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The Kiss of LAMOURETTE

Reflections in Cultural History

NINE

First Steps Toward a History of Reading

OVID OFFERS ADVICE on how to read a love letter: "If your lover should make overtures by means of some words inscribed on tablets delivered to you by a clever servant, meditate on them carefully, weigh his phrases, and try to divine whether his love is only feigned or whether his prayers really come from a heart sincerely in love." The Roman poet might be one of us. He speaks to a problem that could arise in any age, that appears to exist outside of time. In reading about reading in *The Art of Love,* we seem to hear a voice that speaks directly to us across a distance of two thousand years.

But as we listen further, the voice sounds stranger. Ovid goes on to prescribe techniques for communicating with a lover behind a husband's back:

> It is consonant with morality and the law that an upright woman should fear her husband and be surrounded by a strict guard. . . . But should you have as many guardians as Argus has eyes, you can dupe them all if your will is firm enough. For example, can anyone stop your servant and accomplice from carrying your notes in her bodice or between her foot and the sole of her sandal? Let us suppose that your guardian can see through all these ruses. Then have your confidante offer her back in place of the tablets and let her body become a living letter.[1]

The lover is expected to strip the servant girl and read her body—not exactly the kind of communication that we associate with letter writing today. Despite its air of beguiling contemporaneity, *The Art of Love* catapults us into a world we can barely imagine. To get the message, we must know something about Roman mythology, writing techniques, and domestic life. We must be able to picture ourselves as the wife of a Roman patrician and to appreciate the contrast between formal morality and the ways of a world given over to sophistication and cynicism at a time when the Sermon on the Mount was being preached in a barbarian tongue far beyond the Romans' range of hearing.

To read Ovid is to confront the mystery of reading itself. Both familiar and foreign, it is an activity that we share with our ancestors yet can never be the same as what they experienced. We may enjoy the illusion of stepping outside of time in order to make contact with authors who lived centuries ago. But even if their texts have come down to us unchanged—a virtual impossibility, considering the evolution of layout and of books as physical objects—our relation to those texts cannot be the same as that of readers in the past. Reading has a history. But how can we recover it?

We could begin by searching the record for readers. Carlo Ginzburg found one, a humble miller from sixteenth-century Friulia, in the papers of the Inquisition. Probing for heresy, the inquisitor asked his victim about his reading. Menocchio replied with a string of titles and elaborate comments on each of them. By comparing the texts and the commentary, Ginzburg discovered that Menocchio had read a great deal of biblical stories, chronicles, and travel books of the kind that existed in many patrician libraries. Menocchio did not simply receive messages transmitted down through the social order. He read

aggressively, transforming the contents of the material at his disposition into a radically non-Christian view of the world. Whether that view can be traced to an ancient popular tradition, as Ginzburg claims, is a matter of debate; but Ginzburg certainly demonstrated the possibility of studying reading as an activity among the common people four centuries ago.[2]

I ran across a solidly middle-class reader in my own research on eighteenth-century France. He was a merchant from La Rochelle named Jean Ranson and an impassioned Rousseauist. Ranson did not merely read Rousseau and weep: he incorporated Rousseau's ideas in the fabric of his life as he set up business, fell in love, married, and raised his children. Reading and living run parallel as leitmotifs in a rich series of letters that Ranson wrote between 1774 and 1785 and show how Rousseauism became absorbed in the way of life of the provincial bourgeoisie under the Old Regime. Rousseau had received a flood of letters from readers like Ranson after the publication of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. It was, I believe, the first tidal wave of fan mail in the history of literature, although Richardson had already produced some impressive ripples in England. The mail reveals that readers everywhere in France responded as Ranson did and, furthermore, that their responses conformed to those Rousseau had called for in the two prefaces to his novel. He had instructed his readers how to read him. He had assigned them roles and provided them with a strategy for taking in his novel. The new way of reading worked so well that *La Nouvelle Héloïse* became the greatest best seller of the century, the most important single source of romantic sensibility. That sensibility is now extinct. No modern reader can weep his way through the six volumes of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* as his predecessors did two centuries ago. But in his day, Rousseau captivated an entire generation of readers by revolutionizing reading itself.[3]

The examples of Menocchio and Ranson suggest that reading and living, construing texts and making sense of life, were much more closely related in the early modern period than they are today. But before jumping to conclusions, we need to work through more archives, comparing readers' accounts of their experience with the protocols of reading in their books and, when possible, with their behaviour. It was believed that *The Sorrows of Young Werther* touched off a wave of suicides in Germany. Is not the *Wertherfieber* ripe for fresh examination? The pre-Raphaelites in England provide similar instances of life imitating art, a theme that can be traced from *Don Quixote* to *Madame Bovary* and *Miss Lonely Hearts*. In each case the fiction could be fleshed out and compared with documents—actual suicide notes, diaries, and letters to the editor. The correspondence of authors and the papers of publishers are ideal sources of information about real readers. There are dozens of letters from readers in the published correspondence of Voltaire and Rousseau and the unpublished papers of Balzac and Zola.[4]

In short, it should be possible to develop a history as well as a theory of reader response. Possible, but not easy; for the documents rarely show readers at work, fashioning meaning from texts, and the documents are texts themselves, which also require interpretation. Few of them are rich enough to provide even indirect access to the cognitive and affective elements of reading, and a few exceptional cases may not be enough for one to reconstruct the inner dimensions of that experience. But historians of the book have already turned up a great deal of information about the external history of reading. Having studied it as a social phenomenon, they can answer many of the "who," "what," "where," and "when" questions, which can be of great help in attacking the more difficult "whys" and "hows."

