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## Introduction

UPON COMING INTO his master's fortune, Dickens's illiterate dustman Mr. Boffin immediately hires a ballad-seller to entertain him by reading aloud. Only one detail remains to be checked: "You are provided with the needful implement—a book, sir?"

'Bought him at a sale,' said Mr. Boffin. 'Eight wollumes. Red and gold. Purple ribbon in every wollume, to keep the place where you leave off. Do you know him?'

'The book's name, sir?' inquired Silas.

'I thought you might have know'd him without it,' said Mr. Boffin slightly disappointed. 'His name is Decline-And-Fall-Off-The-Rooshan-Empire.' (Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* 59)

Because no one reading this passage shares Mr. Boffin's illiteracy, and because few readers of late Dickens have not read at least the spines of Gibbon, we smile. But what if the geographical confusion made bibliographical sense? As a waste-dealer familiar with tanners, Mr. Boffin would have heard of "Russia" as a metonymy for a leather produced in that country, calfskin (often dyed red) tanned with birch oil that imparted a characteristic smell. In this hypothesis, the hope that "you might have know'd him" would look perfectly reasonable: cannier than Silas, Mr. Boffin does recognize the book "without," if not within. "In what I did know," David Copperfield reflects upon leaving warehouse for school, "I was much farther removed from my companions than in what I did not" (Dickens, *David Copperfield* 218). If we took Russia to refer to container rather than contents, then the dustman's class position would reflect less a deficiency of interpretive skill than an excess of sensitivity to color, texture, and smell. His ignorance of the history in the book would throw into relief how much he knows about the history of the book. "Bought him at a sale": Boffin knows not only how the "wollumes" were manufactured, but whether he is their first owner. Once endowed with a life story, even a book judged by "his" cover can elicit affection.

When Silas later arrives to take up his task, it remains unclear whether the "gorging Lord-Mayor's-Show of wollumes (probably meaning gorgeous, but misled by association of ideas)" will end up on Mrs. Boffin's side of the room (whose shelves display stuffed birds) or Mr. Boffin's (lined with cold joints). As binding is to text, so "gorgeous" to "gorging":

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do books resemble decorative outsides or functional insides? Should the volumes that Boffin has “ranged flat, in a row, like a galvanic battery” be treated as an implement or a show?

In short, what meanings do books make even, or especially, when they go unread? And why did Victorian novelists care? That books function both as trophies and as tools, that their use engages bodies as well as minds, and that printed matter connects readers not just with authors but with other owners and handlers—these facts troubled a genre busy puzzling out the proper relation of thoughts to things, in an age where more volumes entered into circulation (or gathered dust on more shelves) than ever before.

It’s not that they hated books. But the great realists did loathe anyone who loved the look of books—who displayed “a great, large handsome Bible, all grand and golden, with its leaves adhering together from the book-binder’s press,” or whose “splendidly bound books furnished the heavily carved rosewood table” (Gaskell, *North and South* 79; Jewsbury 13, 37). One wellborn narrator remarks, in the house of a wealthy tradesman, that “the round rosewood table was in a painfully high state of polish; the morocco-bound picture books that lay on it, looked as if they had never been moved or opened since they had been bought; not one leaf even of the music on the piano was dogs-eared or worn” (W. Collins, *Basil* 61). Book against text, new money against old money—and secondary characters against protagonist. The opening scene of *Ranthorpe* establishes the hero’s depth by describing what aspects of books he *fails* to notice. “He cared not for rare editions, large paper copies, or sumptuous bindings . . . he cared not even whether they had covers at all” (Lewes 4–5).

A moral test doubles as a political stance: the post-Gutenberg consensus that makes differently priced editions of a text functionally equivalent becomes a proxy for the more controversial demand to value human souls alike, whatever the color of their money or their skin. Or was the problem, on the contrary, that literacy was spreading too widely to remain a reliable marker of rank or gender? To use books no longer proved anything; to refrain from misusing them did. The *Gentleman’s Magazine’s* lament that “too many women value a book solely for its binding” (Watkins 102) is dramatized in a joke about a lady complaining to the librarian: “Look what an atrocious cover it has; haven’t you one bound in saxe-blue to match my costume?” (Coutts 147). In 1851, an Evangelical magazine contrasts the good child who “puts books into his head” with the dunce whose books are “only on your shelves” (“How to Read Tracts”).

