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1

What is the history of reading and writing?

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have convinced ourselves that we are going through an information revolution unique in history. In the field of information technology, the rate of change seems astonishingly rapid. One by one, ‘revolutionary’ technologies are adopted and quickly sink into obsolescence: the electronic typewriter (does anybody even remember them?), the fax machine, the video cassette recorder. We are living, it is said, in an information society, in which the rich and powerful are no longer the ‘captains of industry’ admired by the nineteenth century, but the CEOs of media and entertainment corporations.¹ It is a good idea to take a historical view of rapid change in textual and visual communication, both to put recent changes into perspective and to be more precise about what is actually new about them. In reality, every society since ancient Egypt has been an ‘information society’, in the sense that those who control and restrict access to knowledge in any society thereby control a key component of power.

The purpose of this book is precisely to adopt a much-needed historical perspective on books, reading and writing in the West. It charts the changing conditions which have determined access to textual communication and the uses to which it has been put. In order to do so, it does not adopt the viewpoint of authors (who were often unidentifiable) or even of publishers, scribes and printers, although their role in textual production has been crucial and will not be neglected. The principal focus will be on the consumer rather than the producer; in other words, this will be a history of literature and textual communication in general from the standpoint of the reader. It aims to show how the relationship of readers (and writers, too) with their texts has changed over time, and how those changes have been influenced by the technological, economic, political and cultural developments which are central to Western history.

This book devotes more space to reading than writing, but this balance simply reflects the current state of scholarship. Whereas cultural historians have developed quite sophisticated approaches to the study of the act of reading, scholars are only just beginning to realise the importance of writing practices at all levels of past societies. The richness of scribal cultures is now starting to surface. This book is written, however, in the conviction that we should no longer separate the historical study of reading from that of writing, but should explore them together and investigate the connections between them. In so doing, we must also connect the history of reading and writing to wider historical problems. This book accordingly devotes chapters to some of the major turning points in the history of the West, including the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation and the origins of the French Revolution. The role of print production and the contribution of reading and writing to these events will be discussed.

This introductory chapter will review some of the main ideas and approaches used in the history of reading and writing.

Concepts in the history of reading

The history of reading is concerned with all the factors which have determined the reception of texts. It asks what was read in any given society, by whom and how. In what social situations did people read? Did they read silently and alone, or aloud in groups? Did they read casually, purely for diversion, in a fragmented and disengaged manner, as Richard Hoggart described the approach of English working-class readers in the 1950s?² Or did they read obsessively, in a dedicated and concentrated way, seeking self-improvement, enlightenment or emancipation? What exactly was the purpose of reading for the readers under consideration – did they read for distraction and escape, for learning, for reference, for practical advice or out of religious devotion? Did they carefully re-read a few well-worn texts, or did they fast-read and then throw away their reading, as magazine readers do today, in a perpetual search for novelty? For example, the historian Carlo Ginzburg laments the disappearance of ‘slow reading’, alluding perhaps with tongue in cheek to the Italian ‘slow food’ movement, arguing the need for close textual examination and criticism and deploring crash courses in fast-reading.³

The history of reading includes a study of the norms and practices which determine readers’ responses. Certain reading models incorporating recommended reading material, rules and taboos have been promoted by churches, trade unions, educators and other groups intent on directing or mobilising the reader. How have readers responded to such recommendations? We need to ask these questions if we are to evaluate how readers integrate their reading into the cultural or educational capital they have already accumulated. At the heart of this agenda lies an investigation

into how meaning is ascribed to texts. Only in the act of reading, in the confrontation between reader and text, does literature come alive. The history of the reader, therefore, is a socio-historical study of the factors which produce meaning.

The (mainly German) exponents of Reception Theory launched their hunt for the reader in the literary text itself. Embedded in every piece of literature, they argue, lies an ‘implied’ or a ‘hidden’ reader.⁴ Novels give the reader guidelines on which to base judgements, raise his or her expectations and leave clues designed to mobilise the reader’s imagination. On occasion, for example, the eighteenth-century novel would address the reader directly. The text, in this theory, may open up several different interpretive possibilities for the reader, and it assumes his or her active participation. The presence of the reader, and the reader’s expectations of a work of fiction, may thus be deduced from within the text.

These ideas unfortunately lack a historical perspective. They assume that literary texts are static and immutable, whereas they are constantly re-edited over time, in different versions and formats and at different prices. Each re-incarnation of a text targets a new public, whose participation and expectations are guided not just by authors but by publishing strategies, illustrations and all the other physical aspects of the book.

