences would follow Roger Chartier in avoiding "the simple opposition of *populaire* versus *savant*";[44] rather than start off with that kind of false antithesis, it would reconstruct the cultural diet of a given audience. The term "popular culture" is only meaningful as a quantitative measure of the audience—applying, say, to any novel that sells over a million copies. "High culture" is not its polar opposite, but rather a qualitative measure of the work—the best that is known and thought in the world, leaving open the question of whose criteria we are following. Given those definitions, it is clear that some culture (such as *Sons and Lovers*) is both popular and high, and some culture (such as Victorian pornography) is neither.

However we define it, high culture is clearly not enjoyed exclusively by social elites. British working-class autobiographers generally drew a clear distinction between "improving" literature and "light" or "low" literature; I have yet to find a single one who defended the latter as anything more than a good read. Though George Acorn grew up in poverty in late Victorian East London, he recalled that, even as a boy, he had "some appreciation of style" and a sense of literary hierarchies, "tackling all sorts and conditions of books, from 'Penny Bloods' to George Eliot." He was sophisticated enough to understand that a gifted writer could draw on the conventions of trash literature and work them into a near-classic—in this case *Treasure Island*, which he discerningly characterized as "the usual penny blood sort of story, with the halo of greatness about it."[45]

[42] Brooks, *Russia Learned to Read*, xvi, 33.

[43] See John E. Toews, "Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience," *American Historical Review*, 92 (1987), 883-85.

[44] Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France*, tr. Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton, 1987), 3-8.

[45] One might doubt Acorn's claim that he appreciated all that at age nine, but he had certainly reached that level of understanding by young adulthood, when he wrote his autobiography. George Acorn, *One of the Multitude* (London, 1911), 49-50.

This is not to say that working-class autodidacts were as hostile to gutter literature as late Victorian educators and clergymen, who loudly warned that penny dreadfuls were encouraging juvenile delinquency.[46] In fact a few proletarian autobiographers did admit that Dick Turpin stories inspired them to commit petty thefts,[47] but the following comment is far more typical: "[My] budding love of literature . . . I trace to an enthusiastic reading of Penny Dreadfuls which, so far from leading me into a life of crime, made me look for something better."[48] The key word here is "better." Where middle-class critics reviled penny dreadfuls as dangerous trash, workers read them as harmless trash, perhaps even delightful trash—but trash all the same.

Many cultural historians—most recently John Springhall—read penny dreadfuls with an eye to discerning whether they "reinforce rather than subvert the existing social and political structures."[49] Literary critics and journalists commonly subject all sorts of texts, from Hardy novels to cigarette ads, to that kind of political examination; but their efforts may be misdirected on two counts. First, they usually overlook the possibility that these texts were politically innocuous; Springhall fails to consider that penny dreadfuls may have only entertained their readers and exercised the reading habit, which is what working-class autobiographers generally suggest. Second, this and most other exercises in cultural studies founder on the receptive fallacy.[50] As James Smith Allen presumes, "Because literature was recreated by historical audiences, the world view expressed by the novel may well have involved the beliefs of the readers themselves, who were the most enthusiastic about a particular work. In fact the more popular the work, the more likely this is."[51] In fact because literature was *re*created by historical audiences, and may have been recreated in a fashion quite unlike anything envisioned by the author or the critic, the world view of the novel does not necessarily equal the beliefs of the reader, no matter how popular the work may be. We cannot even assume that popular fiction does not offend its readers: Janice Radway's interviewees were often repelled by the violence and brutal sexuality they found in some romance novels. The reaction of one of those romance fans should

[46] Patrick A. Dunae, "Penny Dreadfuls: Late Nineteenth-Century Boys' Literature and Crime," *Victorian Studies*, 22 (1979), 133-50.

[47] J. H. Howard, *Winding Lanes* (Caernarvon, n.d.), 27; Peter Donnelly, *The Yellow Rock* (London, 1950), 31-32.

[48] Alfred Cox, *Among the Doctors* (London, 1950), 17.

[49] John Springhall, " 'A Life Story for the People'? Edwin J. Brett and the London 'Low-Life' Penny Dreadfuls of the 1860s," *Victorian Studies*, 33 (1990), 225.

