in reading had long ceased to have a hold on the public. Readers did not read whatever was recommended to them by the authorities and the ideologues, but whatever satisfied their intellectual, social and private needs. The genie had irretrievably escaped from the bottle.

In the nineteenth century, the reading public of the Western world achieved mass literacy. The advances made towards general literacy in the age of Enlightenment were continued, to create a rapidly expanding number of new readers, especially for newspapers and cheap fiction. In revolutionary France, about half the male population could read, and about 30 per cent of women. In Britain, where literacy rates were higher, male literacy was about 70 per cent in 1850, and 55 per cent of females could read. The German Reich was 88 per cent literate in 1871.

These figures hide considerable variations between town and country, and between the highly literate capital cities and the rest of the country. In Paris, for example, on the eve of the French Revolution, 90 per cent of men and 80 per cent of women were able to sign their wills; and in 1792, two out of three inhabitants of the popular faubourg St Marcel could read and write. Such high levels of literacy, however, were found only in the largest western European cities before the mid-nineteenth century. Nevertheless by the 1890s, 90 per cent literacy had been almost uniformly reached, and the old discrepancy between men and women had disappeared. This was the 'golden age' of the book in the West: the first generation which acceded to mass literacy was also the last to see the book unchallenged as a communications medium, by either the radio or the electronic media of the twentieth century.

This expansion of the reading public was accompanied by the spread
of primary education. Progress in education, however, tended to follow, rather than precede, the growth of the reading public. Primary education only became effectively free, general and compulsory in England and France after the 1880s, when those countries were already almost completely literate.

Meanwhile, the shorter working day provided more leisure time for reading. In 1910, for instance, the Verein für Socialpolitik found that most German workers associated leisure only with Sundays. But the working day had been getting gradually shorter in Germany since 1870, and by the end of the century, a ten-hour day was normal. In England, a nine-hour day was the rule by 1880. Even the working classes could begin to join the ranks of the new reading public.

The new public devoured cheap novels. In the eighteenth century, the novel was not regarded as a respectable art-form, but in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, its status was assured. It became the classic literary expression of triumphant bourgeois society. In the early years of the nineteenth century, novels were rarely produced in print runs of more than 1,000 or 1,500 copies. By the 1840s, editions of 5,000 copies were more common, while in the 1870s, the cheapest editions of Jules Verne appeared in editions of 30,000. In the 1820s and 1830s, Walter Scott had done much to enhance the reputation of the novel, and had become an international success in the process. By the 1870s, Jules Verne was beginning to reach the global readership that made him a colossus of the growing popular fiction market. The mass production of cheap popular fiction integrated new readers into national reading publics, and helped to make those reading publics more homogeneous and unified.

The publishers, who had now 'arrived' for the first time as a body of professional specialists, fully exploited the new opportunities for capitalist investment. Cheap monthly instalments could reach a wider public than the traditional, well-bound, three-decker novel. The serialization of fiction in the press opened up a new market, and made the fortune of authors like Eugène Sue, Thackeray and Trollope. A new relationship was created between the writer and his or her public. American readers, it was reported, crowded the docksides to greet the ship bringing the next instalment of Dickens's The Old Curiosity Shop, so eager were they to learn the fate of the heroine, Little Nell. The French public first read Marx's Das Kapital in weekly instalments, published in 1872. In a famous essay of 1839, Sainte-Beuve warned that this 'industrialization of literature' could never produce great art. The lure of profit, however, would not be denied.

The new readers of the nineteenth century were a source of profit, but they were also a source of anxiety and unease for social élites. The 1848 revolutions were partly blamed on the spread of subversive and socialist literature, which reached the urban worker and a new audience in the countryside. In 1858 the British novelist Wilkie Collins coined the phrase 'The Unknown Public' to describe 'the lost literary tribes' of 3 million lower-class readers, 'right out of the pale of literary civilisation'. He referred to the readers of illustrated penny magazines, which offered a weekly fare of sensational stories and serials, anecdotes, readers' letters, problem pages and recipes. The readers of the penny novels included many domestic servants and shop-girls, 'the young lady classes'. According to Collins, 'the future of English fiction may rest with this Unknown Public, which is now waiting to be taught the difference between a good book and a bad'. England's new readers, who never bought a book or subscribed to a library, provided middle-class observers with a sense of discovery, tinged with fear.

The Female Reader: Occupying a Space of her Own

Women formed a large and increasing part of the new novel-reading public. The traditional discrepancy between male and female literacy rates was narrowed, and finally eliminated by the end of the nineteenth century. The gap had always been the widest at the lowest end of the social scale. In Lyons at the end of the eighteenth century, day-labourers and silk-workers were twice as literate as their wives; but in artisan trades like baking, where the wife might be responsible for the accounting, and frequent contact with the public was required, women were the equals of their literate male partners.

Perhaps more women than we realize could already read. The signature test, commonly used by historians to measure literacy, hides from view all those who could read, but were still unable to sign their own name. This group was essentially female. The Catholic Church had tried as far as possible to encourage people to read, but not to write. It was useful for parishioners to be able to read the Bible and their catechism, but the ability to write as well might have given peasants an undesirable degree of independence in the eyes of the clergy. Perhaps for this reason, many women could read but not sign or write. In some families, there was a rigid sexual division of literary labour, according to which the women would read to the family, while the men would do the writing and account-keeping.

Girls' education continued to lag behind that of boys everywhere in Europe. At the end of the eighteenth century, only 9 per cent of pupils in Russian state schools were girls, and in Spanish Navarre in 1807, boys' schools outnumbered girls' schools by two to one. In France, the
first écoles normales d'institutrices were not established until 1842, but by 1880, over two million French girls attended school.

The provision of more formal schooling for girls therefore seemed to follow, rather than precede, the growing feminization of the reading public. Expanding opportunities for female employment (for example, as teachers, shop assistants or postal clerks) and gradually changing expectations of women did more to raise the level of female literacy. The nineteenth century witnessed the growth of a thriving female magazine industry and the emergence of a comparatively new phenomenon: the blue-stocking. Women writers, pilloried mercilessly by satirical journals like Le Charivari as a threat to domestic stability, made their mark. The notoriety of a few individuals like George Sand should not disguise the more general literary contributions made by women everywhere in the nineteenth century. The femme des lettres had arrived.

The role of the female reader was traditionally that of a guardian of custom, tradition and family ritual. In Protestant families in Australia, for instance, the family Bible was usually handed down from generation to generation through the female line. In it were recorded births, marriages and deaths, so that it remained a symbol of Christian tradition and family continuity.