In any case, as a historian of reading I am less interested in implied or putative readers than in actual readers. Individual readers have recorded their reactions in their own autobiographies, letters and diaries, or perhaps they have been coerced into explaining their responses (for example, by the Inquisition). I am chiefly concerned not with the implications of canonical texts fossilised in time but with real readers in specific historical circumstances, who can provide us with what Janice Radway calls ‘an empirically-based ethnography of reading’.⁵ Two initiatives, one in Britain and the other in the USA, pursue further the traces of actual historical readers and their practices. The Reading Experience Database, or RED for short, has assembled a multitude of details from varied sources on individual readers’ responses in Britain between 1450 and 1945. The rather different American project, entitled ‘What Middletown Read’, will provide complete evidence of who borrowed what from the Public Library in Muncie, Indiana, between 1891 and 1902. The results of both these innovative projects will be available online, and the RED may already be consulted.⁶

Reading is a creative process. The reader is not an empty or transparent receptacle who automatically receives the ‘imprint’ of what is read. Readers select, interpret, re-work and re-imagine what they read; their responses are far from uniform. The principle of the reader’s autonomy is fundamental to the history of reading. In Michel de Certeau’s metaphor, the reader is a poacher.⁷ Readers as consumers hide as it were in the text; they are trespassers, creeping about the proprietor’s estate for their own nefarious purposes. The estate is not their property; the landscape has been laid out by other hands; but, undetected, they take what they need

from it – a hare here, a thrush there, even a deer if they are lucky – and escape without leaving a trace on the page. In this way, the individual reader insinuates his or her own meanings and purposes into another's text. Each individual reader has silent and invisible ways of subverting the dominant order of consumerised culture. Readers are not passive or docile; they make texts their own, improvising personal meanings and making unexpected textual connections. Sometimes our elites and advertising industries assume that the public is moulded by the consumer products which are offered to it. Consumer passivity, however, is a fallacy. As De Certeau bluntly put it, 'It is always a good idea to remember that we shouldn't treat people like idiots.'⁸

At this point, we hit a snag. If, as this book argues, individual readers engage in a dynamic interaction with what is read, and share in the production of meaning, if, in addition, they develop private interpretations which are not in any way predetermined, then how are we to write their personal histories? The danger is that we will be faced with a multiplicity of individual stories, all of them unique. If we dissolve the history of reading into a myriad of free agents, all arriving at unexpected conclusions, we have a state of subjective anarchy in which no generalisations are either possible or legitimate.

There are ways out of this dilemma. Pierre Bourdieu offers a sociological perspective on the problem. According to Bourdieu, the reader comes to a text with an accumulated 'cultural capital', made up of two components – his or her economic and cultural capital – which determine preferences. Bourdieu posed a pertinent question for the historian of reading, namely what are the social conditions determining the consumption and appropriation of culture?⁹ Some key socio-cultural components of class, including one's level of schooling, produce a cultural competence which defines what we call 'taste'. In other words, it allows the reader to 'decode' a literary work, identify its style, period, genre or author. For Bourdieu, even the ways we acquire cultural objects like books and use them are themselves signs of class, through which we identify ourselves with certain groups and distance ourselves from others. Some readers buy books from antiquarian dealers while others subscribe to the fine reproductions edited by the Folio Society, as distinct from others who find their books in supermarkets or second-hand paperback exchanges. In the process of selecting and responding to what we read, according to Bourdieu, we are operating a strategy of distinction and affirming our membership of a particular social or cultural group. Social groups or communities share a common *habitus* which determines their cultural practices and shapes the common characteristics of an entire lifestyle.

Bourdieu's sociology of consumer practices reminds us that readers are not entirely alone: they belong to social groups. They may also belong to 'interpretive communities'. Stanley Fish, the American literary critic

to whom we owe this idea, offers a useful corrective to the anarchic tendencies of reading history previously mentioned.¹⁰ To adapt a well-worn phrase, readers make their own meanings, but they do not make them entirely as they wish. Readers do so as members of a community which shares certain assumptions about literature and what it constitutes. Members of a reading community may not know each other or even be aware of each other's existence, and this fact alone stretches our conventional ideas of community. Members of a reading community, however, have a common set of criteria for judging what is 'good' or 'bad' literature, for categorising texts as belonging to certain genres and for establishing their own genre hierarchies. Reading communities may be readers of the same newspaper, they may have an institutional basis like a literary society or a university faculty or they might be defined more loosely in terms of gender or social class. Perhaps as women readers, or as militant communist workers, they employ similar interpretive strategies in attributing meaning to their books. Individual readers may of course belong to several reading communities at once.