[50] Lately, a few investigators in this field have come to recognize that fallacy. See Anne Beezer, Jean Grimshaw, and Martin Barker, "Methods for Cultural Studies Students," David Punter (ed.), *Introduction to Contemporary Cultural Studies* (London, 1986), 97, 109-113.

[51] James Smith Allen, "History and the Novel: *Mentalité* in Modern Popular Fiction," *History and Theory*, 22 (1983), 248-49.

serve as a salutary reminder to all cultural historians: one possible reader response is to toss the text in the garbage bin.[52]

Hayden White, then, is quite wrong to conclude that "Every text, grand or humble, is seen to be equally representative, equally interpretive of its proper milieu."[53] We may not treat any text as representative of any reader without that reader's authorization. In his day the sensational novelist G. W. M. Reynolds outsold Charles Dickens, but in their memoirs Victorian working people repeatedly call on Dickens to represent them, not Reynolds. Dickens, they recall, was an honored name in their home;[54] and even in the most extreme poverty, they could be touched and comforted by a cast-off copy of *David Copperfield*.[55] They saw something of themselves in Jo the crossing-sweeper[56] or had learned to pick pockets like the Artful Dodger.[57] They had attended a school like Dr. Blimber's Academy[58] or Dotheboys Hall.[59] They recalled that bad actors in cheap theaters were treated just like Mr. Wopsle in *Great Expectations*;[60] and East End readers praised *A Tale of Two Cities* for transporting them out of a "confused kitchen, that reeked still of fish and chips. . ., to France and the Revolution."[61]

Above and beyond that, Dickens played a critically important role in making the British working classes articulate. He supplied a fund of allusions, characters, tropes, and situations that could be drawn upon by people who were not trained to express themselves on paper. In 1869 the *Dundee, Perth, and Forfar People's Journal*, which had a huge circulation among Scottish workers, sponsored a Christmas story competition: readers submitted more than a thousand entries (about one for every hundred subscribers) and many of them clearly reflected the influence of *A Christmas Carol*.[62] Cotton operative Joseph Burgess was so deeply shocked by the death of Dickens that he was driven, almost unconsciously, to compose a poem, and that began his long career as a labor poet and journalist.[63] We find the daughter of a Dudley shoe repairer beginning her reminiscences as

[52] Radway, *Romance*, 63-76.

[53] White, "Method and Ideology," 282.

[54] Charles H. Welch, *An Autobiography* (Banstead, 1960), 33.

[55] Acorn, *Multitude*, 28-35.

[56] Thomas McLauchlan, *The Life of an Ordinary Man* (n.p., 1979), 51.

[57] Arthur Harding, *East End Underworld: Chapters in the Life of Arthur Harding*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London, 1981), 47, 74-75.

[58] Alfred Gilchrist, *Naethin' at A'* (Glasgow, n.d.), 14.

[59] John Sykes, *Slawit in the 'Sixties* (London, 1926), 23-29.

[60] Thomas Wright, *Some Habits and Customs of the Working Classes* (London, 1867), 166.

[61] Elizabeth Flint, *Hot Bread and Chips* (London, 1963), 163.

[62] William Donaldson, *Popular Literature in Victorian Scotland* (Aberdeen, 1986), 32.

[63] Joseph Burgess, *A Potential Poet? His Autobiography and Verse* (Ilford, 1927), 33.

David Copperfield began his ("I am born"),[64] and a Devonshire farm boy could point to the tale of "The Convict's Return" from *The Pickwick Papers* to affirm the importance of writing a biography of a "homely and ordinary life."[65] Clearly, Dickens provided working people with the inspiration and the generic literary conventions they needed to tell their own stories.

G. W. M. Reynolds did not have that kind of impact. Except for an occasional dismissive comment, his novels are rarely mentioned by working-class memoirists.[66] Equally "popular" texts do not necessarily have equal influence: some transform the lives of their readers, whereas others are consumed like literary chewing gum, leaving no taste behind. Properly done, a history of audiences could teach us to make that kind of distinction.