Studies of who read what at different times fall into two main types, the macro- and the microanalytical. Macroanalysis has flourished above all in France, where it feeds on a powerful tradition of quantitative social history. Henri-Jean Martin, François Furet, Robert Estivals, and Frédéric Barbier have traced the evolution of reading habits from the sixteenth century to the present, using long-term series constructed from the *dépôt légal*, registers of book privileges, and the annual *Bibliographie de la France*. One can see many intriguing phenomena in the undulations of their graphs: the decline of Latin, the rise of the novel, the general fascination with the immediate world of nature and the remote worlds of exotic countries that spread throughout the educated public between the time of Descartes and Bougainville. The Germans have constructed a still longer series of statistics, thanks to a peculiarly rich source: the catalogues of the Frankfurt and Leipzig book fairs, which extend from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. (The Frankfurt catalogue was published without interruption from 1564 to 1749, and the Leipzig catalogue, which dates from 1594, can be replaced for the period after 1797 by the *Hinrichssche Verzeichnisse*.) Although the catalogues have their drawbacks, they provide a rough index to German reading since the Renaissance; and they have been mined by a succession of German book historians since Johann Goldfriedrich published his monumental *Geschichte des deutschen Buchhandels* in 1908–09. The English-reading world has no comparable source; but for the period after 1557, when London began to dominate the printing industry, the papers of the London Stationers' Company have provided H. S. Bennett, W. W. Greg, and others with plenty of material to trace the evolution of the English book trade. Although the British tradition of bibliography has not favored the compilation of statistics, there is a great deal of quantitative information in

the short-title catalogues that run from 1475. Giles Barber has drawn some Frenchlike graphs from customs records. And Robert Winans and G. Thomas Tanselle have taken the measure of early American reading by reworking Charles Evans's enormous *American Bibliography* (eighteen thousand entries for the period 1638–1783, including, unfortunately, an undetermined population of "ghosts").[5]

All this compiling and computing has provided some guidelines to reading habits, but the generalizations sometimes seem too general to be satisfying. The novel, like the bourgeoisie, always seems to be rising; and the graphs drop at the expected points—most notably during the Thirty Years' War at the Leipzig fair, and during World War I in France. Most of the quantifiers sort their statistics into vague categories like "arts and sciences" and "belles-lettres," which are inadequate for identifying particular phenomena like the Succession Controversy, Jansenism, the Enlightenment, or the Gothic Revival—the very subjects that have attracted the most attention among literary scholars and cultural historians. The quantitative history of books will have to refine its categories and sharpen its focus before it can have a major impact on traditional strains of scholarship.

Yet the quantifiers have uncovered some significant statistical patterns, and their achievements would look even more impressive if there were more of an effort to make comparisons from one country to another. For example, the statistics suggest that the cultural revival of Germany in the late eighteenth century was connected with an epidemiclike fever for reading, the so-called *Lesewut* or *Lesesucht*. The Leipzig catalogue did not reach the level it had attained before the Thirty Years' War until 1764, when it included 1,200 titles of newly published books. With the onset of *Sturm und Drang*, it rose to 1,600 titles in 1770; then 2,600 in 1780 and 5,000 in 1800. The

French followed a different pattern. Book production grew steadily for a century after the Peace of Westphalia (1648)—a century of great literature, from Corneille to the *Encyclopédie*, which coincided with the decline in Germany. But in the next fifty years, when the German figures soared, the French increase looks relatively modest. According to Robert Estivals, requests for authorization to publish new books (*privilèges* and *permissions tacites*) came to 729 in 1764, 896 in 1770, and only 527 in 1780; and the new titles submitted to the *dépôt légal* in 1800 totaled 700. To be sure, different kinds of documents and standards of measurement could produce different results, and the official sources exclude the enormous production of illegal French books. But whatever their deficiencies, the figures indicate a great leap forward in German literary life after a century of French domination. Germany also had more writers, although the population of the French- and German-speaking areas was roughly the same. A German literary almanac, *Das gelehrte Teutschland*, listed 3,000 living authors in 1772 and 4,300 in 1776. A comparable French publication, *La France littéraire*, included 1,187 authors in 1757 and 2,367 in 1769. While Voltaire and Rousseau were sinking into old age, Goethe and Schiller were riding a wave of literary creativity that was far more powerful than one might think if one considered only the conventional histories of literature.[6]

Cross-statistical comparisons also provide help in charting cultural currents. After tabulating book privileges throughout the eighteenth century, François Furet found a marked decline in the older branches of learning, especially the humanist and classical Latin literature that had flourished a century earlier according to the statistics of Henri-Jean Martin. Newer genres such as the books classified under the rubric "arts and sciences" prevailed after 1750. Daniel Roche and Michel Marion noticed a similar tendency in surveying Parisian notarial archives.

Novels, travel books, and works on natural history tended to crowd out the classics in the libraries of noblemen and wealthy bourgeois. All the studies point to a significant drop in religious literature during the eighteenth century. They confirm the quantitative research in other areas of social history—Michel Vovelle's on funeral rituals, for example, and Dominique Julia's investigation of clerical ordinations and teaching practices.[7]

The thematic surveys of German reading complement those of the French. Rudolf Jentzsch and Albert Ward found a strong drop in Latin books and a corresponding increase in novels in the fair catalogues of Leipzig and Frankfurt. By the late nineteenth century, according to Eduard Reyer and Rudolf Schenda, borrowing patterns in German, English, and American libraries had fallen into a strikingly similar pattern: 70–80 percent of the books came from the category of light fiction (mostly novels); 10 percent came from history, biography, and travel; and less then 1 percent came from religion. In little more than two hundred years, the world of reading had been transformed. The rise of the novel had balanced a decline in religious literature, and in almost every case the turning point could be located in the second half of the eighteenth century, especially in the 1770s, the years of the *Wertherfieber*. *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* produced an even more spectacular response in Germany than *La Nouvelle Héloïse* had in France or *Pamela* in England. All three novels marked the triumph of a new literary sensitivity, and the last sentences of *Werther* seemed to announce the advent of a new reading public along with the death of a traditional Christian culture: "Workmen carried [the body.] No priest accompanied it."[8]

Thus for all their variety and occasional contradictions, the macroanalytical studies suggest some general conclusions, something akin to Max Weber's "demystification of the world."

That, however, may seem too cosmic for comfort. Those who prefer precision may turn to microanalysis, although it usually goes to the opposite extreme—excessive detail. We have hundreds of lists of books in libraries from the Middle Ages to the present, more than anyone can bear to read. Yet most of us would agree that a catalogue of a private library can serve as a profile of a reader, even though we don't read all the books we own and we do read many books that we never purchase. To scan the catalogue of the library in Monticello is to inspect the furnishings of Jefferson's mind.[9] And the study of private libraries has the advantage of linking the "what" with the "who" of reading.