Similarly, Pierre-Jakez Hélias, recalling his own childhood near Plozevet, in Finistère, towards the beginning of the twentieth century, told us that the Vie des Saints had been part of his mother's trousseau:

In the house, aside from my mother's prayer books and a few collections of hymns, there were only two large volumes. One of them, which was kept permanently on the window sill, was Monsieur Larousse's French dictionary... the other was closed into the cupboard that my mother had received as a wedding gift. It was The Lives of the Saints, written in Breton.

This account links a series of cultural dichotomies. The Lives of Saints was a specifically female preserve, and the maternal wedding chest was a hoard of religious knowledge, in opposition to the Larousse, a treasury of lay wisdom. The Vie des Saints (or Buhez ar zent) represented Catholic France, while Larousse was an emblem of secular republicanism. Hélias's mother's chest was, at the same time, Breton-speaking territory, while the window sill supporting Larousse was a kind of altar devoted to the French language. The traditional image of the woman reader tended to be of a religious, family-oriented reader, far removed from the central concerns of public life.

The new women readers of the nineteenth century, however, had other, more secular tastes, and new forms of literature were designed for their consumption. Among the genres destined for this new market of readers were cookery books, magazines and, above all, the cheap popular novel.

Among cookery manuals, La Cuisinière bourgeoise takes pride of place in early nineteenth-century France. Thirty-two editions of this title, or of La Nouvelle Cuisinière bourgeoise, were produced between 1815 and 1840, the years of its greatest popularity. The total print run produced in this period was probably about 100,000 copies, which made it a bestseller of the Restoration.

La Cuisinière bourgeoise typified the cooking of the Enlightenment, embodying a more scientific approach to dietetics and a rejection both of aristocratic luxury and of the coarse taste of the lower classes. La Cuisinière bourgeoise was published with a set of instructions, which defined specifically bourgeois gestures and table manners. Advice was given on correct seating arrangements, on the roles of husband and wife at table, on the proper subjects of mealtime conversation, and on various rituals of collective consumption. Bread, for example, was to be broken not cut in peasant fashion; wine, the book firmly insisted, could be taken neat immediately after the soup course, but decorum thereafter dictated that it be watered. In these ways, the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie was encouraged to invent its own distinctive style of social behaviour, or its own gesural code, which would allow it to recognize its own, and to identify interlopers.

Unlike its rivals, Le Cuisinier royal and Le Cuisinier impérial, La Cuisinière bourgeoise was female, and the book was usually edited by women. This did not mean that publishers expected bourgeois women to read and use La Cuisinière bourgeoise. The book included not only recipes and advice on entertaining, but also all the household duties of domestic servants, for whom the manual was especially written. According to the preface to the 1846 edition, the mistress of the house 'can have it read to her domestic servants from time to time... which will save her the trouble of repeating the same instructions over and over again. In this respect, this book is indispensable for bachelors, who always risk encountering inept domestics.' The book's real readership was thus even more democratic than its title implied; it was destined not just for the personal use of the bourgeois, but also for those who sought to serve her better.

Recipes and advice on etiquette were incorporated into women's magazines, alongside fashion news. The Journal des Dames et des Modes lasted from 1797 until 1837, carrying engravings and descriptions of both male and female outfits. It was followed in the 1840s by journals like the Journal des demoiselles and La Toilette de Psyché. Gradually, fashion magazines began to reach a more popular readership...
a trend indicated perhaps in France when *femme* replaced *dame* in magazine titles. By 1866, *La Mode illustrée* had a print run of 38,000, with its combination of fiction, household hints and sumptuously illustrated fashion pages.  

From time to time, attempts were made to launch journals which were not just aimed at female readers, but which actively promoted feminist causes. *La Voix des femmes* was an ambitious daily which appeared for three months in 1848. In the Third Republic, *La Droit des femmes* urged the re-establishment of divorce and educational facilities for girls. *La Fronde* was entirely produced by women, between 1897 and 1903.

Weekly illustrated magazines flourished during the Second Empire in France, many of them based on English antecedents like the *Penny Magazine* or the *Illustrated London News*. *Le Journal illustré*, for example, was an illustrated weekly, established in 1864, with eight pages in folio format. One or two pages were taken up with an illustration, and other features included views of Paris, puzzles, some European news, society chat and a *causerie théâtrale*. In 1864, an entire issue written by Alexandre Dumas and Gustave Doré boasted a circulation of 250,000. Such weeklies, costing ten centimes and sold at street kiosks, were becoming an integral part of mass urban culture.

*Les Veillées des chaumières* catered more specifically for female readers, and promised something more moral and uplifting than its competitors. Costing only 5 centimes per issue, it offered novels as bonuses for subscribers, and at times included three different *feuilletons*. It did not, however, ignore the potential drawing power of large melodramatic illustrations. The serialized *Féдорa la nihiliste* opened in 1879 with a full-page illustration, in which a fur-coated Tsar presided, godlike, above the clouds, with sword and sceptre, accompanied by a half-naked winged figure holding a shining crucifix. Below, a masked figure holding a smoking revolver lay transfixed by a sword. Féдорa could not destroy a monarch who enjoyed divine protection. *Les Veillées des chaumières* had two columns of text, with very few breaks except chapter headings. Only in the twentieth century did women's magazines discover the value of breaking up the text, and of interspersing it with illustrated advertisements. In so doing, it was offering a kind of fragmented reading, more perfectly attuned to the interrupted working rhythm of a modern housewife.

For contemporary publishers, the woman reader was above all a consumer of novels. They offered series like the *Collection des meilleurs romans français dédiés aux dames* (Werdet in Paris), or fiction for *le donne gentili* (Stella in Milan). Such titles were making a claim to respectability, attempting to reassure both male and female purchasers that the contents were suitable for delicate eyes. They tried to corner a particular sector of the market, but at the same time, they encouraged the growth of a female reader's subculture. This development ultimately restricted, rather than expanded, sales, and the practice was rarely continued beyond the Restoration period. Nevertheless, to create a series defined by its public, rather than its material content, was a new development in publishing.

In Stendhal's correspondence, the author emphasized the importance of the female reader for the novelist. Novel-reading, he claimed, was the favourite activity of French provincial women: 'There's hardly a woman in the provinces who doesn't read her five or six volumes a month. Many read fifteen or twenty. And you won't find a small town without two or three reading rooms (cabinets de lecture)." While the *femmes de chambre* read authors like Paul de Kock in small duodecimo format, Stendhal continued, the *femmes de salon* preferred the more respectable novel in octavo, which aspired to some kind of literary merit.