Of course, even the most ephemeral literature can leave a mark on the consciousness. Joseph Burgess traced his optimistic turn of mind to a blackface minstrel song he once heard in Manchester:

> I will live as long as I can, ha! ha!
> Or I'll know de reason why,
> For as long as dere's breff in pore old Jeff,
> Dis nigger will never say die, ha! ha![67]

Henry Coward, who rose from poverty to become an eminent Sheffield choir conductor, launched his ascent when he read the following in a scrap of newspaper: " 'Men may be divided into two classes, leaders and followers, and any one who has the equipment for leadership—brains and power of control—will never lack followers if the cause is a just and reasonable one.' Eureka! Eureka! I had found my niche."[68]

These autobiographies, however, suggest that this is all "low" culture can do: it can communicate simple formulas. The *Iliad*, in contrast, did not transmit any pat "message" to Will Crooks, but it did something far more radical and valuable: it revealed a world outside of the East End, it introduced him to new standards of beauty, it aroused desires and dissatisfactions, it explosively expanded the range of his imagination, it

[64] Nora Hampton, "Memories of Baptist End, Netherton, Dudley in the Period 1895-1919," TS, Brunel Univ. Library, p. 1.

[65] Richard Pyke, *Men and Memories* (London, 1948), 9.

[66] Interestingly, the radical journalist W. E. Adams anticipated in 1903 that changing literary standards might bring about Reynolds's rehabilitation: "With the taste for sensation and salacious details which the modern novelist and modern dramatist have cultivated, it is not at all unlikely that he would . . . [be] admitted to the hierarchy of fiction." But as Adams reviled all the Emile Zolas of contemporary literature, that hardly constituted an endorsement. W. E. Adams, *Memoirs of a Social Atom* (New York, 1968), 102-8, 233-34, ch. 57.

[67] Burgess, *Potential Poet*, 70-72.

[68] Henry Coward, *Reminiscences of Henry Coward* (London, 1919), 42.

inspired him to recreate his world. That kind of epiphany recurs again and again in working-class autobiographies, and it is usually produced by canonical literature, not by any odd verbal artifact. For Arthur Harding, an East End pickpocket, the magical book was *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.[69] And it was a "serious novel" that liberated housemaid Edith Hall from the cultural hegemony imposed by the popular press of the 1920s, when

> *Punch* and other publications of that kind showed cartoons depicting the servant class as stupid and "thick" and therefore fit subjects for their jokes. The skivvy particularly was revealed as a brainless menial. Many of the working-class were considered thus and Thomas Hardy wrote in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* that "Labouring farm folk were personified in the newspaper press by the pitiable dummy known as Hodge . . ." and it was in this book that Hardy told the story of Tess, a poor working girl with an interesting character, thoughts and personality. This was the first serious novel I had read up to this time in which the heroine had not been of "gentle birth" and the labouring classes as brainless automatons. This book made me feel human and even when my employers talked at me as though I wasn't there, I felt that I could take it; I knew that I could be a person in my own right.[70]

The crucial difference between middle-class and working-class autobiographers, according to Regenia Gagnier and Nan Hackett, is that the latter present themselves less as individuals than as members of a class, "social atoms" among the masses.[71] That is true up to a point—but only to the point where the proletarian memoirist describes the book that made all the difference, the book that conferred a sense of identity, mastery, and possibility on the reader. In that respect a history of audiences could provide as good a test as any for identifying "great books." These are the books that do what *Tess* did for Edith Hall—they burst the boundaries of the mind, and they have a record of doing that for a broad range of audiences, representing different classes, cultures, and generations.

In an attempt to rehabilitate forgotten nineteenth-century novelists like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Jane Tompkins has argued that their books must be judged not by modernist aesthetic criteria but according to the "kind of work the text is doing within its particular milieu."[72] When we look to readers' memoirs, however, it becomes apparent that the quality of work done by canonical and noncanonical texts is very different. In the 1890s Elizabeth Bryson, the daughter of a Dundee factory worker, did

[69] Harding, *East End Underworld*, 274.

[70] Edith Hall, *Canary Girls and Stockpots* (Luton, 1977), 39-40.