Fish would probably be enormously surprised by the distance that historians have since run with his original conception. James Smith Allen, to take a prominent example, took the idea of the interpretive community as the starting point for his analysis of readers' letters to nineteenth-century French fiction writers.¹¹ He found that, at the beginning of the century, readers' letters valued the noble sentiments expressed in fiction. They envisaged the author as a man of fine aristocratic sensibilities (thus Stendhal received letters addressed to 'Monsieur de Stendhal'). Readers judged writers according to traditional shared criteria, which demanded moral lessons and allegiance to neoclassical virtues of simplicity and restraint. They adapted slowly to the realist ethic, and their correspondence suggested to Allen that for some time they associated realism with immorality. Gradually, the impact of Flaubert and Zola redefined the expectations of the public. Instead of praising a novel's refinement and delicate taste, readers were more likely to appreciate its energy and power. These insights, building on valuable direct evidence of readers' responses, gave Allen's work shape and direction.

Fish's notion, to which Allen's work refers, is only a starting point. It does not give us enough help to define the social realities of reading communities in historical time. For this we need a social context. As Robert Darnton reminded us, ascribing meaning to texts is a social activity.¹² The process is not wholly individual and random, but relies on broader social and cultural conditioning factors. The expectations brought to the book by readers are formed through shared social experience. These expectations may also be encouraged by publishers who adopt marketing strategies aimed at particular communities of readers. This already goes beyond Fish's own formulations, but his ideas need a broad interpretation.

A community of readers can exist on various levels. On one level, it shares a common stock of literary references or images drawn from a shared imaginary library. Thus early British migrants to Australia, faced with the novel and threatening experiences of their new life, refracted them through shared literary analogies. On the long sea journey to Australia, for example, Coleridge was a regular companion. Emigrants' diaries and journals rarely failed to describe one particular landmark experience: the first sighting of the albatross, followed by attempts to kill or capture a specimen, in the style of the Ancient Mariner. 'Who could doubt their supernatural attributes? Certainly not a spirit-chilled lands woman, with Coleridge's magic legend perpetually repeating itself to her', wrote 27-year-old Louisa Meredith, arriving in Sydney in 1839. Louisa was to surround herself with mementos of the reading community from which she felt uprooted. She called her spaniel Dick Swiveller (from Dickens' *Old Curiosity Shop*), and she rode horses called Touchstone and Audrey (from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*).¹³

This agenda for the history of reading developed from the *histoire du livre*, as initiated by Lucien Febvre and the Annales school of history, and continued by Robert Darnton among many others. These scholars showed the importance of placing literary production into a social and economic context. They understood books as material and commercial objects, produced for profit and sent in search of readers. The history of the book thus emphasised the role of the printers, publishers and booksellers who manufactured books and brought them to the reading public. Darnton developed the notion of the communications circuit (Figure 1.1), which genuflected in the direction of the author, but emphasised as well all the producers and distributive networks which give books a material reality and a social meaning.¹⁴ The paper manufacturers, the compositors, the bookbinders, the itinerant peddlers, the smugglers of forbidden literature, librarians, booksellers – all these and other characters in the chain of production now became the objects of historical investigation. Darnton's model of textual transmission invites criticism for its anachronisms: it reflects the world of eighteenth-century France, when literature was peddled and smuggled to avoid censorship, and when books were often sold unbound for readers to bind as they wished.¹⁵ In addition, the model is vague about how readers influence publishers. In spite of such criticisms, however, Darnton's scheme effectively dethrones the author from his or her role as sole creator.

L'histoire du livre also incorporates the study of the evolving material forms of the book. Authors, we are frequently reminded, write texts; they do not write books. As Stoddard explained,

Whatever they may do, authors do not write books. Books are not written at all. They are manufactured by scribes and other artisans, by mechanics and other engineers, and by printing presses and other machines.¹⁶