The French have taken the lead in this area, too. Daniel Mornet's essay of 1910, "Les Enseignements des bibliothèques privées," demonstrated that the study of library catalogues could produce conclusions that challenged some of the commonplaces of literary history. After tabulating titles from five hundred eighteenth-century catalogues, he found only one copy of the book that was to be the Bible of the French Revolution, Rousseau's *Social Contract*. The libraries bulged with the works of authors who had been completely forgotten, and they provided no basis for connecting certain kinds of literature (the work of the philosophes, for example) with certain classes of readers (the bourgeoisie). Seventy years and several refutations later, Mornet's work still looks impressive. But a vast literature has grown up around it. We now have statistics on the libraries of noblemen, magistrates, priests, académicians, burghers, artisans, and even some domestic servants. The French scholars have studied reading across the social strata of certain cities—the Caen of Jean-Claude Perrot, the Paris of Michel Marion—and throughout entire regions—the Normandy of Jean Quéniart, the Languedoc of Madeleine Ventre. For the most part, they rely on *inventaires après décès*,

notarial records of books in the estates of the deceased. So they suffer from the bias built into the documents, which generally neglect books of little commercial value or limit themselves to vague statements like "a pile of books." But the notarial eye took in a great deal in France, far more than in Germany, where Rudolf Schenda considers inventories woefully inadequate as a guide to the reading habits of the common people. The most thorough German study is probably Walter Wittmann's survey of inventories from the late eighteenth century in Frankfurt am Main. It indicates that books were owned by 100 percent of the higher officials, 51 percent of the tradesmen, 35 percent of the master artisans, and 26 percent of the journeymen. Daniel Roche found a similar pattern among the common people of Paris: only 35 percent of the salaried workers and domestic servants who appear in the notarial archives around 1780 owned books. But Roche also discovered many indications of familiarity with the written word. By 1789 almost all the domestic servants could sign their names on the inventories. A great many owned desks, fully equipped with writing implements and packed with family papers. Most artisans and shopkeepers spent several years of their childhood in school. Before 1789 Paris had five hundred primary schools, one for every thousand inhabitants, most of them free. Parisians were readers, Roche concludes, but reading did not take the form of the books that show up in inventories. It involved chapbooks, broadsides, posters, personal letters, and even the signs on the streets. Parisians read their way through the city and through their lives, but their ways of reading did not leave enough evidence in the archives for the historian to follow closely on their heels.[10]

He must therefore search for other sources. Subscription lists have been a favorite, though they normally cover only rather wealthy readers. From the late seventeenth to the early

nineteenth century, many books were published by subscription in Britain and contained lists of the subscribers. Researchers at the Project for Historical Biobibliography at Newcastle upon Tyne have used these lists to work toward a historical sociology of readership. Similar efforts are under way in Germany, especially among scholars of Klopstock and Wieland. Perhaps a sixth of new German books were published by subscription between 1770 and 1810, when the practice reached its peak. But even during their *Blütezeit,* the subscription lists do not provide an accurate view of readership. They left off the names of many subscribers, included others who functioned as patrons instead of as readers, and generally represented the salesmanship of a few entrepreneurs rather than the reading habits of the educated public, according to some devastating criticism that Reinhard Wittmann has directed against subscription-list research. The work of Wallace Kirsop suggests that such research may succeed better in France, where publishing by subscription also flourished in the late eighteenth century. But the French lists, like the others, generally favor the wealthiest readers and the fanciest books.[11]

The records of lending libraries offer a better opportunity to make connections between literary genres and social classes, but few of them survive. The most remarkable are the registers of borrowings from the ducal library of Wolfenbüttel, which extend from 1666 to 1928. According to Wolfgang Milde, Paul Raabe, and John McCarthy, they show a significant "democratization" of reading in the 1760s: the number of books borrowed doubled; the borrowers came from lower social strata (they included a few porters, lackeys, and lower officers in the army); and the reading matter became lighter, shifting from learned tomes to sentimental novels (imitations of *Robinson Crusoe* went over especially well). Curiously, the registers of the Bibliothèque du Roi in Paris show that it had

the same number of users at this time—about fifty a year, including one Denis Diderot. The Parisians could not take the books home, but they enjoyed the hospitality of a more leisurely age. Although the librarian opened his doors to them only two mornings a week, he gave them a meal before he turned them out. Conditions are different in the Bibliothèque Nationale today. Librarians have had to accept a basic law of economics: there is no such thing as a free lunch.[12]

The microanalysts have come up with many other discoveries—so many, in fact, that they face the same problem as the macroquantifiers: how to put it all together? The disparity of the documentation—auction catalogues, notarial records, subscription lists, library registers—does not make the task easier. Differences in conclusions can be attributed to the peculiarities of the sources rather than to the behavior of the readers. And the monographs often cancel each other out: artisans look literate here and unlettered there; travel literature seems to be popular among some groups in some places and unpopular in others. A systematic comparison of genres, milieux, times, and places would look like a conspiracy of exceptions trying to disprove rules.

So far only one book historian has been hardy enough to propose a general model. Rolf Engelsing has argued that a "reading revolution" *(Leserevolution)* took place at the end of the eighteenth century: From the Middle Ages until sometime after 1750, according to Engelsing, men read "intensively." They had only a few books—the Bible, an almanac, a devotional work or two—and they read them over and over again, usually aloud and in groups, so that a narrow range of traditional literature became deeply impressed on their consciousness. By 1800 men were reading "extensively." They read all kinds of material, especially periodicals and newspapers, and read it only once, then raced on to the next item. Engelsing

does not produce much evidence for his hypothesis. Indeed, most of his research concerns only a small sampling of burghers in Bremen. But it has an attractive before-and-after simplicity, and it provides a handy formula for contrasting modes of reading very early and very late in European history. Its main drawback, as I see it, is its unilinear character. Reading did not evolve in one direction, extensiveness. It assumed many different forms among different social groups in different eras. Men and women have read in order to save their souls, to improve their manners, to repair their machinery, to seduce their sweethearts, to learn about current events, and simply to have fun. In many cases, especially among the public of Richardson, Rousseau, and Goethe, the reading became more intensive, not less. But the late eighteenth century does seem to represent a turning point, a time when more reading matter became available to a wider public, when one can see the emergence of a mass readership that would grow to giant proportions in the nineteenth century with the development of machine-made paper, steam-powered presses, linotype, and nearly universal literacy. All these changes opened up new possibilities, not by decreasing intensity but by increasing variety.[13]