[71] Regenia Gagnier, "Social Atoms: Working-Class Autobiography, Subjectivity and Gender," *Victorian Studies*, 30 (1987), 335-63. Nan Hackett, *XIX Century British Working-Class Autobiographies: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York, 1985).

[72] Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (New York, 1985), 38.

indeed find the story of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* quite gripping. *Sartor Resartus*, however, was nothing less than a "miracle": it incited "the exciting experience of being kindled to the point of explosion by the fire of words."[73]

Likewise, as a Tyneside hospital worker in the 1920s, Catherine McMullen enjoyed Elinor Glyn's *The Career of Catharine Bush*, in which a common girl prepares for marriage into the aristocracy by studying Lord Chesterfield's letters to his son. But Glin's novel was valuable to Miss McMullen mainly because it induced her to visit the public library and read Lord Chesterfield: he was the author who transformed her life.

Now here (to anticipate a possible objection) Barbara Herrnstein Smith might step in and claim vindication. Catherine, one could argue, read Chesterfield's letters not because they were intrinsically great literature but because they were cited in some trashy novel. That is how upper-class cultural hegemony seduces the poor working girl: it ensnares her in a web of intertextuality.

My first response is that (as noted earlier) working people can recognize great literature when they see it. Winifred Albaya once picked up an old *Strand* magazine and was wonderfully impressed by a story set in an industrial town like Sheffield, where she was growing up. Only years later did she learn that the story, "Tickets Please," was by D. H. Lawrence.[74] Second, while Smith's theories may explain why Catherine McMullen read Lord Chesterfield, they do not account for the emancipating power of the book. Inspired by its vision of aristocratic splendor ("I would see myself beautifully gowned going down a marble staircase on the hand of Chesterfield"), she became (as Catherine Cookson) an immensely successful author of novels about poor but plucky Northern girls. Even more importantly, she recalled, Lord Chesterfield brought her for the first time into a public library:

> And here began my education. With Lord Chesterfield I read my first mythology. I learned my first real history and geography. With Lord Chesterfield I went travelling in the world. I would fall asleep reading the letters and awake around three o'clock in the morning, my mind deep in the fascination of this new world, where people conversed, not just talked. Where the brilliance of words made your heart beat faster. . . . Dear, dear Lord Chesterfield. Snob or not I owe him much.[75]

Marxist critics have long contended that classic literature can persuade workers like Catherine to accept social hierarchies and distract them from the business of correcting social injustice. Indeed, Chris Baldick and Terry Eagleton have argued that English literature was established as an academic discipline partly for the purpose of social control:

[73] Elizabeth Bryson, *Look Back in Wonder* (Dundee, 1967), 71, 80-82, 124-25.
[74] Winifred Albaya, *A Sheffield Childhood* (Sheffield, n.d.), 40-41.
[75] Catherine Cookson, *Our Kate* (London, 1969), 158-60.

Since literature, as we know, deals in universal human values rather than in such historical trivia as civil wars, the oppression of women or the dispossession of the English peasantry, it could serve to place in cosmic perspective the petty demands of working people for decent living conditions or greater control over their own lives, and might even with luck come to render them oblivious of such issues in their high-minded contemplation of eternal truth and beauties. . . . Instead of working to change such conditions . . . you can vicariously fulfill someone's desire for a fuller life by handing them *Pride and Prejudice.*[76]

That might have been the intention of some critics and educators, but did literature actually have such a narcotizing effect on the workers? How then do we explain the fact that another great fan of Lord Chesterfield's letters was the ultra-radical agitator Richard Carlile?[77] While serving respective prison sentences, T. A. Jackson read Jane Austen worshipfully; J. T. Murphy devoured Conrad and Macaulay; and Manny Shinwell was consoled by Shakespeare, Walter Scott, Dickens, Hardy, Keats, Shelley, and Tennyson. All three of these proletarian Marxist intellectuals survived the great books with their ideological loyalties intact.[78] Canonical literature tended to spark insurrections in the mind of the working-class reader and was more likely to radicalize than mollify him. In Arnold Freeman's Sheffield survey, the population of worker-intellectuals was not identical with the radical activists, but the two groups overlapped very closely. Robert Roberts recalled that the most militant socialists in Edwardian Salford, the workers who most persistently challenged prevailing conservative ideologies, were the "readers of Ruskin, Dickens, Kingsley, Carlyle, and Scott."[79] At the same time Jewish anarchists in London's East End were sponsoring popular lectures on *Hamlet, Gulliver's Travels*, and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony because they believed that kind of acculturation was essential to political liberation.[80]