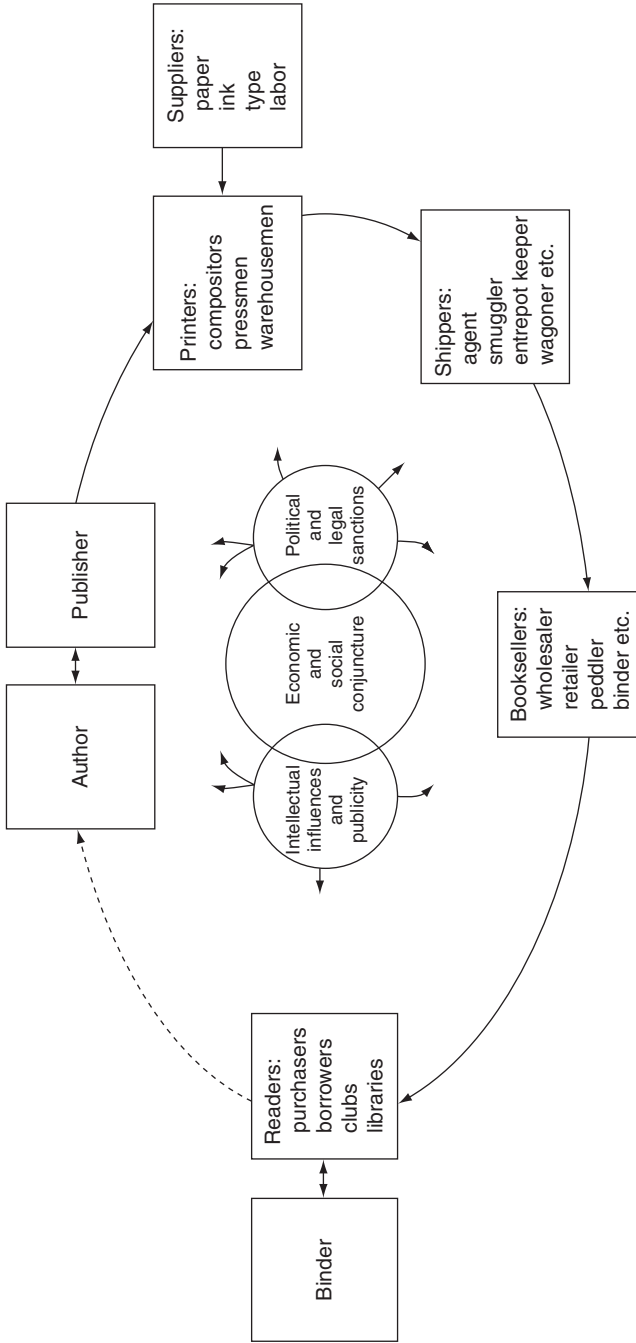


Figure 1.1 The Communications Circuit from 'Kiss of Lamourette' by Robert Darnton. © 1990 Robert Darnton. Used by Permission of W. W. Norton & Co., Inc.

The physical form of the text, on screen or on paper, its format, the disposition of typographical space on the page are all factors which determine the historical relationship between reader and text. The historian of reading attempts to elucidate the relationships between the text in its physical form, the means by which it was circulated and the meaning ascribed to it by its eventual public. Many rules and constraints determine these connections, some of them imposed by governmental or clerical censorship. There are technical limitations to be taken into account, as well as limitations deriving from the nature of the market for books in historical time. We might also trace the invention of the author, as a distinct legal persona, endowed since the eighteenth century at least with some form of intellectual property rights. We may also want to discuss the role of print culture as an essential part of the formation of a public sphere in the late eighteenth century. Considering the historical importance of print in European and Western culture, this agenda concerns all of us whose task it is to read and criticise texts.

The story of writing

We can tell the story of reading as it developed from the exclusive attribute of a few into a necessity of life for all. At the same time, the Western world learned to write, and the democratisation of writing forms an important theme of this book. Reading and writing were not quite simultaneous processes – on the whole, the expansion of writing practices followed the spread of reading – but this book will treat them together as far as possible. Writing had its public and bureaucratic forms: from the monumental inscriptions of ancient Rome to the writing of vast organisations like the Catholic Church, writing was always an essential instrument of power. In Fernand Braudel's famous work *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, he pictured Philip of Spain at the centre of the greatest Empire the world had ever seen.¹⁷ It was an Empire organised, administered and held together by bureaucratic writing on an unprecedented scale and pursued at an exhausting pace. Braudel imagined Philip at the centre of a global epistolary web, as a graphomaniac overwhelmed by his writing responsibilities. In Braudel's vision, 'writing the Empire' made Philip its victim at the same time as it enabled him to be its master.