I must therefore confess to some skepticism about the "reading revolution." Yet an American historian of the book, David Hall, has described a transformation in the reading habits of New Englanders between 1600 and 1850 in almost exactly the same terms as those used by Engelsing. Before 1800, New Englanders read a small corpus of venerable "steady sellers"—the Bible, almanacs, the *New England Primer,* Philip Doddridge's *Rise and Progress of Religion,* Richard Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted*—and read them over and over again, aloud, in groups, and with exceptional intensity. After 1800 they were swamped with new kinds of books—novels, newspapers, fresh and sunny varieties of children's literature—and

they read through them ravenously, discarding one thing as soon as they could find another. Although Hall and Engelsing had never heard of one another, they discovered a similar pattern in two quite different areas of the Western world. Perhaps a fundamental shift in the nature of reading took place at the end of the eighteenth century. It may not have been a revolution, but it marked the end of an Old Regime—the reign of Thomas à Kempis, Johann Arndt, and John Bunyan.[14]

The "where" of reading is more important than one might think, because placing the reader in his setting can provide hints about the nature of his experience. In the University of Leyden there hangs a print of the university library, dated 1610. It shows the books, heavy folio volumes, chained on high shelves jutting out from the walls in a sequence determined by the rubrics of classical bibliography: *Jurisconsulti, Medici, Historici,* and so on. Students are scattered about the room, reading the books on counters built at shoulder level below the shelves. They read standing up, protected against the cold by thick cloaks and hats, one foot perched on a rail to ease the pressure on their bodies. Reading cannot have been comfortable in the age of classical humanism. In pictures done a century and a half later, "La Lecture" and "La Liseuse" by Fragonard, for example, readers recline in chaises longues or well-padded armchairs with their legs propped on footstools. They are often women, wearing loose-fitting gowns known at the time as *liseuses.* They usually hold a dainty duodecimo volume in their fingers and have a faraway look in their eye. From Fragonard to Monet, who also painted a "Liseuse," reading moves from the boudoir to the outdoors. The reader backpacks books to fields and mountaintops where, like Rousseau and Heine, he can commune with nature. Nature must have seemed out of joint a few generations later in the trenches of World War I, where the young lieutenants from Göttingen and Oxford somehow found room for a few slim

volumes of poetry. One of the most precious books in my own small collection is an edition of Hölderlin's *Hymnen an die Ideale der Menschheit,* inscribed "Adolf Noelle, Januar 1916, nord-Frankreich"—a gift from a German friend who was trying to explain Germany. I'm still not sure I understand, but I think the general understanding of reading would be advanced if we thought harder about its iconography and accoutrements, including furniture and dress.[15]

Of course, one cannot take pictures literally, as a depiction of how people actually read. But they can reveal hidden assumptions about what people thought reading should be or the atmosphere in which it should take place. Greuze certainly sentimentalized the collective character of reading in his painting of "A Father Reading the Bible to His Children." Restif de la Bretonne probably did the same in the family Bible readings described in *La Vie de mon père:* "I cannot recall without tenderness the rapt attention with which that reading was heard and the way it spread a feeling of good-hearted brotherhood throughout the numerous family (and in the family I include the domestic servants). My father would begin with these words: 'Prepare your souls, my children; the Holy Spirit is about to speak.' "

But for all their sentimentality, such descriptions proceed from a common assumption: for the common people in early modern Europe, reading was a social activity. It took place in workshops, barns, and taverns. It was almost always oral but not necessarily edifying. Thus the peasant in the country inn described, with some rose tinting around the edges, by Christian Schubart in 1786:

> Und bricht die Abendzeit herein,
> So trink ich halt mein Schöpple Wein;
> Da liest der Herr Schulmeister mir
> Was Neues aus der Zeitung für.[16]

> When the evening time comes round,
> I always drink my glass of wine.
> Then the schoolmaster reads to me
> Something new out of the newspaper.

The most important institution of popular reading under the Old Regime was a fireside gathering known as the *veillée* in France and the *Spinnstube* in Germany. While children played, women sewed, and men repaired tools, one of the company who could decipher a text would regale them with the adventures of *Les quatre fils Aymon, Till Eulenspiegel,* or some other favorite from the standard repertory of the cheap, popular chapbooks. Some of these primitive paperbacks indicated that they were meant to be taken in through the ears by beginning with phrases such as, "What you are about to hear . . ." In the nineteenth century, groups of artisans, especially cigar makers and tailors, took turns reading or hired a reader to keep themselves entertained while they worked. Even today many people get their news by being read to by a telecaster. Television may be less of a break with the past than is generally assumed. In any case, for most people throughout most of history, books had audiences rather than readers. They were better heard than seen.[17]

Reading was a more private experience for the minority of educated persons who could afford to buy books. But many of them joined reading clubs, *cabinets littéraires,* or *Lesegesellschaften,* where they could read almost anything they wanted, in a social atmosphere, for a small monthly payment. Françoise Parent-Lardeur has traced the proliferation of these clubs in Paris under the Restoration, but they went back well into the eighteenth century. Provincial booksellers often turned their stock into a library and charged dues for the right to frequent it. Good light, some comfortable chairs, a few pictures on the wall, and subscriptions to a half-dozen newspa-

pers were enough to make a club out of almost any bookshop. Thus the *cabinet littéraire* advertised by P. J. Bernard, a minor bookseller in Lunéville: "A large, comfortable, well-lit, and well-heated house, which will be open every day from nine in the morning until noon and from one o'clock until ten in the evening, will provide members with two thousand volumes; and the stock will be increased by four hundred each year. . . . A room on the ground floor and another on the second floor will be reserved for conversation; all the others will be placed at the disposition of readers of newspapers and books." By November 1779, the club had two hundred members, mostly officers from the local *gendarmerie*. For the modest sum of three livres a year, they had access to five thousand books, thirteen journals, and special rooms set aside for socializing.[18]

German reading clubs provided the social foundation for a distinct variety of bourgeois culture in the eighteenth century, according to Otto Dann. They sprang up at an astounding rate, especially in the northern cities. Martin Welke estimates that perhaps one of every five hundred adult Germans belonged to a *Lesegesellschaft* by 1800. Marlies Prüsener has been able to identify well over four hundred of the clubs and to form some idea of their reading matter. All of them had a basic supply of periodicals supplemented by uneven runs of books, usually on fairly weighty subjects like history and politics. They seem to have been a more serious version of the coffeehouse, itself an important institution for reading, which spread through Germany from the late seventeenth century. By 1760, Vienna had at least sixty coffeehouses. They provided newspapers, journals, and endless occasions for political discussions, just as they had in London and Amsterdam for more than a century.[19]

Thus we already know a good deal about the institutional bases of reading. We have some answers to the "who," "what,"

"where," and "when" questions. But the "why's" and "how's" elude us. We have not yet devised a strategy for understanding the inner process by which readers made sense of words. We do not even understand the way we read ourselves, despite the efforts of psychologists and neurologists to trace eye movements and to map the hemispheres of the brain. Is the cognitive process different for Chinese, who read pictographs, and for Westerners, who scan lines? For Israelis who read words without vowels moving from right to left and for blind people who transmit stimuli through their fingers? For Southeast Asians whose languages lack tenses and order reality spatially and for American Indians whose languages have been reduced to writing only recently by alien scholars? For the holy man in the presence of the Word and for the consumer studying labels in a supermarket? The differences seem endless, for reading is not simply a skill but a way of making meaning, which must vary from culture to culture. It would be extravagant to expect to find a formula that could account for all those variations. But it should be possible to develop a way to study the changes in reading within our own culture. I would like to suggest five approaches to the problem.