This brings us to a corollary of the receptive fallacy: even when working people read books approved and provided by the governing classes, there was no guarantee that they would read those texts as their patrons wished. *Pilgrim's Progress* was a staple of prison and Sunday School libraries, but nascent Chartists like John James Bezer read it as a radical political allegory:

My own dear Bunyan! if it hadn't been for you, I should have gone mad, I think,

[76] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, 1983), 22-27; Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism 1848-1932* (Oxford, 1983), 63-67.

[77] Joel H. Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Life of Richard Carlile* (Westport, Conn., 1983), ch. 4.

[78] T. A. Jackson, draft autobiography, Marx Memorial Library, 364; J. T. Murphy, *New Horizons* (London, 1941), 216; Shinwell, *Conflict*, 72-73.

[79] Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum: Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century* (London, 1990), 177-79.

[80] William J. Fishman, *East End Jewish Radicals 1875-1914* (London, 1975), 266.

before I was ten years old! Even as it was, the other books and teachings I was bored with [in Sunday School], had such a terrible influence on me, that somehow or other, I was always nourishing the idea that "Giant Despair" had got hold of me, and that I should never get out of his "Doubting Castle." Yet I read, ay, and *fed* with such delight as I cannot *now* describe—though I think I could *then*. Glorious Bunyan, you too were a "Rebel," and I love you *doubly* for *that*. I read you in Newgate,—so I could, I understand, if I had been taken care of in Bedford jail,—your books are in the library of even your Bedford jail. Hurrah for progress![81]

Even an author with a conservative message could be turned to radical uses by working-class activists. When Walter Scott was first published, he was denounced as a reactionary by Thomas Wooler and Richard Carlile,[82] but among the first Labour MPs he ranked near the top of the charts. George Howell read *The Wealth of Nations* as a critique rather than a defense of capitalists: "Adam Smith, with that clear insight and accurate knowledge of life which he so eminently possessed, pointed out that combinations among masters, either directly or tacitly, enabled them to fix the price of labour or to regulate it."[83] The land nationalizers inspired by Thomas Spence likewise appropriated John Locke as their champion. After all, Locke had discovered a natural right to property, and had postulated that all land was held in common in the "state of nature": for the Spenceans, the communalization of land followed logically from those premises.[84] This does not necessarily mean that C. B. Macpherson was wrong to conclude that Locke "provides a moral foundation for bourgeois appropriation";[85] but a history of audiences would remind us to ask, "Provides for whom?" Until we can answer that question, we should foreswear the critical habit of pronouncing that texts reinforce or subvert existing social and political structures.

Literary theorists have debated endlessly whether the reader writes the text or the text manipulates the reader. A history of audiences could lead us out of this deadlock by revealing the interactions of specific readers and texts. Already, a pattern is emerging from Carlo Ginsberg's study of a sixteenth-century Italian miller, Margaret Spufford's work on seventeenth-century English peasant readers, Ned Landsman's recent arti-

[81] John James Bezer, "The Autobiography of One of the Chartist Rebels of 1848," David Vincent (ed.), *Testaments of Radicalism: Memoirs of Working Class Politicians 1790-1885* (London, 1977), 167.

[82] Paul Thomas Murphy, " 'Imagination Flaps Its Sportive Wings': Views of Fiction in British Working-Class Periodicals, 1816-1858," *Victorian Studies*, 32 (1989), 341-53.

[83] George Howell, *The Conflicts of Capital and Labour* (2nd ed., London, 1890), ch. 4.

[84] Malcolm Chase, *The People's Farm: English Radical Agrarianism 1775-1840* (Oxford, 1988), 143, 181.