Nothing against books, then, but something against the eyeing and pricing of books imagined to compete with internalizing them. *The Oxford English Dictionary* dates to 1847 the use of “reading copy” as a eu-

phemism for a book so battered that the only value left lies in the words that it contains. “Books are now so dear,” Southey had reported at the dawn of the Regency phenomenon known as “the bibliomania,” “that they are becoming rather fashionable articles of *furniture* more than anything else; they who buy them do not read them, and they who read them do not buy them. I have seen a Wiltshire clothier, who gives his bookseller no other instructions than the *width* of his shelves.”<sup>1</sup> Made to be seen through, books find themselves seen. By 1887, an article titled “Literary Voluptuaries” could declare that “the collector is curious about margins, typography, and casings, but comparatively indifferent to contents” (805). Cover and content, authenticity and appearance: the language of insides and outsides makes any consciousness of the book’s material qualities signify moral shallowness. Leather bindings rub off on their skin-deep owners.

Commission reinforces omission. Not content to ignore the outsides of books, a good reader actively scorns them. “Due attention to the inside of books, and due contempt for the outside,” Chesterfield had pronounced in 1749, “is the proper relation between a man of sense and his books” (1291). One dictionary defined bibliomania as the fact of being “rather seduced by the exterior than the interior” (Dibdin 58). An article titled “Furniture Books” compared loving one’s “handsomely dressed” volumes to “thinking more of the jewels of one’s mistress than of her native charms” (97). Reciprocally, Wilde could shock by comparing a woman wearing a “smart gown” to “an *édition de luxe* of a bad French novel” (178, 37).<sup>2</sup>

No cheaper cue for our sympathies, no surer predictor of the plot: a character who sells his father-in-law’s library can’t be trusted not to buy a mistress; a character who wants his books bound in leather will marry the blonde; a character who manhandles books will abuse children. The great nineteenth-century novels of individual development domesticate Heine’s 1821 prediction that “when they have burned books, they will end in burning human beings.” In liberal democracies, the traditional state prosecution of books whose content is judged treasonous gives way to homegrown persecution of persons whose reading is judged antisocial. After Julien Sorel’s father catches his attention by knocking a book out of his hands, the book is drowned; when Hugh Trevor’s master beats him for being “deeply engaged in my book,” the book is burnt (Holcroft 41). The public hangman burned books in place of their author, but domestic tyrants made books a proxy for the readers under their control. When John Reed reduces books to projectiles or Tom Tulliver asks why a bankrupt’s books shouldn’t be auctioned off along with his chairs, their refusal to treat the book as a protected category signals their blindness to what’s special about Jane or Maggie.

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## A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

One of the dark blue volumes of the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “book” as

- a. . . . a treatise occupying numerous sheets or leaves fastened together at one edge called the *back* . . . But, since either the form of the book or its subject may be mainly or exclusively the object of attention, this passes on either side into
- b. The material article so made up, without regard to the nature of its contents, even though its pages are occupied otherwise than with writing or printing, or are entirely blank . . .
- c. A literary composition such as would occupy one or more volumes, without regard to the material form or forms in which it actually exists . . .

In sense b every volume is a ‘book’; whilst in sense c one ‘book’ may occupy several volumes; and on the other hand one large volume may contain several ‘books,’ i.e. literary works originally published as distinct books.

The minute the contributor pictures the material container, the textual contents empty out: the example imagined is “entirely blank.” Charles Chestnutt’s 1904 story “Baxter’s Procrustes” makes that zero-sum logic a plot twist, imagining a club of book-collectors tricked into accepting a blank book for their collection. “The true collector loves wide margins, and the Procrustes, being all margin, merely touches the vanishing point of the perspective” (830). A thumbed-to-death “reading copy” stands opposite an illegible collectible clean not only of smudges and underlinings, but of print.

You’ll have noticed my contortions attempting to distinguish “text”—a string of words—from “book” or “book-object”: a physical thing. In an everyday language incapable of even deciding what preposition should link the two—the text “of” a book, the text “in” a book?—one term appears sometimes as contained within the other, sometimes as antithetical to it.<sup>3</sup> If “book” really connoted materiality, there would be no need to affix the pleonastic “object”; if “text” really provided an adequate term for a linguistic structure, I would refer to what you’re now reading as “this text.” Only the ambiguity of sentence openings prevented me from generalizing the distinction between the Bible (a text) and the bible (an object) to Books and books.<sup>4</sup>

The Victorians cathected the text in proportion as they disowned the book. More specifically, they identified themselves as text-lovers in pro-

portion as they distinguished themselves from book-lovers. To take in a text is to tune out its raw materials: a newspaper isn't called a "rag" if the speaker thinks it worth reading. More surprisingly, in 1818 William Hazlitt could ridicule a book by pointing out the *high* cost of the paper it was printed on: "Mr. Campbell always seems to me to be thinking how his poetry will look when it comes to be hot-pressed on superfine wove paper" (295). Whenever a review mentions the price or appearance of a book, we know that its textual contents will be either ridiculed or dismissed as beneath contempt. Even in the digital age, to name the ingredients of a book is to insult it—as when an MIT professor refers to "tree flakes encased in dead cow" or a Microsoft researcher to "sooty marks on shredded trees."<sup>5</sup>