First, I think it should be possible to learn more about the ideals and assumptions underlying reading in the past. We could study contemporary depictions of reading in fiction, autobiographies, polemical writings, letters, paintings, and prints in order to uncover some basic notions of what people thought took place when they read. Consider, for example, the great debate about the craze for reading in late eighteenth-century Germany. Those who deplored the *Lesewut* did not simply condemn its effects on morals and politics. They feared it would damage public health. In a tract of 1795, J. G. Heinzmann listed the physical consequences of excessive reading: "susceptibility to colds, headaches, weakening of the eyes, heat rashes, gout, arthritis, hemorrhoids, asthma, apoplexy,

pulmonary disease, indigestion, blocking of the bowels, nervous disorder, migraines, epilepsy, hypochondria, and melancholy." On the positive side of the debate, Johann Adam Bergk accepted the premises of his opponents but disagreed with their conclusions. He took it as established that one should never read immediately after eating or while standing up. But by correct disposition of the body, one could make reading a force for good. The "art of reading" involved washing the face with cold water and taking walks in fresh air as well as concentration and meditation.

No one challenged the notion that there was a physical element in reading, because no one drew a clear distinction between the physical and the moral world. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, readers attempted to "digest" books, to absorb them in their whole being, body and soul. A few extremists took to reading-as-digestion literally: thus the case of a woman in Hampshire, England, who "ate a New Testament, day by day and leaf by leaf, between two sides of bread and butter, as a remedy for fits." More often the devouring of books took the form of a spiritual exercise, whose physicality still shows on the surviving pages. The volumes from Samuel Johnson's library, now owned by Mrs. Donald F. Hyde, are bent and battered, as if he had wrestled his way through them.[20]

Reading as a spiritual exercise predominated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But how was it performed? One could look for guidance in the manuals of Jesuits and the hermeneutical treatises of Protestants. Family Bible readings took place on both sides of the great religious divide. And as the example of Restif de la Bretonne indicates, the Bible was approached with awe, even among some Catholic peasants. Of course, Boccaccio, Castiglione, Cervantes, Erasmus, and Rabelais had developed other uses of literacy for the elite. But for most people, reading remained a sacred activity. It put you

in the presence of the Word and unlocked holy mysteries. As a working hypothesis, it seems valid to assert that the farther back in time you go the farther away you move from instrumental reading. Not only does the "how-to" book become rarer and the religious book more common, reading itself is different. In the age of Luther and Loyola, it provided access to absolute truth.

On a more mundane level, assumptions about reading could be traced through advertisements and prospectuses for books. Thus some typical remarks from an eighteenth-century prospectus taken at random from the rich collection in the Newberry Library: a book seller is offering a quarto edition of the *Commentaires sur la coutume d'Angoumois*, an excellent work, he insists, for its typography as much as its content: "The text of the *Coutume* is printed in *gros-romain* type; the summaries that precede the commentaries are printed in *cicéro;* and the commentaries are printed in *Saint-Augustin*. The whole work is made from very beautiful paper manufactured in Angoulême."[21] No publisher would dream of mentioning paper and type in advertising a law book today. In the eighteenth century advertisers assumed that their clients cared about the physical quality of books. Buyers and sellers alike shared a typographical consciousness that is now nearly extinct.

The reports of censors also can be revealing, at least in the case of books from early modern France, where censorship was highly developed if not enormously effective. A typical travel book, *Nouveau voyage aux isles de l'Amérique* (Paris, 1722) by J.-B. Labat, contains four "approbations" printed out in full next to the *privilège*. One censor explains that the manuscript piqued his curiosity: "It is difficult to begin reading it without feeling that mild but avid curiosity that impels us to read further." Another recommends it for its "simple and concise style" and also for its utility: "Nothing in my opinion is

so useful to travelers, to the inhabitants of that country, to tradesmen, and to those who study natural history." And a third simply found it a good read: "I had great pleasure in reading it. It contains a multitude of curious things." Censors did not simply hound out heretics and revolutionaries, as we tend to assume in looking back through time across the Inquisition and the Enlightenment. They gave the royal stamp of approval to a work, and in doing so they provided clues as to how it might be read. Their values constituted an official standard against which ordinary readings might be measured.

But how did ordinary readers read? My second suggestion for attacking that problem concerns the ways reading was learned. In studying literacy in seventeenth-century England, Margaret Spufford discovered that a great deal of learning went on outside the schoolroom, in workshops and fields, where laborers taught themselves and one another. Inside the school, English children learned to read before they learned to write instead of acquiring the two skills together at the beginning of their education as they do today. They often joined the work force before the age of seven, when instruction in writing began. So literacy estimates based on the ability to write may be much too low, and the reading public may have included a great many people who could not sign their names. The disparity between reading and writing stands out even more sharply in Sweden, where the archives are rich enough to provide reliable statistics. By 1770, according to Egil Johansson, Swedish society was almost fully literate. Church records show that 80–95 percent of the population could both read and respond satisfactorily when interrogated about the meaning of religious texts. Yet only 20 percent could write, and only a tiny fraction had ever gone to school. A vast literacy campaign had taken place in homes, without the aid of professional teachers, in response to a church law of 1686, which

required that everyone, and especially children, farm hands, and domestic servants, should "learn to read and see with their own eyes [i.e., be able to understand] what God bids and commands in His Holy Word."[22]

Of course, "reading" for such people meant something quite different from what it means today, and it differed in the Protestant North from what it had become in the Catholic South. Children in early modern France learned their three R's in sequence: first reading, then writing, then arithmetic. Their primers—ABCs like the *Croix de Jésus* and the *Croix de par Dieu*—began as modern manuals do, with the alphabet. But the letters had different sounds. The pupil pronounced a flat vowel before each consonant, so that *p* came out as "eh-p" rather than "pé," as it is today. When said aloud, the letters did not link together phonetically in combinations that could be recognized by the ear as syllables of a word. Thus *p-a-t* in *pater* sounded like "ehp-ah-eht". But the phonetic fuzziness did not really matter, because the letters were meant as a visual stimulus to trigger the memory of a text that had already been learned by heart—and the text was always in Latin. The whole system was build on the premise that French children should not begin to read in French. They passed directly from the alphabet to simple syllables and then to the *Pater Noster, Ave Maria, Credo,* and *Benedicite*. Having learned to recognize these common prayers, they worked through liturgical responses printed in standard chapbooks. At this point many of them left school. They had acquired enough mastery of the printed word to fulfill the functions expected of them by the Church—that is, to participate in its rituals. But they had never read a text in a language they could understand.