Although women were not the only readers of novels, they were regarded as a prime target for popular and romantic fiction. The feminization of the novel-reader seemed to confirm dominant preconceptions about the female's role and about her intelligence. Novels were held suitable for women, because they were seen as creatures of the imagination, of limited intellectual capacity, both frivolous and emotional. The novel was the antithesis of practical and instructive literature. It demanded little, and its sole purpose was to amuse readers with time on their hands. Above all, the novel belonged to the domain of the imagination. Newspapers, reporting on public events, were usually a male preserve; novels, dealing with the inner life, were part of the private sphere to which nineteenth-century bourgeois women were relegated.

This carried a certain danger for the nineteenth-century bourgeois husband and *paterfamilias*: the novel could excite the passions, and stimulate the female imagination. It could encourage romantic expectations that appeared unreasonable; it could make erotic suggestions which threatened chastity and good order. The nineteenth-century novel was thus associated with the (supposedly) female qualities of irrationally and emotional vulnerability. It was no coincidence that female adultery became the archetypal novelistic form of social transgression in the period, from Emma Bovary to Anna Karenina and Effi Briest.

The threat which fiction posed to sensitive girls was emotionally described by a reader herself, subsequently 'redeemed' from her errors. Charlotte Elizabeth Browne, daughter of a Norwich clergyman, was only seven when she innocently encountered *The Merchant of Venice*. 'I drank a cup of intoxication under which my brain reeled for many a year,' she wrote in 1841.
I revelled in the terrible excitement that it gave rise to; page after page was stereotyped upon a most retentive memory, without an effort, and during a sleepless night I feasted on the peregrine sweets thus hoarded in my brain. . . Reality became insipid, almost hateful to me; conversation, except that of literary men . . . a burden; I imbied a thorough contempt for women, children, and household affairs, entrenching myself behind invisible barriers. . . . Oh how many wasted hours, how much of unprofitable labour, what wrong to my fellow-creatures, must I refer to this ensnaring book! My mind became unnerved, my judgement perverted, my estimate of people and things wholly falsified. . . . Parents know not what they do, when from vanity, thoughtlessness, or overindulgence, they foster in a young girl what is called a poetical taste.18

As a result of this harrowing experience, Charlotte issued strict warnings to parents about protecting the young from dangerous reading.

The seductive potential of the sentimental novel was ironically treated by Brisset in the opening scenes of his Le Cabinet de lecture, published in 1843. The bearded and hunchbacked Madame Bien-Aimé, who keeps the reading room, advises a writer: 'You have, to entice your female readers, some sentimental insights to seduce them, some deliciously entangled phrases, the most chaste and shameless thoughts, followed by whirlwinds of passion to enrapture them, frenzied ravings and fiery outbursts!'19 In Brisset's story, a young grisette asks for a gothic novel with castles and dungeons, with a happy romantic ending, to read after work. Then a fashionable, married Parisienne, tired of chaste, sentimental heroines, promises to send her maid to collect something stronger. The novelist immediately resolves to seduce both the couturière and the rich Parisienne. The novel itself, by implication, is a means of seduction.

Reading had an important role in female sociability. In pubs and cabarets, men discussed public affairs over a newspaper; fiction and practical manuals, in contrast, changed hands through exclusively female networks. One Bordeaux writer commented in 1850: 'These days society is split into two great camps; on one side the men, who smoke and gamble, on the other the women and young girls, whose life is divided between reading novels and music.'20 When the two genders came together as readers, the woman was often in a position of tutelage to the male. In some Catholic families, women were forbidden to read the newspaper. More frequently, a male would read it aloud. This was a task which sometimes implied a moral superiority and a duty to select or censor material.

While the man was expected to read the political and sporting news, women appropriated the sections of the newspaper devoted to faits divers and serialized fiction. The territory of the newspaper was thus thematically divided according to gender-based expectations. The roman-feuilleton, or serialized novel, was a subject of everyday conversation among women readers, and many would cut out the episodes as they were published, and paste or bind them together. The improvised novels so created could be passed on through many female hands. As a shoemaker's daughter from the Vaucluse, born in 1900, explained:

I used to cut out the serials from the journal and rebind them. We women passed them round between us. On Saturday evening, the men went to the café, and the women used to come and play cards at our house. The main thing was, that's when we swapped our serials, things like Rocambole or La Porteuse de pain.'21

In this way, women who might never have bought a book improvised their own library of cut-out, re-sewn and often-shared texts.

Oral historians who have interviewed women about their reading practices in the period before 1914 have become familiar with a few common attitudes. The commonest female response, looking back on a lifetime's reading, is to protest that there had never been any time for reading. For women, and for their mothers, 'I was too busy getting on with my duties', or 'Mother never sat down idle'. Peeling potatoes, embroidery, making bread and soap left no time for recreation, in the memory of many working-class women. As children, they recalled that they feared punishment if they were caught reading. Household obligations came first, and to admit to reading was tantamount to confessing neglect of the woman's family responsibilities. The idealized image of the good housekeeper seemed incompatible with reading.

Working-class women, however, did read, as oral historians have also discovered – magazines, fiction, recipes, sewing patterns – but they persisted in discrediting their own literary culture. Those interviewed frequently described their own fiction-reading as 'trash' or 'nonsense-reading'. Reading was condemned as a waste of time, which offended against a rather demanding work ethic. Such women, interviewed by Anne-Marie Thiersse in France, and by myself and Taksa in Sydney, denied their own cultural competence.22 They accepted conventional expectations of the woman as housekeeper, intellectually inferior and a limited reader. Those who violated these stereotypical patterns read in secret. For them, books provided furtive enjoyment (les plaisirs dérobés).

One young girl who struggled for her independence as a reader and a woman was Margaret Penn, autobiographical author of Manchester Fourteen Miles. First published in 1947, the book described the author's life near the northern city of Manchester in about 1909.

Margaret, or Hilda as she called herself, had illiterate and devoutly
Methodist parents. She read all the family's correspondence aloud, and she read the Bible to her parents. Using the local co-operative library, she began, as a young teenager, to borrow novelettes. Her parents, however, objected to her reading anything except the Bible and books from Sunday school. They further wanted to confine her reading to Sunday.

Hilda, however, persuaded the local Anglican vicar to give his approval to her borrowing from the co-operative library. She read Robinson Crusoe and Tess of the D'Urbervilles, which would have shocked her parents, as would her choice of the best-selling Victorian melodrama East Lynne. Her parents, however, were forced to accept the advice of the vicar, but her illiterate mother remained suspicious of any book that Hilda would not read aloud. Hilda refused to go meekly into domestic service as her parents demanded. Instead, aged thirteen, she left for Manchester to begin work as an apprentice dressmaker. She had encountered constant attempts to prevent her from indulging in 'idle reading'. Her difficulties were severe, since her parents would at first tolerate nothing but religious reading. Her crime was aggravated by the fact that she was a girl, who had no business thinking about educating or improving herself. Hilda's father blamed her for her refusal to accept her destiny. He was probably correct to see a connection between reading and Hilda's independence, but reading was a symptom, not a cause, of Hilda's desire for liberation.