[85] C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford, 1964), 194-221.

cle on popular responses to Presbyterian preachers in eighteenth-century Scotland, Richard Altick's nineteenth-century English common readers, and my own research into twentieth-century students in a British adult education program. Spufford was "startled" to find laborers and peasants reading and discussing Scripture with striking critical independence. They were, she concluded, "far from being the docile material which their ministers no doubt desired." Landsman also found that "the laity possessed a rather remarkable capacity to integrate seemingly disparate beliefs and actively forge their own understandings of the delivered message and create their own religious symbols," all of which could be quite unlike anything their preachers intended to convey.[86] We have all independently discovered what Roger Chartier calls "appropriation": the power of an audience—even at the bottom of the social pyramid—to transform received messages, rendering those messages "less than totally efficacious and radically acculturating."[87]

Literary theorists may argue, as an epistemological question, whether texts have any fixed meaning; but intellectual historians hardly need to be told that, in practice, all readers are editors—often ruthless and insensitive editors. The Jacques Derrida who worried that wantonly deconstructive criticism "would risk developing in any direction at all and authorize itself to say almost anything"[88] might have been shocked to learn what common readers can do to texts. They create their own meanings, they mistake the "unmistakable," they read very selectively. The same workingmen who drew inspiration from Ruskin's social criticism, for instance, were apparently baffled by his art criticism. Regarding the latter "I was frankly a philistine," wrote Frederick Rogers, a bookbinder and self-taught Elizabethan scholar, "and in this I undoubtedly expressed the feelings of the . . . workmen who had read his books."[89] Likewise, several of the autodidacts who embraced Karl Marx frankly confessed that they could hardly understand him.[90]

We must be equally careful not to underestimate the common reader's level of comprehension. Jonathan Culler states a general postulate that has become a commonplace among reader-response critics: "Literary works may be quite baffling to those with no knowledge of the special

[86] Ginzburg, *Cheese and Worms*, xiv-xxi, 41-50; Spufford, *Small Books*, xvii, 30-34; Ned Landsman, "Evangelists and Their Hearers: Popular Interpretation of Revivalist Preaching in Eighteenth-Century Scotland," *Journal of British Studies*, 28 (1989), 120-49; Altick, *Common Reader*, 255-56; Jonathan Rose, "The Workers in the Workers' Educational Association, 1903-1950," *Albion*, 21 (1989), 591-608.

[87] Chartier, *Cultural Uses of Print*, 3-8.

[88] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, tr. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, 1976), 158.

[89] Frederick Rogers, *Life, Labour and Literature* (London, 1913), 61-62.

[90] Shinwell, *Conflict*, 25-28.

conventions of literary discourse."[91] That sounds logical, but readers ignorant of the appropriate literary conventions sometimes read difficult works anyway, and thereby manage to puzzle out those conventions. One Edwardian bootmaker's daughter recalled finding her father's Shakespeare in the attic, "and I tried to kind of get out the plots in my mind, from reading the dialogue,. . . and I didn't ever get them outright, but it was a good help to me, wasn't it, trying to get by myself." Clearly it was a great help: she expanded her vocabulary and later entered a teacher training college, where she performed in productions of *Twelfth Night* and *Electra*.[92]

Richard Altick recognized that common readers who had not learned the literary conventions of the Bible could still read it as a simple collection of stories.[93] As a boy W. E. Adams enjoyed *Pilgrim's Progress, Gulliver's Travels*, and the *Arabian Nights* on the same level: "The religious meaning of the first, the satirical meaning of the second, and the doubtful meaning of the third were, of course, not understood. The story was the thing—the trials of Christian, the troubles of Gulliver, the adventures of Aladdin."[94] George Acorn may have read George Eliot at age nine, but "solely for the story. I used to skip the parts that moralized, or painted verbal scenery, a practice at which I became very dextrous."