Some children—we don't know how many, perhaps a minority in the seventeenth century and a majority in the eighteenth—remained in school long enough to learn to read in

French. Even then, however, reading was often a matter of recognizing something already known rather than a process of acquiring new knowledge. Nearly all of the schools were run by the Church, and nearly all of the schoolbooks were religious, usually catechisms and pious textbooks like the *Escole paroissiale* by Jacques de Batencour. In the early eighteenth century the Frères des Ecoles Chrétiennes began to provide the same text to several pupils and teach them as a group—a first step toward standardized instruction, which was to become the rule a hundred years later. At the same time, a few tutors in aristocratic households began to teach reading directly in French. They developed phonetic techniques and audio-visual aids like the pictorial flash cards of the abbé Berthaud and the *bureau typographique* of Louis Dumas. By 1789 their example had spread to some progressive primary schools. But most children still learned to read by standing before the master and reciting passages from whatever text they could get their hands on while their classmates struggled with a motley collection of booklets on the back benches. Some of these "schoolbooks" would reappear in the evening at the *veillée*, because they were popular best sellers from the *bibliothèque bleue*. So reading around the fireside had something in common with reading in the classroom: it was a recital of a text that everyone already knew. Instead of opening up limitless vistas of new ideas, it probably remained within a closed circuit, exactly where the post-Tridentine Church wanted to keep it. "Probably," however, is the governing word in that proposition. We can only guess at the nature of early modern pedagogy by reading the few primers and the still fewer memoirs that have survived from that era. We don't know what really happened in the classroom. And whatever happened, the peasant reader-listeners may have construed their catechism as well as their adventure stories in ways that completely escape us.[23]

If the experience of the great mass of readers lies beyond the range of historical research, historians should be able to capture something of what reading meant for the few persons who left a record of it. A third approach could begin with the best-known autobiographical accounts—those of Saint Augustine, Saint Theresa of Avila, Montaigne, Rousseau, and Stendhal, for example—and move on to less familiar sources. J.-M. Goulemot has used the autobiography of Jamerey-Duval to show how a peasant could read and write his way up through the ranks of the Old Regime, and Daniel Roche discovered an eighteenth-century glazier, Jacques-Louis Ménétra, who read his way around a typical tour de France. Although he did not carry many books in the sack slung over his back, Ménétra constantly exchanged letters with fellow travelers and sweethearts. He squandered a few sous on broadsides at public executions and even composed doggerel verse for the ceremonies and farces that he staged with the other workers. When he told the story of his life, he organized his narrative in picaresque fashion, combining oral tradition (folk tales and the stylized braggadocio of male bull sessions) with genres of popular literature (the novelettes of the *bibliothèque bleue*). Unlike other plebeian authors—Restif, Mercier, Rousseau, Diderot, and Marmontel—Ménétra never won a place in the Republic of Letters. He showed that letters had a place in the culture of the common man.[24]

That place may have been marginal, but margins themselves provide clues to the experience of ordinary readers. In the sixteenth century marginal notes appeared in print in the form of glosses, which steered the reader through humanist texts. In the eighteenth century the gloss gave way to the footnote. How did the reader follow the play between text and paratext at the bottom or side of the page? Gibbon created ironic distance by masterful deployment of footnotes. A careful study of annotated eighteenth-century copies of *The De-*

cline and Fall of the Roman Empire might reveal the way that distance was perceived by Gibbon's contemporaries. John Adams covered his books with scribbling. By following him through his copy of Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality,* one can see how radical Enlightenment philosophy looked to a retired revolutionary in the sober climate of Quincy, Massachusetts. Thus Rousseau, in the first English edition:

> There was no kind of moral relation between men in this state [the state of nature]; they could not be either good or bad, and had neither vices nor virtues. It is proper, therefore, to suspend judgment about their situation . . . until we have examined whether there are more virtues or vices among civilized men.

And Adams, in the margin:

> Wonders upon wonders. Paradox upon paradox. What astonishing sagacity had Mr. Rousseau! Yet this eloquent coxcomb has with his affectation of singularity made men discontented with superstition and tyranny.

Christiane Berkvens-Stevelinck has found an excellent site for mapping the Republic of Letters in the marginalia of Prosper Marchand, the bibliophile of eighteenth-century Leyden. Other scholars have charted the currents of literary history by trying to reread great books as great writers have read them, using the annotations in collectors' items such as Diderot's copy of the *Encyclopédie* and Melville's copy of Emerson's essays. But the inquiry needn't be limited to great books or to books at all. Peter Burke is currently studying the graffiti of Renaissance Italy. When scribbled on the door of an enemy, they often functioned as ritual insults, which defined the lines of social conflict dividing neighborhoods and clans. When attached to the famous statue of Pasquino in Rome, this public scribbling set the tone of a rich and intensely political street culture. A history of reading might be able to advance by great

leaps from the Pasquinade and the Commedia dell'Arte to Molière, from Molière to Rousseau, and from Rousseau to Robespierre.[25]

My fourth suggestion concerns literary theory. It can, I agree, look daunting, especially to the outsider. It comes wrapped in imposing labels—structuralism, deconstruction, hermeneutics, semiotics, phenomenology—and it goes as rapidly as it comes, for the trends displace one another with bewildering speed. Through them all, however, runs a concern that could lead to some collaboration between literary critics and historians of the book—the concern for reading. Whether they unearth deep structures or tear down systems of signs, critics have increasingly treated literature as an activity rather than an established body of texts. They insist that a book's meaning is not fixed on its pages; it is construed by its readers. So reader response has become the key point around which literary analysis turns.