Conversely, the best texts eclipse the book. When Amazon launched its first e-reader, Jeff Bezos boasted that the Kindle emulated the way in which "the physical book is so elegant that the artifact itself disappears into the background. The paper, glue, ink and stitching that make up the book vanish, and what remains is the author's world."<sup>6</sup> A successful e-reader, by this logic, would illustrate Marian Evans's contention that "on certain red-letter days of our existence, it happens to us to discover among the *spawn* of the press, a book which, as we read, seems to undergo a sort of transfiguration before us. We no longer hold heavily in our hands an octavo of some hundred pages, over which the eye laboriously travels, hardly able to drag along with it the restive mind; but we seem to be in companionship with a spirit, who is transfusing himself into our souls" (G. Eliot, "J. A. Froude's *The Nemesis of Faith*" 265). The double etymology of "liber" points to the book's Janus-faced potential: some medieval commentators traced it to the word for the "bark" on which texts were inscribed, others to the action ("liberare") that texts were expected to perform.<sup>7</sup> Grounded in a material substance or linked with a lofty abstraction, the same object bound by its medium is credited with the power to free its users.

## WHAT USE ARE BOOKS?

The following pages reconstruct nineteenth-century understandings of, and feelings toward, the uses of printed matter. In particular, they excavate the often contentious relation among three operations: reading (doing something with the words), handling (doing something with the object), and circulating (doing something to, or with, other persons by means of the book—whether cementing or severing relationships, whether by giving and receiving books or by withholding and rejecting

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them). Often pictured as competing, in practice these three modes almost always overlapped. Impossible to read without handling (even if certain genres took pains to suppress any mention of handling), or to get one's hands on a book without its having passed through someone else's hands (even if other genres imagined books as found objects). We might posit, then, that what look like antonyms are in fact subsets: handling without reading is easier to imagine than reading without handling, circulating without reading than reading without circulating. Yet the opposite asymmetry occupies an even more prominent place in certain Victorian literary genres—notably the *bildungsroman* and the memoir—which represented reading as systematically as they avoided any mention of the social transactions in which the book was enlisted or the material properties with which it was invested. The fact that a few instances of these genres continue to be reprinted and reread, while genres that acknowledged handling now look like repositories of jokes gone flat, and genres that theorized circulation look like depositories for dated didacticism, suggests how much twenty-first century culture values the first use over the second and third.

To ask how one use relates to the other two is also to ask how—even whether—books differ from other kinds of object. Where do books fit in a postal system that mandates different pricing for letters than for freight? What about newspapers, catalogs and advertising circulars, or books that contain nonverbal objects (herbaria, scrapbooks, tradesman's sample books)? When you display a book in your hands or on your shelf, are you implicitly claiming to have read it—and therefore, as often as not, lying? In what operations other than reading can books be enlisted? Is it legitimate to hide behind the newspaper, use an encyclopedia as a door-stop, turn a newspaper into fish wrapping, match the binding of your bible to your dress, fill a study wall with hollowed-out books, decorate a living-room table with intact ones that you have no intention of opening?

Are books likelier to be put to one or another of the three uses if they're free? What about if they're bought, borrowed, inherited, received as a gift from an acquaintance or as a giveaway from an organization? (In some quarters, the price of subsidized bibles was raised in order to prevent their being worth reselling for wastepaper; in others, to inherit, stumble upon, or even steal books was considered morally superior to buying them.) Do traces (verbal or nonverbal) left by past users increase or decrease the value of books (commercial or sentimental)? What should be done with printed matter when its contents go out of date?

Under what circumstances is it acceptable to annotate, extra-illustrate, cut up, disbind, rebind, reprint, recycle, or discard books? And when is it permissible to disperse, sell, or export entire library collections? What

should be pulped (and how soon), what should be archived (and how long)? What relation do those persons responsible for interpreting and evaluating texts bear to those responsible for dusting or shelving books? And the formal corollary of that social question: why do Victorian writers develop such a rich language in which to name the manual gestures of holding, turning, and handling, with no matching lexicon to describe the mental act of reading?