That kind of editing, Acorn added, was a defense mechanism that working people had to develop against

> the flood of goody-goody literature which was poured in upon us. Kindly institutions sought to lead us into the right path by giving us endless tracts, or books in which the comparative pill of religious teaching was clumsily coated by a mild story. It was necessary in self-defense to pick out the interesting parts, which to me at the time were certainly not those that led to the hero's conversion, or the heroine's first prayer.[95]

A striking illustration of this selective reading is the working-class response—or rather, nonresponse—to imperialist propaganda. Patrick Dunae and others have argued that a whole generation of boys were converted to imperialism by the novels of G. A. Henty and similar forms of indoctrination. "At school, in church groups, in recreational associations—at almost every turn boys were exposed to the imperial idea": that undeniable fact leads Dunae to the conclusion that "in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century most British youths were acutely aware of their imperial heritage. They could scarcely have been otherwise."[96]

[91] Culler, "Prolegomena," 49.

[92] University of Essex Oral History Archive, "Family, Work and Community Life Before 1918," interview 21.

[93] Altick, *Common Reader*, 255-56.

[94] Adams, *Memoirs*, 100-101.

[95] Acorn, *Multitude*, 49-50.

[96] Patrick A. Dunae, "Boys' Literature and the Idea of Empire, 1870-1914," *Victorian Studies*, 24 (1980), 105-21.

They certainly could have been otherwise. The majority of those youths were working-class, and they seem to have been acutely unaware of their empire. Although John MacKenzie has shown that imperialist propaganda saturated textbooks, popular literature, and later the cinema, he fails to prove that this message got through to its intended audience.[97] The memoirs of Robert Roberts, Willie Gallacher, and Harry Pollitt all document workers' indifference to the empire, except for brief and exceptional outbursts of jingoism during the First World War.[98] Roberts reports that the same people who rushed to the colors in August 1914 would have considered it a disgrace to join the army in peacetime. Royal jubilees were celebrated as national, not imperial, holidays: "One felt the coming together of a whole country for a day of contentment and freedom." Schoolchildren might well be imperialists on Empire Day, having been taught "a lot of inconsequential facts on India [and] parts of Africa,. . . all ruled over by Edward the Peace-maker (pacemaker, my father called him)." But, Roberts emphasizes, "Except in periods of national crisis or celebration, industrial labourers, though Tory, royalist and patriotic, remained uninterested in any event beyond the local, horse racing excepted."[99]

That last point is confirmed by the very titles of workers' autobiographies: *A Sheffield Childhood, My Dorset Days, Newlyn Boyhood, Memories of Old Poplar, Salford Boy, Ancoats Lad, A Man of Kent, A Love for Bermondsey and Its People, In a Lancashire Street, 36 Stewart Street, Bolton, Lark Rise*. The scope of these memoirs is almost entirely local. There lies one of the most telling silences in workers' memoirs: they not only fail to express imperialist sentiments, they scarcely mention the empire. Many autobiographers, including several future socialists, do recall that they enjoyed reading Hentyesque stories;[100] but they did not therefore become imperialists. Apparently they did not even notice the ideological freight carried by these tales, which were read purely as adventure stories, in which India or Africa was simply an exotic backdrop, not a territory the reader wanted to spend his life policing.

A history of audiences, then, will have to take into account not only the concrete messages that readers pick up from texts, but also the degree of credulity, involvement, and critical distance that readers bring to those

[97] John M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880-1960* (Manchester, 1984), 254.

[98] William Gallacher, *Revolt on the Clyde: An Autobiography* (London, 1936), 18-19; Harry Pollitt, *Serving My Time: An Apprenticeship in Politics* (London, 1940), 85-87.

[99] Roberts, *Classic Slum*, 140-44, 162-63, 179-82.