In Germany, this approach has led to a revival of literary history as *Rezeptionsästhetik* under the leadership of Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser. In France, it has taken a philosophical turn in the work of Roland Barthes, Paul Ricœur, Tzvetan Todorov, and Georges Poulet. In the United States, it is still in the melting-pot stage. Wayne Booth, Paul de Man, Jonathan Culler, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, and Stanley Fish have supplied ingredients for a general theory, but no consensus has emerged from their debates. Nonetheless, all this critical activity points toward a new textology, and all the critics share a way of working when they interpret specific texts.[26]

Consider, for example, Walter Ong's analysis of the first sentences of *A Farewell to Arms:*

> In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the

bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels.

What year? What river? Ong asks. Hemingway does not say. By unorthodox use of the definite article—"the river" instead of "a river"—and sparse deployment of adjectives, he implies that the reader does not need a detailed description of the scene. A reminder will be enough, because the reader is deemed to have been there already. He is addressed as if he were a confidant and fellow traveler who merely needs to be reminded in order to recollect the hard glint of the sun, the coarse taste of the wine, and the stench of the dead in World War I Italy. Should the reader object—and one can imagine many responses such as, "I am a sixty-year-old grandmother and I don't know anything about rivers in Italy"—he won't be able to "get" the book. But if he accepts the role imposed on him by the rhetoric, his fictionalized self can swell to the dimensions of the Hemingway hero; and he can go through the narrative as the author's companion in arms.[27]

Earlier rhetoric usually operated in the opposite manner. It assumed that the reader knew nothing about the story and needed to be oriented by rich descriptive passages or introductory observations. Thus the opening of *Pride and Prejudice:*

> It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.
>
> However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.
>
> "My dear Mr Bennet," said his lady to him one day, "have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?"

This kind of narrative moves from the general to the particular, like a lens zooming in from a wide-angle shot to a close-up. It places the indefinite article first and helps the reader get

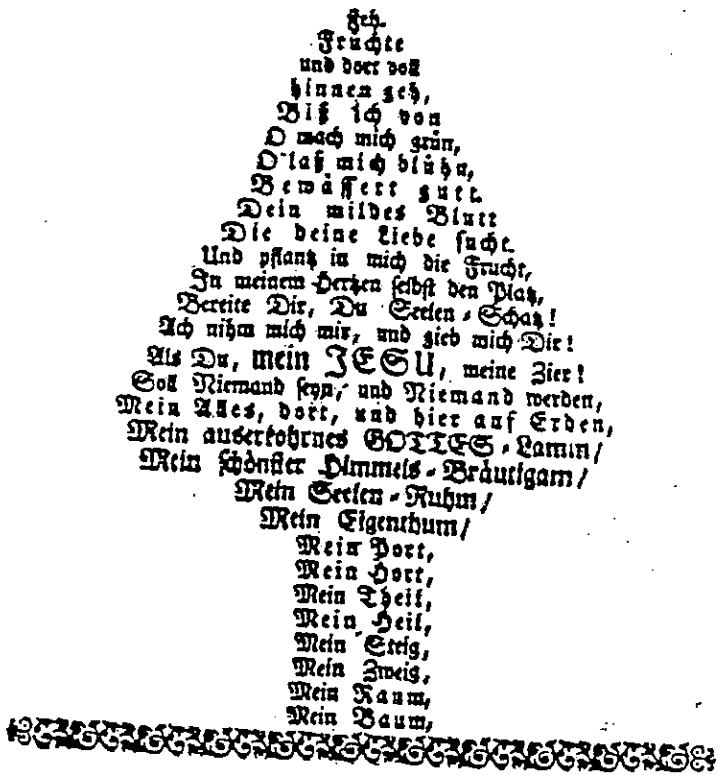
his bearing by degrees. But it always keeps him at a distance, because he is presumed to enter the story as an outsider and to be reading for instruction, amusement, or some high moral purpose. As in the case of the Hemingway novel, he must play his role for the rhetoric to work; but the role is completely different.

Writers have devised many other ways to initiate readers into stories. A vast distance separates Melville's "Call me Ishmael" from Milton's prayer for help to "justify the ways of God to men." But every narrative presupposes a reader, and every reading begins from a protocol inscribed within the text. The text may undercut itself, and the reader may work against the grain or wring new meaning from familiar words: hence the endless possibilities of interpretation proposed by the deconstructionists and the original readings that have shaped cultural history—Rousseau's reading of *Le Misanthrope,* for example, or Kierkegaard's reading of Genesis 22. But whatever one makes of it, reading has reemerged as the central fact of literature.

If so, the time is ripe for making a juncture between literary theory and the history of books. The theory can reveal the range in potential responses to a text—that is, to the rhetorical constraints that direct reading without determining it. The history can show what readings actually took place—that is, within the limits of an imperfect body of evidence. By paying heed to history, literary critics may avoid the danger of anachronism; for they sometimes seem to assume that seventeenth-century Englishmen read Milton and Bunyan as if they were twentieth-century college professors. By taking account of rhetoric, historians may find clues to behavior that would otherwise be baffling, such as the passions aroused from *Clarissa* to *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and from *Werther* to *René.* I would therefore argue for a dual strategy, which would combine textual analysis with empirical research. In this way it should

be possible to compare the implicit readers of the texts with the actual readers of the past and, by building on such comparisons, to develop a history as well as a theory of reader response.

Such a history could be reinforced by a fifth mode of analysis, one based on analytical bibliography. By studying books as physical objects, bibliographers have demonstrated that the typographical disposition of a text can to a considerable extent determine the way it was read. The most striking instances of linkage between typography and meaning occur in baroque poems such as the following, from Gottfried Kleiner's *Garten-Lust im Winter* (1732):



[Literal translation: "My tree, / My space, / My bough, / My path, / My salvation, / My share, / My refuge, / My port, / My property / My soul's fame / My most beautiful, celestial bridegroom / My elected lamb of GOD / My all, there and here on earth, / Let no one be and no one come into being / But thou, my JESUS, my adornment! / Oh! take me from me and give me to thee! / Thou treasure of the soul, prepare / A place for yourself in my heart, / And plant in me the fruit, / That seeks your love. / Your mild blood / Waters well. / Oh, let me blossom, / Oh, make me green, / Until I go / From hence, / And stand there / Full of / Fruit.]