Investigating these questions may help us understand the printed “before” against which so many twenty-first-century commentators measure their digital “after.” We can learn, in particular, from the Victorians’ struggle to articulate how far the power of books (for good and evil) depended on their verbal content, their material form, or the social and antisocial practices that they enabled and even prompted. (In the language introduced a moment ago: on their reading, handling, or circulating.) When we use idealized printed texts as a stick with which to beat real digital ones, we flatten the range of uses to which the book was put before digital media came along to compete with it. If we shift our gaze from the library to the kitchen and the privy, an ethnography that juxtaposes reading with handling and circulating can replace the Manichaeian contrast *between* print and digital by distinctions *within* the uses of each. Where nostalgists today conflate the practice of disinterested, linear, sustained attention with the object that is the printed book—equating modular, scattershot, instrumental reading in turn with electronic media—secular novelists like Dickens, Eliot, Brontë, and Trollope assumed that absorption in the text required forgetting its medium. The ideal text was, as we say today, platform-independent; the ideal reader, binding-blind and edition-deaf (see Kirschenbaum). Evangelical tracts, in contrast, showed less interest in the words that the book conveyed than in the interpersonal transactions that served to convey it. Web 2.0 has lent new life to a question that Victorian missionaries first formulated: does the distribution of texts compete with, or piggyback onto, social relationships among human beings?

#### READER-UNRESPONSE

I was trained in the method known as “reception history.” That enterprise shifts literary and intellectual historians’ sights from writers to readers, from upstream arguments about a work’s sources to downstream speculations about those other works that it influenced or spawned. The chapters that follow form a prototype for what might better be dubbed “rejection history.” However much interest books have in being coveted,

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bought, hoarded, even stolen, a wide range of Victorian genres devote more attention to the energy expended on refusing to read or own or touch or even refrain from destroying them.

The umbrella term “nonreading” encompasses an array of practices that have little in common except what they are defined against:

- novelistic narrators replacing the mental act of reading by the manual gesture of holding, in order to repudiate the omniscience that could penetrate characters’ thoughts
- writers reducing the term “reading” to a metaphor for activities that involve the interpretation of something other than books, and books to a front for daydreaming or for ignoring others sharing the same physical space
- in the case of free print, refusing to vest time (or shelf space) where you have not chosen to invest money
- a sign of respect for the book—protecting it from wear and tear—or on the contrary an insult to the text: branding it unworthy of your own time and attention or, worse, delegating or relegating it to your social inferiors
- a feeling that you don’t belong in its audience, whether your identity doesn’t match its implied reader’s or because you are too good (or not good enough) to rub elbows with others in its public. Or, more contingently: the sense that it’s too soon, or too late, for you to shove your way among them—that a servant, for example, should hand today’s news to his master without peeking, contenting himself instead with using last month’s paper to wrap food. Or, more comprehensively: the sense that you do not fit into *any* text’s audience, either because your place is to handle (or dust or fetch) books rather than to read. Or, more crudely, because you are unable to read at all—or because you *are* able to put the book to humbler uses, such as wrapping groceries in its pages.

“Nonreading” may be too negative a term to encompass one more scenario in which, whether or not a text is worth reading, the book becomes more valuable for some other purpose. The book’s material properties trump its textual content when its value (whether for use or for resale) lies in attributes orthogonal to its legibility. This could be for aesthetic reasons, as when a book’s textual content is judged particularly worthless *and* its material properties are judged especially valuable: the gap between the two yawns particularly wide, for example, in the case of coffee-table books and their early-nineteenth-century ancestor, the annual. The reason could be that one of those two axes looks more relevant to a particular situation; material value trumps textual value in times and places where paper is particularly scarce, including among the poor, in

wartime, at moments when the raw materials fall short, or at times and places in which paper is heavily taxed or imports restricted. Or cultures in which the *idea* of the book signifies more than the content of any particular book: during China's Cultural Revolution, for example, burning formed a sign of hostility not just to a particular text's political message, but also to the social classes that were literate and inherited cultural goods. Or the moment of nonreading could be determined not by the history of a nation, but by that of a book: the point in its life span when its read-by date has passed and its pages are ripe for cutting, wrapping, and even wiping.

As late as 1711, Pope could gibe of a miscellany published by Bernard Lintot (and containing works of his own):

Lintot's for gen'ral Use are fit,  
For some Folks read, but all Folks —.

(Pope 280)

The couplet aligns the gap between the many books that are handled and the few that are read with the gap between the few who read books and the many who use them. To reconstruct the hermeneutics of handling is also to situate the book within a larger social world. Since the nineteenth century, activists and scholars alike have assumed that the place to look for the illiterate classes' relation to printed matter was reading aloud—that is, those moments where the information contained in newspapers overleaps their written medium. Pope directs our attention instead to the converse: those moments where the medium outlives its content.