Women of the middle or lower-middle classes rarely faced such obstacles as readers. Even if they could not afford to buy books regularly, they became regular customers at public lending libraries. This was especially true in large cities. In the popular libraries sponsored by the Société Franklin, from the end of the Second Empire onwards, women formed a small minority of provincial borrowers. In 1872, 94 per cent of library readers were men, in 1865, in 88 per cent. In the lending libraries of the Paris arrondissements, however, in the 1880s and 1890s, there was a substantial proportion of women readers – about half of the total in the first and eighth arrondissements (the Louvre and the faubourg St Honoré), and about one-third in Batignolles. Unemployed women, described by librarians as propriétaires or rentières, reinforced the demand for novels and recreational reading in the late nineteenth-century lending libraries.

As never before, the female reader compelled recognition, from novelists and publishers, from librarians, and from parents keen to discourage time-wasting or to protect their daughters from imaginative fancy or erotic stimulation. She appeared more and more frequently in literary and pictorial representations of reading.

The female reader was a recurrent subject for nineteenth-century painters like Manet, Daumier, Whistler and Fantin-Latour. Fantin-Latour's female readers read alone and in peace, completely absorbed in their books. In Whistler's versions of readers, again usually female, books are never quite as absorbing as the pink-covered review is for the reader in Fantin-Latour's Portrait de Victoria Dubourg (1873). But Whistler did paint his half-sister reading at night, with lamp and cup of coffee beside her. This was a modern portrayal of reading, and one in a bourgeois setting (Reading by Lamplight, 1858). In general, though, Whistler's readers recline in languid poses, like his wife, lying in bed with a book on her lap in The Siesta.

Manet tended to distinguish very clearly between male and female reading practices. In his Liseur of 1861, the artist Joseph Gall is painted in the style of a Tintoretto self-portrait, deep in meditation over a large and heavy tome. He is a bearded, paternal figure, engaged in serious and erudite reading.

Manet's La Lecture de l'illustré of 1879, however, presented a different, and modern view of the female reader. A young girl, elegantly dressed, is sitting outside a café, casually flipping through the pages of an illustrated magazine. She reads alone, without concentration, and purely for entertainment, her eyes and attention wandering towards the street scene in front of her. At the same time, she is close to a common stereotype of the female reader, destined to be an eternal consumer of light, trivial and romantic reading matter.

The realist Bonvin painted peasant women, nuns and servant girls bending silently over large quarto illustrated volumes. His subjects have often interrupted their work to read, since they are often still dressed in apron and white cap, or have purposefully rolled up their sleeves (Femme lisant, 1861, and La Lecture, 1852). The inspiration of the Dutch masters is evident in Bonvin's thick-textured garments and in his use of light and shade. His art, however, has a quality of reportage. He often painted his working-class readers from behind, as though he was peeping over their shoulder, without disturbing their evident concentration. He painted as an observer capturing a slice of popular life. His women are very private readers – the maid reading her employer's letters could not be otherwise (La Servante indiscrete, 1871). They read as a respite from their labour. They read alone, and they are almost always female.

Although Fantin-Latour often represented the act of reading as an element of female companionship in bourgeois households, the painted image of the woman reader was increasingly that of a solitary individual. Reading aloud, in contrast, was a practice more common to the male society of the pub or the workshop. The female readers of the nineteenth century can be associated with the development of silent,
individual reading, which relegated oral reading to a world that was disappearing. Perhaps the female reader was more than this: a pioneer of modern notions of privacy and intimacy.

The Child as a Reader: From Classroom Learning to Reading for Pleasure

The expansion of primary education in nineteenth-century Europe encouraged the growth of another important sector of the reading public: the children. For much of the century, though, educational provision remained rudimentary. In France, the Guizot Law of 1833 indicated a trend, but did not bring about an immediate transformation in primary education. Not until the Ferry reforms of the 1880s in France, and the 1870 Education Act in England and Wales, was primary education in any sense universal. These developments had important repercussions for reading and publishing. Children's magazines and other literature blossomed, and appealed to the pedagogical concerns of educated families. The demand for school texts began to assume a larger share of the book market, helping to make the fortune of publishers like Hachette.

In France, free, universal primary education was not available until the 1880s. The educational reforms of Bonaparte had been directed principally at secondary education, and thus had little impact outside the ranks of the bourgeoisie. The Guizot Law of 1833 laid down a blueprint for a primary school in every municipality in France, but it was some time before this goal was achieved. The number of primary schools in existence certainly rose after 1833, but it had already begun to increase in response to demand in the 1820s.

Setting up a school was only the first step; the largest problem was to persuade the local inhabitants to attend. In 1836, only 8 per cent of children in the Dordogne attended school; in 1863, the attendance rate in the Vienne was only 6 per cent. Even in rural communes where a primary school existed, it would be completely deserted at harvest time. A survey carried out in 1863 revealed that almost a quarter of French children in the nine to thirteen age-group never attended school, and that a third of the rest attended only for six months in the year. It need hardly be said that figures like this apply only to boys' schooling.

School equipment was rudimentary. Often schools had no tables and no books. Frequently, there was not even a classroom either. Guizot's inspectors found that the school in Lons-le-Saunier, for instance, was also used as an armoury and as a public dance-hall. Elsewhere, lessons were held in the teacher's house, where he might have the catechism recited while he prepared his dinner. Many schools were damp, badly lit and poorly ventilated. In the Meuse, one inspector was shocked to find that the teacher's wife had just given birth in the classroom.

The teachers relied on collecting fees from parents. This was not an easy task. Some teachers were paid in food, or were forced to take supplementary jobs as grave-diggers or choirmasters. The lack of qualified personnel put an intolerable burden on urban schools. In Montpellier, in 1833, there were between 100 and 220 students per class. In this overcrowded situation, the system of mutual education was popular. The eldest and, it was assumed, the best student was appointed monitor, and entrusted with the instruction of his peers.

In Britain, as in France, educational opportunities for working-class children were sparse and unreliable for most of the nineteenth century. Only with the Education Acts of 1870, 1876 and 1880 did it become compulsory to attend school, at least up to the age of ten. Even until 1880, the decision to fine reluctant parents was left to the discretion of local authorities. The normal age of apprenticeship was fourteen, but this required an initial payment which not everyone could afford. Many had abandoned schooling long before this age. They had started work as errand-boys or farm-hands as soon as practical, which usually meant at any time after their eighth birthday. The education of the working-class child was always secondary to the needs of the family economy.