[100] John Lanigan, "Thy Kingdom *Did* Come," TS in Brunel University Library, 22, 63; William Holt, *Under a Japanese Parasol* (Halifax, 1933), 111-12; John Allaway in Ronald Goldman (ed.), *Breakthrough: Autobiographical Accounts of the Education of Some Socially Disadvantaged Children* (London, 1968), 7-9; James Griffiths, *Pages from Memory* (London, 1969), 11-12; John Edwin, *I'm Going—What Then?* (Bognor Regis, 1978), 89.

texts. Semioticians call this dimension of audience response "suture," which has been defined by Jacques Alain-Miller as "the relation of the subject to the chain of its discourse."[101] Roger Chartier, for example, has tried to fix the relation of readers to the roguery stories published in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France. He concludes that because these stories combined documentary effects with parody, they may have suspended the reader somewhere between credulity and incredulity:

Belief in what is read is thus accompanied by a laugh that gives it the lie; the readers' acceptance is solicited, but a certain distance shows literature for what it is. . . . This delicate balance permits multiple readings that fluctuate between a persuasion by literal interpretation and an awareness of and amusement at the parody. . . . Thus the reader could simultaneously know and forget that fiction was fiction.[102]

Perhaps he could, but how do we know that? Lacking more direct evidence of audience involvement, Chartier tries to infer it from an analysis of texts and of editorial decisions made by the publishers; the method is ingenious, but it does not avoid the receptive fallacy. Most students of suture construct their theories on still shakier foundations: Kaja Silverman, for instance, tells us with great assurance what perspectives Hitchcock's film *Psycho* "obliges" the audience to assume, without interrogating any actual viewer. In this area George Acorn was a superior sociologist: he observed audiences at the Edwardian counterpart of *Psycho* and the roguery tale—"lurid, streaky melodrama, in which the villain always vowed to steep his hands in the hero's gore"—and found that their involvement with the narrative ran the complete gamut:

"Look out!" an overwrought galleryite would shout, " 'e's going to stab her with a knife." Or when the poisoned cup was offered to the handsome hero, the action of the play would be delayed by voices anxiously bidding him not to drink it. "Shut up, Fathead!" some grumpy old chap would say to the nearest possessor of one of those voices; " 'ow can the play go on if he don't get drugged? Besides, the 'ero's bahnd to win in the end, ain't he?"[103]

Where Chartier and Silverman assume that all audiences have the same relation to a given narrative, Acorn appreciated that individual theatergoers might be "sutured" very differently. Where Chartier concluded that his readers simultaneously believed and disbelieved, Acorn found his audience sharply divided between the totally credulous and the contemptuously incredulous. Silverman asserts that suture involves "passive insertions into pre-existing discursive positions," in which the

[101] For a theoretical discussion of suture, see Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York, 1983), ch. 5.

[102] Chartier, *Cultural Uses of Print*, 335-36.

[103] Acorn, *Multitude*, 134-36.

audience "permits itself to be spoken by the film's discourse"; but part of Acorn's audience quite aggressively tried to insert itself into the narrative and seize control of the discourse, while another section (including Acorn) was wholly divorced from the play and sneered at all its clanking machinery. Anyone who doubts that the common reader can manipulate the text should consider the case of a Victorian actor who, having died an elaborately melodramatic stage death, was loudly urged by his working-class audience to "Die again!"—and did so.[104]

Given that these audiences were so obstreperous and even dictatorial, the term "suture" should be scrapped as misleading, since it suggests that the reader is helplessly stitched into the narrative. We should instead be asking questions about the degree of audience *involvement*, which may have been quite active. We might also ask why Silverman and so many other literary theorists habitually treat that audience as a passive vessel, but that is another question for another essay. A brief answer would be that, in a democratic society, this assumption is attractive to both extremes of the political spectrum, because it rationalizes their failure to win broad popular support: they *would* enjoy that support, if only the masses were not somehow manipulated by the media. Thus cultural studies monographs and the House Un-American Activities Committee have both tried to expose the devilishly subtle political messages embedded in Hollywood movies, and for essentially the same reason.

There is no denying that films and books can be manipulative; but it should be equally obvious that we cannot know whether or when they succeed without somehow questioning the audience. Many literary critics today are understandably anxious to present themselves as sociologists rather than mere belletrists: they are concerned not with what texts mean, but with what texts do, as Stanley Fish has put it.[105] I would reply that it is equally worthwhile to ask what texts do, what texts mean, and which texts are the best texts; my point is that literary criticism cannot answer the first of these questions, while a history of audiences might. In that sense, the reader is outside the text.

Drew University.

[104] Thomas Wright, *Habits and Customs*, 165.
[105] Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), 3.