By the following century, what Pope represents as a subset has become a contrary. At the very moment when the poor are learning to read, the rich are unlearning how to handle—are forgetting, as paper ceases to be taxed and new manufacturing methods substitute cheap wood pulp for expensive linen, how to assess the reuse potential and resale value of pages. Servants continued to eyeball how much animal gelatin had been used to “size” a page (determining whether liquids like ink, and later grease, would sink in or bead up); they knew, therefore, which pages were suitable for sealing food and which for absorbing dirt. Masters, in contrast, now noticed only whether the text was absorbing. Although all folks still —, not all folks associated that activity with print: memoirists now described Queen Victoria visiting Cambridge “and saying, as she looked over the bridge: ‘What are all those pieces of paper floating down the river?’ To which, with great presence of mind, [Dr. Whewell, the master of Trinity College] replied: ‘These, ma’am, are notices that bathing is forbidden’” (Raverat 34).

Between reading and wiping, a range of uses stretches: the social breadth to which Pope's “gen'ral” alludes is matched by (though not



Figure I.1. "The Turf," *Punch*, 18 March 1882, 122.

always mapped onto) an equally wide spectrum of practices. If reading can serve different agendas—to save a soul, to form an identity, to do a job, to place a bet, to snub a spouse—handling figures in even more disparate activities.<sup>8</sup> Just as bibliographers have taught us that the changes among successive editions do not necessarily constitute decay, so the Victorian novel can teach us to distinguish absence of reading from absence of use.

Not all uses, however, were created equal. The Victorians plotted the book/text distinction onto every axis imaginable: temporal (new books get read, old books handled), sexual (the text as the province of male thinkers, the book as raw material for women's curlpapers or pie plate liners), generic (the text as the object of piety, the book as the butt of jokes), ethical (the text as an aid to selfhood, the book as a spur to selfishness), social (the text as the business of intellectuals, the book of filthy rich bibliophiles or literally dirty rag-collectors), even disciplinary (the text as the purview of Skimpoleanly aesthetic sensitivities, the book of Gradgrindianly empirical plodders). All that cuts across these otherwise ill-assorted word-pairs is value: in each case, the text is aligned with whichever term happens to be considered superior. A higher-order instance of that logic is that the text is associated with moderation, the book with

extremes. In social terms, the professional middle classes' rejection of materialism left the book-object in the hands of effete gentry (the owners of country-house libraries as selfish hoarders), rich vulgarians (Manchester manufacturers' wives who chose books to match their color schemes), or poor illiterates (costermongers who priced a book by the absorbency of its pages). And in historical terms, book fetishism looked forward (to new technologies for facsimile reproduction and nouveaux riches furnishing their houses with bran-new bindings) as well as backward (to country-house collectors ignoring the post-1850 public libraries, or superstitious old women eating the pages of their bibles). What was true for users also held for things. Just as the very rich and the very poor, the excessively scholarly and insufficiently literate, were both imagined to be either above or below reading, so books were faulted as too cheap or too expensive. Terms like "penny dreadful" and "shilling shocker" took a low price as metonymic for literary worthlessness; more counterintuitively, mentions of perfumed or hot-pressed paper did the same with high.

#### CHAPTER SUMMARY

My study starts where Curtius's foundational survey of "the use of writing and the book in figurative language" leaves off: in intellectual terms, at the end of the Enlightenment; in technological, as the handpress era closed (Curtius). It ends with the midcentury legal and technological developments that cheapened paper, shortening its life cycle and narrowing its affordances. The boundaries of my subject, therefore, are at once technological, legal, and literary- (or sometimes intellectual-) historical. Changes in printing and papermaking technology; innovations in distribution systems; institutional changes in schooling, both sacred and secular; legal changes to copyright and to taxes on knowledge—even if these add up to a coherent narrative, they map less neatly onto the time line of literary history, itself complicated by gaps between production and reception. (No argument about the books the Victorians read can confine itself to texts composed by Victorians.)

The proper nouns that appear in this book's table of contents form a grudging concession to the unspoken rule that literary-critical monographs must title each chapter after a different author (or in books about a single author, a different text). Although it fits badly with anonymous texts and worse with those (even thicker on the ground in this study) whose authors are named but whose names command no recognition, the convention humors our own protocols of reception—as well as of selection and rejection. With the exception of professional reviewers, people

reading such books often skip straight from the introduction to whichever chapter discusses a text or author that the reader himself happens to be reading or writing about.

In that spirit, some itineraries. Because chapter 1 intertwines an introduction to Victorian debates about media with a survey of (and polemic about) the relation of book history to literary-critical theory and practice, readers interested in methodology should begin at the beginning. Those more interested in the primary texts, however, can easily enough cut straight to the more accessible and more detailed case studies of chapter 2. Husband-wife relations come to the fore there, parent-child in chapter 3, master-servant in chapters 4 through 6. Scholars of reading aloud (and silent listening) may want to skip ahead to chapter 6; bibles figure most prominently in chapters 4, 5, and 6; newspapers in chapters 2, 6, and 7.