Tom Mann, future labour leader and trade unionist, continued a family tradition typical of coal-mining communities. In 1865, at the age of nine, he started work in a colliery farm, after only three years of formal schooling. His mother was dead, and his father a colliery clerk. Family survival depended on the sacrifice of his school years.

In the countryside, a range of seasonal activities made schooling an intermittent affair. As late as 1898, Her Majesty's Inspector De Sausmarez commented that:

In addition to the regular harvest, children are employed in potato-digging, pea-picking, hopping, blackberrying and nutting, and fruit and daffodil gathering, and where... a boy can earn ten shillings in one week in picking blackberries, it is not surprising if his parents consider him more profitably employed than in struggling with the analyses of sentences.

In the north of England, where agricultural wages were higher, this was less of a problem.

The British example shows that those taught in the mutual or monitory system learned to read according to a rigorous discipline, and under strict religious supervision. The Lancaster schools, supported by the Dissenters, and promoted by the British and Foreign School Society,
were outstripped by the Anglican schools, which followed the similar Bell system. In both, teachers were trained only superficially, but they were entrusted with the instruction of their leading pupils, or monitors, who led their classes. The monitors, often aged no more than thirteen, might each be responsible for between ten and twenty children, giving them tasks and maintaining discipline. In Lancaster schools, each pupil had a number, and they were marched to their desks in military fashion. In 1846 a government-sponsored system of teacher training was inaugurated, which began to supplant the monitors.

Beginners started to read and write in a sand-tray, before progressing to slates. To avoid the expense of books, children learned to read from cards. In large groups, they were made to chant syllables, words and sentences ‘as if they were poetry’, as one student recalled. Children spent hours copying letters and words, to perfect their handwriting. Teachers were especially well trained in syntax and etymology, and the children were never required to compose anything original. As they learned to recognize individual words from cards, they learned to read without ever having touched a book. Reading lessons insisted on the mechanical memorization of a few texts – those which inspectors would later use to test the child’s reading competence. Reading thus demanded grim patience and endlessly repetitive exercises. Most children must have regarded it as a miserable experience. So, too, did reformers like Matthew Arnold, who later campaigned for a more ‘humanizing’ form of instruction.

‘Reading is a key to the treasures of Holy Writ,’ pronounced an Oxfordshire vicar in 1812, before insisting that the teaching of writing and arithmetic might dangerously encourage the career expectations of the rural poor. In mutual schools, even arithmetic was taught in a religious context. In 1838 the Central Society for Education recommended mathematical examples on the following model: ‘There were twelve apostles, twelve patriarchs and four evangelists; multiply the patriarchs and the apostles together and divide by the evangelists.’

Teaching the young to read had to be compatible with religious orthodoxy and the continued inculcation of social subordination. For T. B. Macaulay in 1847,

The statesman may see, and shudder as he sees, the rural population growing up with as little civilization, as little enlightenment as the inhabitants of New Guinea, so that there is at every period a risk of a jacquerie.

In English village schools, seven-year-old girls were caned for not curtseying to the squire’s wife or the vicar’s wife. The monitory schools thus aimed at mass literacy, combined with the kind of obedience and regular work discipline needed for nineteenth-century capitalist society.

They were not necessarily successful. In working-class areas of East London, Sunday schools were more popular than monitory schools, because they were cheap, familiar and well integrated into the neighbourhood. So too, were dame-schools, where the rudiments of reading and writing were taught informally, in the homes of local women often accused by the authorities of being no more than child-minders. In dame-schools, religious instruction was almost completely absent. In spite of the effort made by London’s monitory schools, the attendance at the monitory school in Bethnal Green in the early 1820s was only 21 per cent of its capacity. Furthermore, in 1812, 20 per cent of the poor of Spitalfields confessed to having no religious beliefs at all, and nearly half of them possessed no Bible.

Learning to read and write from the Bible was common practice in Protestant countries in the nineteenth century. There was an increasing demand, however, for a more secular pedagogical literature, which publishers rushed to satisfy. In France, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century authors still provided the standard texts recommended to children. The educational market, for example, helps to account for the position of La Fontaine’s Fables at the top of the bestseller lists in at least the first half of the nineteenth century. Between 1816 and 1850, the Bibliographie de France recorded 240 editions of La Fontaine, and probably close to 750,000 copies were produced in this period.

Robinson Crusoe enjoyed a global popularity, and was produced in various versions adapted to the needs of children of different ages. The same was true of Buffon’s Histoire naturelle, which appeared as Le Petit Buffon and Buffon des enfants. The best-selling Voyage du jeune Anacharsis en Grecque, by the abbé Barthélemy, first published in 1788, was the young student’s guide to ancient Greek civilization. The author, a historian of antiquity and a connoisseur of ancient languages, had known the art critic Winckelmann, and was an expert numismatist. The fictional journey taken by Anacharsis served as a vehicle for a discussion of Greek art, religion and science in the period of Philip of Macedon. In the course of his trip through the islands, the hero has conversations with philosophers, and observes a wide range of Greek institutions. This book was often abridged; it was especially popular in the 1820s.

The emergence of a flourishing industry in children’s literature was part of the process Philippe Ariès has called the ‘invention of childhood’ – the definition of childhood and adolescence as discrete phases of life with unique problems and needs. In the first part of the nineteenth century, however, the specific needs of the child-reader were recognized only for the purpose of imposing a strictly conventional moral code. Much of early nineteenth-century children’s literature was therefore rigorously didactic.
Bérenger’s *La Morale en action*, for example, had eighty editions listed by the *Bibliographie de France* for 1816–60, and it was regularly reprinted throughout the century. Caron’s Amiens edition had 137 reprints between 1810 and 1899. The work, adopted by secondary schools, had as its subtitle ‘Faits mémorables et anecdotes instructives’. It was a compilation of short moral tales, usually about little children.

The stories had exotic settings to capture the young imagination, and they all had a happy, moral ending. They advanced a chiefly secular morality, emphasizing kindness to animals, courage, honesty and fidelity. They warned against avarice and gambling, and like most children’s literature of the period, stressed family solidarity. Many stories in *La Morale en action* featured wealthy merchants, and praised the utility of commerce, while condemning ostentatious wealth and reckless social climbing. *La Morale en action* carried a traditional message, transposed into a bourgeois setting, in which Catholicism played an unobtrusive role.