Through its shape as a tree, the poem invites the reader to reverse his normal mode of scanning and to read from the bottom up, as if he were climbing toward heaven. At the heart of the tree, the reader encounters the word "Jesus." By then he has become so absorbed in the rhetoric that the poet's voice speaks for him and he can identify with the poet's ecstasy. He has read himself into a position where he imagines being penetrated by the love of Christ. It grows within him like a seed. It makes his life flower and bear fruit in good works, and in the end it helps him to ascend into paradise. Metaphors of climbing, growing, and sexual fecundation reinforce one another and are reinforced in turn through the combined effect of the meter, which rises to a crescendo at "Jesus" in line 15, and of the grammar, which sweeps the reader upward through a series of clauses culminating with the end of the sentence in that same critical line, where the reader is exposed to the Word and saved.[28]

Print does not often embody poetry so completely, but every text has typographical properties that guide the reader's response. The design of a book can be crucial to its meaning. In a remarkable study of Congreve, D. F. McKenzie has shown that the bawdy, neo-Elizabethan playwright known to us from

the quarto editions of the late seventeenth century underwent a typographical rebirth in his old age and emerged as the stately, neoclassical author of the three-volume octavo *Works* published in 1710. Individual words rarely changed from one edition to another, but a transformation in the design of the books gave the plays an entirely new flavor. By adding scene divisions, grouping characters, relocating lines, and bringing out *liaisons des scènes,* Congreve fit his old texts into the new classical model derived from the French stage. To go from the quarto to the octavo volumes is to move from Elizabethan to Georgian England.[29]

Roger Chartier found similar but more sociological implications in the metamorphoses of a Spanish classic, *Historia de la vida del Buscón* by Francisco de Quevedo. The novel was originally intended for a sophisticated public, both in Spain where it was first published in 1626 and in France where it came out in an elegant translation in 1633. But in the mid-seventeenth century the Oudot and Garnier houses of Troyes began to publish a series of cheap paperback editions, which made it a staple of the popular literature known as the *bibliothèque bleue* for two hundred years. The popular publishers did not hesitate to tinker with the text, but they concentrated primarily on book design, what Chartier calls the *"mise en livre."* They broke the story into simple units, shortening sentences, subdividing paragraphs, and multiplying the number of chapters. The new typographical structure implied a new kind of reading and a new public: humble people who lacked the facility and the time to take in lengthy stretches of narrative. The short episodes were autonomous. They did not need to be linked by complex subthemes and character development because they provided just enough material to fill a *veillée*. So the book itself became a collection of fragments rather than a continuous story, and it could be put together by each reader-listener in his own way. Just how this "appropriation" took place remains a mystery, because Chartier limits his analysis to the book as a physical object. But he shows how typography opens onto sociology, how the implicit reader of the author became the implicit reader of the publisher, moving down the social ladder of the Old Regime and into the world that would be recognized in the nineteenth century as *"le grand public."*[30]

A few adventuresome bibliographers and book historians have begun to speculate about long-term trends in the evolution of the book. They argue that readers respond more directly to the physical organization of texts than to their surrounding social environment. So it may be possible to learn something about the remote history of reading by practicing a kind of textual archeology. If we cannot know precisely how the Romans read Ovid, we can assume that, like most Roman inscriptions, the verse contained no punctuation, paragraphing, or spaces between words. The units of sound and meaning probably were closer to the rhythms of speech than to the typographical units—the ens, words, and lines—of the printed page. The page itself as a unit of the book dates only from the third or fourth century A.D. Before then, one had to unroll a book to read it. Once gathered pages (the *codex*) replaced the scroll *(volumen),* readers could easily move backward and forward through books, and texts became divided into segments that could be marked off and indexed. Yet long after books acquired their modern form, reading continued to be an oral experience, performed in public. At an indeterminate point, perhaps in some monasteries in the seventh century and certainly in the universities of the thirteenth century, men began to read silently and alone. The shift to silent reading might have involved a greater mental adjustment than the shift to the printed text, for it made reading an individual, interior experience.[31]

Printing made a difference, of course, but it probably was

less revolutionary than is commonly believed. Some books had title pages, tables of contents, indexes, pagination, and publishers who produced multiple copies from scriptoria for a large reading public before the invention of movable type. For the first half century of its existence, the printed book continued to be an imitation of the manuscript book. No doubt it was read by the same public in the same way. But after 1500 the printed book, pamphlet, broadside, map, and poster reached new kinds of readers and stimulated new kinds of reading. Increasingly standardized in its design, cheaper in its price, and widespread in its distribution, the new book transformed the world. It did not simply supply more information. It provided a mode of understanding, a basic metaphor of making sense of life.

So it was that in the sixteenth century men took possession of the Word; in the seventeenth century they began to decode the "book of nature"; and in the eighteenth century they learned to read themselves. With the help of books, Locke and Condillac studied the mind as a tabula rasa, and Franklin formulated an epitaph for himself:[32]

The Body of
B. Franklin, Printer,
Like the cover of an old Book,
Its Contents torn out,
And stript of its Lettering & Gilding
Lies here, Food for Worms.
But the Work shall not be lost;
For it will, as he believ'd,
Appear once more
In a new and more elegant Edition
Corrected and improved
By the Author.

I don't want to make too much of the metaphor, since Franklin has already flogged it to death, but rather to return to

a point so simple that it may escape our notice. Reading has a history. It was not always and everywhere the same. We may think of it as a straightforward process of lifting information from a page; but if we considered it further, we would agree that information must be sifted, sorted, and interpreted. Interpretive schemes belong to cultural configurations, which have varied enormously over time. As our ancestors lived in different mental worlds, they must have read differently, and the history of reading could be as complex as the history of thinking. It could be so complex, in fact, that the five steps suggested here may lead in disparate directions or set us circling around the problem indefinitely without penetrating to its core. There are no direct routes or shortcuts because reading is not a distinct thing, like a constitution or a social order, that can be tracked through time. It is an activity involving a peculiar relation—on the one hand the reader, on the other the text. Although readers and texts have varied according to social and technological circumstances, the history of reading should not be reduced to a chronology of those variations. It should go beyond them to confront the relational element at the heart of the matter: how did changing readerships construe shifting texts?

The question sounds abstruse, but a great deal hangs on it. Think how often reading has changed the course of history—Luther's reading of Paul, Marx's reading of Hegel, Mao's reading of Marx. Those points stand out in a deeper, vaster process—man's unending effort to find meaning in the world around him and within himself. If we could understand how he has read, we could come closer to understanding how he made sense of life; and in that way, the historical way, we might even satisfy some of our own craving for meaning.