Why can realist novels represent the book (the second chapter asks) only at the price of reducing reading, quite literally, to an act? And why does representing reading from the inside (as do the texts discussed in the third) entail abstracting the visible book? What models of causation (the fourth asks) have the nineteenth-century bildungsroman and its narrative bequeathed to twentieth-century bibliographers and twenty-first-century book historians? The fifth chapter turns to the circulation of free and subsidized print—especially junk mail and religious tracts—among owners and borrowers, givers and receivers, readers and handlers, preservers and destroyers. The sixth asks what relationships the Victorians expected particular copies of a book to establish among their users—whether concurrent, as in reading aloud or subscribing to the same periodical, or sequential, as in secondhand books or association copies. Ending with the end of the book's life, chapter 7 explores the relation between old texts instantiated in new books (reprinting) and new texts transmitted via old books (marginalia, binder's waste, and paper recycling).

Books don't simply mediate a meeting of minds between reader and author. They also broker (or buffer) relationships among the bodies of successive and simultaneous readers—or even between one person who holds the book and others before whose gaze, or over whose dead body, she turns its pages. Ambivalence about circulation runs through these different case studies: untouched books figure as prisoners or wallflowers or clotted blood, but books subjected to too many readers are compared to worn-out prostitutes or knackered horses. The same fictions that credit texts with marking minds blame handlers for marking books. Conservative and radical fiction agree in classifying books as a special category of commodity that can be alienated only at the price of disloyalty. Yet one deplors, and the other celebrates, the intimacies and antagonisms that the book establishes between buyer and seller, lender and borrower,

or even between strangers who handle the same piece of paper unbeknownst to one another. Circulation affects not only relations between persons and books, that is, but also between one person and another.

A second tension runs between the book's powers to unite and to divide. Books can link their successive readers, owners, and handlers, whether across classes (as in tracts distributed by the rich to the poor, or papers that find their way from the study to the kitchen) or even (as in the case of "association copies" bought or inherited) across the line that divides the living from the dead. Books could just as easily, however, separate individuals (like the husbands and wives who hide from one another behind books and newspapers in chapter 2, or the children of chapter 3 who hide behind books, and within texts, from the adults who jolt them back to their surroundings by hitting them with a book), or separate classes (like the masters and servants of chapters 6 and 7, who handle the same book or newspaper but for different purposes and at different moments of its life cycle). It's worth emphasizing that this distinction between the book as bridge and the book as wedge does *not* map onto the dichotomy between reception and rejection: on the contrary, withholding a book can assert a relationship (think of a parent denying a child access to a book) as easily as bestowing a book can sever it (the bookseller who gives that child the book he requests is disowning any more personal responsibility for the child's morals).

The tension between commonality and distinction cuts across genres as different as circulating-library triple-deckers representing middle-class couples and didactic tracts written for and about servants. Midcentury middle-class fiction substituted power struggles within the middle-class family (chapters 2 and 3) for more public debates about working-class literacy (chapters 5 and 6). Yet even as the antagonists in these battles of the books shift from master/servant to husband/wife and stepfamily/stepchild, the question of who has "business in the library" (a phrase echoed across these different contexts) continues to determine who stands inside and outside of the "family"—whether in the older sense of an internally stratified economic entity or the newer affective unit divided by age and gender. In both cases, the self-made reader—whether "made" as a middle-class child develops interiority, or as a working-class person climbs the social ladder—may be represented either with empathetic intimacy or with satirical distance, and this generic choice implies an ideological choice between embedding the book within, or counterposing the text to, social structures.

The self-made reader in turn implies a self-propelling text: to acknowledge how books reached one's hands is to recognize one's dependence,

in every sense of that now old-fashioned word. Victorian secular fiction deploys two genres of required reading—school textbooks (chapter 3) and religious tracts (chapters 5 and 6)—as foils to its own claim to be freely chosen, even secretly coveted, hoarded, begged, borrowed, or stolen. Tracts are to the mid-Victorian novel what romance was to its predecessors: the inscribed genre against which it defines itself. Institutions like school and church stand opposite the novel's putative market, imagined as an aggregate of independent (even rebellious) individuals. By representing teachers foisting grammars, dictionaries, and prize books upon middle-class children, and tract-distributors doing the same to working-class men, the novel presents itself as a commodity driven more by demand than by supply. A different novelistic subgenre, the Evangelical it-narrative (chapter 4), substitutes divine providence as the motor driving the circulation of books, a logic borrowed, surprisingly enough, by the resolutely anticlerical Henry Mayhew to structure his account of paper recycling (chapter 7).