Forms of children’s literature also began to prosper and develop by stimulating young appetites for fantasy and magic, and among these were the increasingly popular fairy-tales. Fairy-tales underwent a constant process of transformation by authors and publishers, as they were rewritten, edited, cut or reinvented to suit readers of different ages and different moral standards. Fairy-tales are texts without texts, because they have always been part of a complex interchange between high literature and an ancient oral tradition. They are not only texts without texts, but almost texts without authors: the stories are familiar to all, but every version may be different. The peasant folk-tales of the past were universally re-baptized ‘fairy-tales’ by the romantic nineteenth century: a change which signified their importance as literature destined for the young. Like many other aspects of traditional folk culture, fairy-tales were ‘infantilized’. In their reading tastes, children were becoming the peasants of the twentieth century.

Perrault’s tales had drawn both on erudite texts and on oral tradition, but had been recast to point a contemporary moral, and conform to standards of *bienveillance*. The tales had been sanitized, cured of impropriety, coarseness or overt sexuality, to meet the demands of polite seventeenth-century society. This process of textual transformation continued.

Publishers sweetened the folk-tales they inherited for nineteenth-century children. The second part of *La Belle au bois dormant*, dealing with the ogress, was often suppressed by the end of the century, so that the marriage of the prince and La Belle becomes the ending.

*Little Red Riding Hood*, to take another example, had always posed a problem for moralists. It could be interpreted as a cautionary tale, and modern Freudians have read it as a warning to young girls against erotic temptations posed by wolf-like sexual predators. It was, however, the only one of Perrault’s tales which did not have a happy ending. In the seventeenth century, popular publishers had already amended Perrault’s ending, in order to punish the wolf. Many variations appeared for the endings of fairy-tales like this one, including the appearance of the friendly, paternal woodcutter beloved of the Grimm brothers. Perrault’s tales thus survived, but not always in the version that he had given them. Independent oral versions coexisted with nineteenth-century texts of fairy-tales. In the oral versions of *Le Petit Chaperon rouge* collected by nineteenth- and twentieth-century folklorists, only seven out of thirty-five French versions had a happy ending. Perrault’s versions appeared much more frequently in oral tales after Perrault was selected as a primary school text in France in 1888. Once again, therefore, the ‘literary’ fairy-tale, having drawn on popular oral tradition, was influencing and contaminating what remained of that folk culture.

The brothers Grimm, whose first collection was published in 1812, also claimed to tap an oral, peasant-based tradition. They responded to the romantic period’s desire to give Germany a unique folk culture and a national literature. In practice, however, their sources were neither peasant in origin nor exclusively German: they consisted of their close circle of friends and relatives in Hesse, many of whom were of French Huguenot descent, and familiar with the tales of Perrault.

The impact of the Grimms on this corpus of children’s literature was to soften the theme of conflict between child and parent. They could not tolerate the expulsion of Hansel and Gretel from their home by both parents. A sympathetic father was introduced; and in the fourth edition of their stories in 1840, the children’s mother became a stepmother. This assured that no natural parents appeared malevolent in the story.

Stories which suggested that crime paid, like *Puss-in-Boots*, were omitted from their anthology. They introduced more fairy-tale clichés – friendly hunters, beautiful princesses and the fairies themselves, who populated this sugary and predictable world. At the same time, brutality was intensified against the villains of the tales. Rumpelstiltskin thus met a violent death, instead of flying away on a spoon. The Grimms thereby reinforced the moral message and family values. In addition, they interpolated several religious references. Hansel and Gretel did not, in the Grimms’ version, rely entirely on their own ingenuity to escape the dangers that trapped them: instead, they appealed to God. In the fifth edition of the stories, in 1843, the wicked witch was described as ‘godless’ for good measure.

The Grimms were hailed as the inventors of a national literary monument. They had successfully adapted for children the traditions they
inherited and discovered. At the same time, the Grimm adapted themselves, reworking their stories from one edition to another. The literature of fairy-tales, like the popular culture in which they had once been embedded, was never fixed or static. It was a dynamic body of texts, always open to assimilation and contamination, by new publishers, new fashions and the perceived needs of new audiences.

Advances in lithography permitted a new scope and inventiveness for publishers of the elementary ABCs studied by Sé golène Le Men. These reading primers were destined chiefly for domestic consumption; their leading illustration might depict an idealized scene in which young children gather around their mother's knee to study the ABC. (In spite of such propaganda by publishers, learning to read took place more and more in the classroom rather than at home.)

The pedagogical technique of illustrated ABCs was usually a linear one. In other words, the infant began at the letter A, and worked alphabetically through a series of examples to Z. He or she would, as at school, learn first the shape of individual letters, then syllables and would finally recognize entire words. The lavish illustrations could be used to recapitulate each lesson, and test the student on what had been learned. The illustration, in other words, had an important role in the memorizing process. Sometimes the image accompanied a text, but remained separated from it. At other times, more inventive visual techniques were adopted: text was superimposed on illustration, for example, or perhaps the text itself was transformed into an image. To delight the infant further, individual letters were given human form, dancing, bending, or falling into their place in an animated anthropomorphic alphabet.

For older students, a children's press emerged. In 1857, Hachette launched La Semaine des enfants, costing only ten centimes for an issue of eight pages, including the novels of the comtesse de Ségur as feuilletons. In 1864, Hetzel created the Magasin d'éducation et de récréation, which ran to thirty-two pages for fifteen centimes, and was to include many Jules Verne novels.

Le Magasin d'éducation et de récréation was to appear twice per month from 1864 to 1915. Its authors tried to remain neutral in politics and religion, but family solidarity and an underlying French patriotism were constant themes. The periodical catered to a bourgeois audience, which proved very susceptible to the formulas of authors like Jules Verne – his faith in science and his heroes who were models (mostly Anglo-Saxon models) of self-control and self-discipline. The tone was secular and republican, but it remained socially conservative.

For Hetzel, the Magasin d'éducation et de récréation had a dual responsibility to amuse and to instruct. The cover itself announced this ambiguity of intention. The plump infant illustrated there, with spectacles and a paper knife, already has the reading manner of an adult. This was to be serious literature, but at the same time, literature for children. Hetzel himself advertised Jules Verne's stories as works with a serious scientific purpose, and claimed that they demonstrated the power of science and human energy to overcome all adversity. His publicity was idealistically aimed at the family as a whole, envisaging 'la lecture en commun fait au coin du feu.' Even so, his discourse on Verne emphasized his pedagogic value, and invited a scientific and positivist reading of Les Voyages extraordinaires.

Neither Verne himself nor his illustrators fully echoed these sentiments. Verne treated topical scientific themes, in geology, astronomy and exploration, but at the same time he invented a new kind of adventure novel for adolescents. A dichotomy of aims potentially existed in Verne's novels, in which the spirit of fantasy and adventure struggled to transcend their scientific and pedagogical purpose. For Isabelle Jan, this created the profound misunderstanding which lay at the heart of the relationship between Verne and his publisher Hetzel.