The writing of power always engendered fear among the subordinate classes. They saw writing as a means by which governments recorded their land and possessions, levied taxes on them, organised conscription and administered an oppressive legal system. Since writing was an attribute of clerical elites, the uneducated sometimes imagined that it possessed magical powers. In the Caribbean, recounted López de Gómara, the Indians carrying the papers of their European lords hung them at the

far end of a pole at a safe distance, because they were convinced that ‘they contained some spirit and that they could speak, like some deity speaking through a man, and not by human means’.¹⁸

Increasingly, however, individuals appropriated writing for their own private purposes. The spread of cursive script, familiarly known as ‘joined-up’ or ‘running’ writing, facilitated more private and informal uses of writing technology in medieval Europe. In the modern period, writing was appropriated by every section of society for a wide range of purposes, sometimes pragmatic, sometimes intimate. Even for the humblest peasant, specific crises and moments made written communication absolutely essential. These situations occurred at times of great migrations of peoples, and in times of separation from one’s family during war or imprisonment. The nineteenth century, in particular, witnessed a huge expansion of writing activity at every social level. We must therefore consider the West’s apprenticeship in writing alongside its acquisition of reading skills.

Aims and objectives

The history of reading and writing goes in search of four main objectives. Firstly, our task is to find the targeted reader, or the audience desired and solicited by both author and publisher. The targeted reader may leave traces in the text itself, but stronger clues are usually found in the commercial or editing strategies chosen by the publisher to reach the desired market. The novels of Walter Scott, for example, which were immensely popular in Europe in the early nineteenth century, were sometimes presented as love stories and sometimes as realistic historical novels. Similarly, some editions of Jules Verne’s novels stressed their pedagogic value and treated them almost as geography lessons, while their illustrations sometimes undermined this marketing approach by stressing the adventure and suspense which appealed to young male readers. In the choice of price, format, in the quality of the paper and binding, in the typeface and layout, in the presence or absence of illustration and in the marketing tactics employed to sell the work, the targeted reader can be detected.

Secondly, we are hunting for actual readers and their responses. Various constraints surround them, and we need to consult the normative sources, by which I mean all the pressures, bans and instructions through which elites and other institutions seek to channel and structure an individual’s reading and to promote what they think *ought* to be read. To find flesh-and-blood readers, however, we must also plunge into their autobiographies, whether written or oral, spontaneously composed or written under duress from a spiritual confessor. Readers have written about their own reading and reactions to it and in doing so create valuable material for the study of reading practices in the past.

A third and more general aim remains to historicise the encounter between the reader and the text. The material form of the book is an important ingredient in identifying a market and soliciting certain reading responses. The ways in which a text reaches its readers may also affect the way it is received. The reader's own background and culture will further influence how the text is appropriated. The history of reading will then become a study of how meaning is ascribed to texts, and of the norms and practices which determine how in the past we have understood and made use of literature.

The fourth objective is to demonstrate the democratisation of writing practices, in all its ramifications. These include exploring how the growing mastery of the written word served governments and opened up new possibilities for individual communication. The access to writing has contributed to the emancipation of workers and women. This liberating process has always been dependent on the development of writing as an evolving technology. The multiple uses of writing – whether bureaucratic or religious, or domestic and familial – form part of the history of scribal culture in the Western world. They raise questions about the complex relationship between oral and written culture in pre-industrial societies.

Several turning points stand out in such a history, and the revolutions of the book help to frame what follows. One of the first of these was the invention of the codex, whose advantages allowed it to gradually replace the scroll. Another was the medieval invention of silent reading as the normal method of textual appropriation, which gradually took the place of reading as an oral performance and a communal activity. Reading aloud of course did not disappear; it still exists in different and specific contexts and we must be alert to them. These transformations are introduced in Chapter 2. A third landmark was the invention of printing, which, as this book will argue, has been overrated. The invention of printing is discussed in Chapter 3, and the role of print in the European Renaissance, Reformation and early modern popular culture is outlined in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. Chapter 7 analyses the rise of reading and writing literacy over several centuries. In Chapters 8 and 9, the importance of Enlightenment literature and its reception is discussed, as well as the significance of the so-called 'reading revolution' at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. A fourth revolution in reading and writing occurred in the nineteenth century, which witnessed the industrialisation of the book and the advent of a mass literary culture. These questions form the subject matter of Chapters 10 and 11, while Chapter 12 is entirely devoted to the spread of writing practices in this period.

Lastly, the appearance of computerised text brings us into the present. Some contemporary reactions to hypertext eerily resemble fifteenth-century responses to printing, ranging from hailing a new utopia to dire

prophecies of doom. In spite of such parallels, the computer revolution has proved far more profound than Gutenberg's invention, in that it completely changed the material form of the codex which had been dominant for at least 1500 years. It has also invited an unprecedented involvement of the reader in the text, changing the way we write as well as the way we read.

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