The subgenres discussed in Part I grope for ways to discuss the circulation and handling of books while bracketing their textual content. Those comedies of manners that I call "behaviorist" perform that substitution lexically (by substituting manual phrases like "turned the page" or spatial phrases like "sat with a book before him" for the mental verb "read") as well as thematically (by representing characters going through the motions of reading or even pretending to read). In novels that more dogmatically prize psychological depth, however, the child who internalizes the content of books at the expense of any awareness of their material or commercial properties stands opposite the adults who throw, display, and sell books with no interest in actually reading them. Seen from the inside, a prompt for absorption; from the outside, a prop for avoidance. Does the book compete with human friendships (as when the metaphorical "companions" that populate a man's library crowd out his wife and children) or enable them (as when the loan of a bible provides a missionary an excuse to enter a home)?

The book as barrier (Part I) gives way to the book as bridge (Part II): reading can create interpersonal bonds (in the sense of constraint as well as of intimacy), but so can using and choosing books—for oneself, or on behalf of others. Over the course of the nineteenth century, new commercial developments (including the introduction of new raw materials for papermaking), new political arrangements (notably the removal of "taxes on knowledge"), and new distribution infrastructures (ranging from the penny post to the missionary press) changed books from a scarce resource to a storage problem. Printed matter came to be figured as a chain, for better and for worse: what linked its users also burdened them. Too much

information, too many readers, too much paper: Part II explores the first problem through the rise of junk mail and subsidized tracts (chapter 5), the second through the shift from masters' concern about servants' reading to public library patrons' concern about one another's handling (chapter 6), the third through the fall of paper recycling (chapter 7).

Subsidized Evangelical tracts and middle-class three-volume novels alike shifted their attention from the individual reader to the social and economic transactions that link one user to another (with or without their consent). If hiding behind a book could undercut the compulsory intimacies expected of family members who shared the same domestic space (whether the husbands and wives of chapter 2 or the parents and children of chapter 3), conversely peeking into one's master's bible (chapter 4) or procuring novels on the sly from one's servant (chapter 6) could undermine the distance that unequals were expected to maintain.

Like religious relics, books link us not just to an author but to those who have touched them before: think of Barack Obama's being sworn in at his inauguration on Abraham Lincoln's bible or, two years earlier, Keith Ellison's being sworn in to the House of Representatives on Thomas Jefferson's Koran. Those transitive relationships sound cosy enough: conventionally compared to a friend or companion, the book can also broker friendships, even between the living and the dead. By the nineteenth century, however, the cheapening of both paper and literacy opened the less pleasant possibility of bumping into one's social inferiors within the readership of a particular book, or the handlership of a particular copy of a book. The traditional fear that a text might poison its readers' minds was now joined by a newer anxiety that poor, sick, or dirty fellow handlers might infect their bodies.

The sequential uses of a single copy of a book embodied in "association copies" find their converse in Benedict Anderson's famous analysis of strangers bonding through simultaneous newspaper reading. Yet if we shift our sights from text to book, the relationships enabled by print look more negative—a prop for avoiding persons in the same space, as easily as communicating with strangers at a distance. And if we look beyond reading to handling (an activity that occupies a larger fraction of any newspaper's life cycle), it becomes clear that while the meaning of texts changes as new generations reinterpret them, the relation between page and paper changes as the former ages. In Henry Mayhew's ethnography of the wanderings of books from class to class and hand to hand, we find a media theory that lumps paper together with humbler commodities while insisting on the power of even illiterate users to invest even papers past their read-by date with fresh value.

## UNCOMMON READERS

Like most literary-historical arguments, mine has both a corrective and a creative ambition. In negative terms, it seeks historical and critical distance from the heroic myth—whether Protestant, liberal, New Critical, or New Historicist—that makes textuality the source of interiority, authenticity, and selfhood (Raven, *The Business of Books* 132, 377). In more positive terms, it seeks to recover stories that this myth overwrites: stories about women, children, and working-class or non-European men who remained sensitive to the material affordances of books and, therefore, to the stories in which books themselves figured as heroes. Some of the following chapters will trace antibookishness back to a particular time (around 1850) and a particular genre (the secular middle-class bildungsroman). Others excavate Victorian alternatives to a worship of the text that demonizes the book: now-forgotten genres and subcultures whose challenges to that model may be worth fishing out of the dustbin—no: the glass-fronted bookcase—of history.