This contrast is much more plausible if the illustrators of Le Magasin d'éducation et de récréation are considered, as well as the publisher and authors. The engravings provided by Bennett and Riou for Verne's stories were an integral part of the magazine and of the subsequent novels. They stress the action of the plot and all that is fantastic in Verne's detailed descriptions of natural phenomena. The composition often centres on a bright nucleus of light in the foreground, but they are engravings with great depth, which lead the reader further into a world of mystery. They stress movement and adventure, and their purpose is imaginative rather than educational. Riou exploited the shipwrecks, tempests and maelstroms of Verne's imagination, without making them part of a geography lesson. Riou's illustrations tended to suggest not human mastery of the elements, but rather man's fragility in the face of powerful natural forces. Perhaps this served to enhance all the more the sang-froid of the Vernian hero. At any rate, his illustrations offered adolescents an alternative reading to that proposed by Hetzel's advertising. While Riou invited a youthful reader to imagine Verne's fiction as pure adventure, Hetzel invited a different, more utilitarian view from the adults who were, after all, the ones who paid the subscriptions.

The Working Classes: Prescribed Reading, Improvised Reading

The new readers of the nineteenth century also included the lower-middle classes, aspiring artisans and the white-collar workers who swelled the
clientele of lending libraries everywhere. Public lending libraries were especially well-advanced in Britain. Legislation of 1850 gave local councils the right to levy one penny in local taxation to finance library facilities. This gave Great Britain its distinctively decentralized public library system, and by 1980, there were 553 municipal libraries in the country. In 1902, Leeds, with a population of 400,000, boasted a central library, and fourteen branches open all day, with lending and newspaper rooms. This fast development of public libraries in Britain was a product of dense urbanization and a degree of administrative decentralization unmatched on the European continent.41

Public lending libraries had a philanthropic and a political purpose. Like factory schools, they were instruments of social control, designed to incorporate a sober working-class élite into the value system of the ruling classes. Charles Dickens, opening the Manchester Library in 1852, saw libraries as a guarantee of social harmony. Dickens expected to hear from the working man

the solid and nervous language to which I have often heard such men give utterance to the feelings of their breasts, how he knows that the books stored here for his behoof will cheer him through many of the struggles and toils of his life, will raise him in his self-respect, will teach him that capital and labour are not opposed, but are mutually dependent and supporting (hear, hear and applause), will enable him to tread down blinding prejudice, corrupt misrepresentation, and everything but the truth, into the dust (applause).42

As Dickens himself was well aware, there was considerable reader resistance to the libraries' attempts to provide moral and edifying literature. Instead of attracting working-class readers, lending libraries in Britain and France catered rather for women, students and white-collar workers. These new workers overwhelmingly demanded recreational literature, in preference to practical manuals and works of instruction.

There was nevertheless a great demand for continuing adult education, although workers in France often felt this was thwarted by clerical interference and short library opening hours. In 1862 a group of bronze workers, returning from the London Exhibition, complained that the arts relied too heavily on mythological and allegorical subject matter, and the love intrigues of gods and heroes, 'ne relevant presque toujours que de la ruse, de la force, quand ils ne sont pas équitablement incestueux'.43 French national history, they claimed, was a better field for subjects which would encourage the intellectual development of ordinary Frenchmen. A section of the working class therefore rejected a culture which fed them only religious history and antique mythology.

Middle-class library reformers continued to recommend the classics to working-class readers. When Agricol Perdiguier compiled a list of basic books for a workers' library in 1857, many of his selections reflected this choice.44 His list included Homer and Virgil, the Bible, Fénélon, Corneille, Moléire, Racine and La Fontaine. This would have pleased the liberal library reformers of the Société Franklin. He went further, however, in insisting on some history of the French Revolution, Eugène Sue's Mystères de Paris, Hugo's Notre-Dame de Paris, and Sand's Le Compagnon de la tour de France.

The popular reader, often patronizingly known as 'le grand enfant', had a mind of his own. A lithographer, Girard, set up a bibliothèque populaire in the third arrondissement of Paris, and tried to evade municipal surveillance for as long as possible. At Le Creusot in 1869, one twenty-eight-year-old worker, Dumay, formed a bibliothèque démocratique which organized support for a republican candidate in 1869, and for a 'no' vote in the 1870 plebiscite.45 Two popular libraries had been set up in the industrial city of St Étienne in 1866, which the city notables and clerical élite attempted to bring under control.46 The workers' choice of literature was offensive, because it included Voltaire and Rousseau, as well as George Sand and Eugène Sue, who were accused of attacking marriage and justifying suicide and adultery. Rabelais was considered a dangerous author, as were Michelet for La Sorcière, Renan for La Vie de Jésus and Lamennais for Les Paroles d'un croyant. Enfantin, Louis Blanc, Fourier and Proudhon also had their place in these workers' libraries, and suggest that working-class readers struggled to form their own literary culture, free of bourgeois, bureaucratic or Catholic control.

A gradual reduction in the working day allowed greater opportunities for reading among the working classes. In England, a fourteen-hour day was commonplace in the early nineteenth century, but by 1847, the textile industry had won a ten-hour day. By the 1870s, London artisans normally worked a fifty-four-hour week. In Germany, on the other hand, a reduction of daily working hours to twelve was achieved very slowly after 1870. In 1891, the maximum working day for German women was limited by law to eleven hours. Shortly before the First World War, the Reich Statistical Office determined that of 1.25 million workers whose conditions were regulated, 96 per cent worked fewer than ten hours, although only 38 per cent worked fewer than nine hours.47 In iron and steel works a double-shift system still operated, which necessitated a twelve-hour day.

These conditions explain why leisure was seen principally in terms of physical recuperation, and why, when asked what they did in their leisure time, German workers almost invariably thought of Sundays.
Although they enjoyed reading, their favourite occupation, according to the Verein für Sozialpolitik, was going for walks in the fresh air.

The daily burden of work dictated reading habits and library borrowings. In the winter, borrowings from German libraries with a high proportion of workers rose regularly, while in the summer months it declined. In many occupations, the winter working day was shorter. In times of slump and unemployment, workers also tended to borrow more library books.48

The German Social Democratic Party gave a high priority to workers' education, in the spirit of Karl Liebknecht's slogan, coined in 1872, 'Knowledge is Power! - Power is Knowledge!'. The party's education committee recommended titles of books for lending libraries, and published ten-pfennig booklets, written in popular style, to help with the interpretation of plays and operas. These, however, enjoyed little success.