Within a culture where book is to text as outside to inside, secular middle-class fictions and Evangelical tracts alike make the relation between those terms a surrogate for the relation of the material world to the inner life—whether that life belongs to their characters or to their readers. Printed matter raises ethical questions (how much or little should one care about the look of books?) as much as formal ones (how, and how fully, can a mental act like reading be represented?). Identifying a deep structure underlying different representations of the book, however, doesn't mean lumping "the" Victorians into some monolithic mass. Multiple fault lines separated those narratives and essays that celebrated the spread of ideas from those that mocked the circulation of paper: political and sectarian and economic and educational positions of readers, writers, and publishers; size and format and pricing of books; genre of texts. It's hardly surprising, for example, that Evangelical Protestants produced and consumed texts that figured reading rather differently from those that emerged from Catholic or freethinking subcultures, or that those who favored or feared the social mobility of persons developed different vocabularies in which to discuss books' movement through space and across social ranks, or that proponents of individualistic economic or religious models valued silent reading as highly as others condemned it. What held for discourses applied less evenly to practices: each subculture developed its own ways of showing books off or hiding them away, distributing or hoarding, alienating or personalizing, bequeathing or disposing of, noticing or taking for granted.

Such sectarian and political identities crosscut a second determinant of attitudes toward the book: genre. Cast by circulating-library novels as a

buffer between intimates (chapters 2 and 3) and by subsidized tracts as a bridge among strangers (chapters 4–6), the book could figure in the Evangelical press as a picaresque wanderer (chapter 4) or in radical journalism as the protagonist of a providential plan (chapter 7). And a third: narrative mode. First-person accounts showed the individual reader transcending the constraints of space, time, age, and social class—whether that individual was the middle-class child through whom the bildungsroman was focalized, the working-class autodidact of rags-to-riches memoirs, or the narrator of an American slave autobiography. The counternarrative that emphasized the material, social, and commercial properties of paper, in contrast, clustered in third-person comic and anecdotal genres, distanced by the Olympian irony of an omniscient narrator.

The two halves of the book correspond, therefore, not only to different genres and different classes of audience, but also to different models of literacy. Middle-class bildungsromans, like working-class autodidacts' autobiographies, frame reading in terms of individual agency, self-fashioning, even transgression. To read a subsidized tract, in contrast, was to engage in an interpersonal transaction. In that sense, surprisingly, Evangelical tracts (chapters 5 and 6) had less in common with those bildungsromans that secularized the Christian conversion narrative (chapter 3) than with social satires and comedies of manners that cast books as props in etiquette dilemmas (chapter 2).

Yet what divided these genres was ultimately less what powers they ascribed to the book than what value judgments inflected that ascription. All three associated autodidacticism with the text, formal education with the book. If the text guaranteed upward mobility; the book made users placeable. The text signifies individual freedom, the book social determinism; the text generates empathy among different classes and genders, while the book marks differences of rank and age. It's logical enough, in that context, that the religious tracts produced by anti-Jacobin propagandists should celebrate the moment of elders and betters handing books to the young and the poor, while more secular middle-class fictions instead praised texts for propelling themselves into the hands of protagonists (often, again, young and poor) who were badly treated by other human beings. By extension, the protagonists of the great Victorian bildungsromans are characterized less by their love of texts than by their hatred of books—less by immersion in verbal content than by indifference, or even repugnance, to its material container.

Like nonfictional accounts of individual self-improvement and national progress, serious fictions marketed to middle-class circulating-library patrons vest the text with the power to liberate and individuate. They associate the text with mobility, whether through the power of words to move across media (the cheap reprint's claim to be functionally

interchangeable with the finest folio models the equality of their respective owners), the power of the author to move through space and time (to be read although dead, to do his work “on the top of a mountain or in the bottom of a pit”), or the power of the text to change the reader’s identity (through empathy with fictional characters) and social status (whether by transcending one’s social and physical disabilities, or by forging relationships with fellow readers) (Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography* 209). Whether in the privy or on the sofa table, among collectors or bibliomancers, a book that was placed—either socially or spatially—was always a book not being read.

A fuller ethnography or phenomenology of Victorians’ interactions with the book would need to approach a wider range of genres and formats from a wider range of methods. My reliance on a few pieces of printed prose that have survived in twenty-first-century research libraries positions me to offer little more than an account of competing ideologies surrounding the book in a few numerically unrepresentative genres. Yet “ideology” sounds at once too lofty and too dry (or, in a more Victorian language, too coarse) to do justice to the visceral energies driving my subjects to distance themselves from some uses of books and identify themselves with others. In the end, the most interesting question to ask of these hands now quiet may be not what they felt about the book but why they felt so much. To grope our way back into their intellectual and emotional and ethical investment in paper; their urge to cast written matter in etiological narratives and interpersonal dramas; the leaps of faith and logic that pressed trivial decisions about to whom to hand a tract, or on which shelf to stick a volume, or at what angle to hold a newspaper, into the service of hopes and fears and theories and hunches—this exercise may provide a chance to work through the contradictions of our own media theory and practice.