Employers, too, made their own attempts to control the leisure pursuits of a new, lower-class reading public. The industrialists of eastern France, for example, played a major role in the movement to create popular lending libraries at the end of the Second Empire. In Germany there are some striking examples of successful factory libraries. In the book hall of the Rhine Steel Works in Duisburg-Meiderich, the proportion of workers who asked for readers' cards rose from 17 per cent of all workers in 1908 to 47 per cent in 1911. The Krupp Company library in Essen was an exceptional example of a factory library. Established in 1899, the Krupp library had over 61,000 volumes by 1909. By that year, 50 per cent of the Krupp work-force borrowed books, mainly from the very richly provided belles-lettres section.49 This was regarded as one of the finest lending libraries in Germany.

Employers and library reformers hoped that by providing suitable literature, and by encouraging the reading habit, they could soften social tensions. Working-class readers, it was hoped, could be weaned away from drink and from dangerous literature with tendencies towards socialism, excessive superstition or obscenity. A range of useful literature, to promote 'rational recreation', would incorporate the more intelligent members of the working class into a consensus of bourgeois values. Liberal philanthropy of this kind seemed to be working in Britain and the United States. Continental observers were impressed by the apparent quiescence of Lancashire operatives during the cotton famine; liberal philanthropists believed there was a lesson to be learned here. Perhaps popular philanthropists believed there was a lesson to be learned here. Perhaps popular libraries could contribute towards social stability.

Readers, however, resisted the diet of useful and moral literature which they were offered. A model library catalogue produced by the Société Franklin in 1864 recommended that two-thirds of library stock should consist of works of instruction.50 The German Social Democrats, at the turn of the century, promoted proletarian education by means of libraries oriented towards the social sciences. Readers might begin to use popular libraries for entertaining fiction, but they would be expected to 'advance' to the classics of socialism, Kautsky and eventually Das Kapital. The Dresden librarian Griesbach declared that the main task of the workers' librarian was to 'lead the reader from reading entertainment to reading non-fiction material'.51 In Britain, in the 1830s, both Utilitarians and Evangelicals urged the provision of 'improving' literature for working-class readers. With these severely educational aims in mind, the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge launched its Library of Useful Knowledge, concentrating on biography and natural science.

This educational optimism, however, was doomed to disappointment, as working-class readers overwhelmingly chose the recreational literature offered by lending libraries, whether they were employers' or trade union institutions. By the 1840s, the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge was bankrupt. In German workers' libraries, there was an enormous discrepancy between the actual tastes of readers and the expectations of the Social Democratic Party. Of almost 1.1 million borrowings from German workers' libraries recorded between 1908 and 1914, 63 per cent were in the belles-lettres category. Another 10 per cent were from the youth section, which included fairy-tales, children's tales and humorous fiction. The same pattern is found in Vienna, where fewer than 2 per cent of readers asked for social science literature at the Arbeiterzentralbibliotek de Wien-Favoriten in 1909-10.52

In France, too, popular practices failed to conform to the norms of librarians. In the 1880s and 1890s, more than half the borrowings from Parisian municipal libraries were of novels (see tables 1 and 2).53 The librarians sponsored by the Société Franklin complained regularly that their customers rejected serious works in favour of Alexandre Dumas or Hugo's Notre-Dame de Paris.

One stratum of the working class, however, did embark on the hard struggle to emancipate itself from ignorance and dependence. Webb estimates over two-thirds of the British working class could read before 1870.54 Their thirst for knowledge was only partly satisfied by the Mechanics' Institutes, which spread useful knowledge and moral improvement to an artisan élite.

Workers' autobiographies describe their determination to overcome poverty and material hardship, in order to understand their world. Thomas Wood, a Yorkshire mechanic, rented a newspaper for a penny a week when he was sixteen, after the paper was a week old, and he read it by firelight because he could not afford a candle. It was
significant that the paper he read was the radical Chartist *Northern Star*. Winifred Foley, general maid, was beaten by her nonagenarian mistress for reading *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Maxim Gorky, who had no formal education, carried on reading, although he was working fourteen hours a day, in a bakery in Kazan in 1887 – one of the places he ironically called *My Universities*.

Thomas Cooper, shoemaker, Chartist and public lecturer, wrote of his own attempts at self-education:

> I thought it possible that by the time I reached the age of 24 I might be able to master the elements of Latin, Greek, Hebrew and French; might get well through Euclid, and through a course of algebra; might commit the entire *Paradise Lost*, and 7 of the best plays of Shakespeare to memory; and might read a large and solid course of history, and of religious evidences; and be well acquainted also with the current literature of the day. I failed considerably, but I sped on joyfully.  

Cooper was an honourable failure, reading every morning from 3 or 4 to 7 a.m., and also during meals, with a book propped up in front of him, and then from 7 p.m. until too exhausted to go on, always reciting some text while working at his cobbler’s stall. In 1828, aged twenty-one, Cooper had a complete physical breakdown, and was confined to bed for several months.

The profusion of working-class autobiographies like Cooper’s in the nineteenth century is one clear indication of the growing self-awareness and mastery of the printed word among individual workers who had experienced little formal tuition. Proletarian autobiographers were an articulate élite. In spite of their exaggerated modesty and humble origins, most of them wrote of personal struggles which had led to success. Some had become trade unionists, others journalists; most described the hard road towards individual and collective emancipation. To some extent, therefore, their writing can be situated within the ambiguous ideology of ‘self-improvement’ – ambiguous because it was expounded by middle-class writers, promising upward social mobility which would blur or cross class boundaries.

Middle-class radicals believed that the pursuit of knowledge was open to all who were ready to apply a little self-discipline. Thomas Cooper had accepted this aim, but it led him to imprisonment in Stafford Gaol in the Chartist crisis of 1842. Nevertheless, a self-educated working-class intelligentsia emerged, which recognized the importance of the written word. To this group fell the enormous burden of elaborating and disseminating a working-class political ideology. They followed a long tradition of serious reading in the British labouring community, which fed on Milton and Bunyan in the seventeenth century and Paine and Volney among radical texts of the eighteenth century.

Reading was central to the ethos of self-improvement. Working-class autobiographers rarely failed to give a description of their reading, and many of them outlined the detailed reading programmes which had guided and improved them. When the Lancashire hand-loom weaver Samuel Bamford discovered what he called ‘the–blessed habit of reading’, he set out on a course which led him to parliamentary reform agitation, journalism and later to a career as a public poetry reader.

> ‘What a wasted life is his’, wrote the cabinet-maker James Hopkinson, ‘who has no favourite book, no store of thought or happy recollection (sic), of what he has done, experienced or read’.  

The eager search for
book knowledge was vital to the intellectual emancipation on which political action was based; it also provided the knowledge and discipline required for moral, rational self-improvement. Willie Thom read Walter Scott, ‘the Wizard of Waverley’, in his moments of relaxation as a young factory weaver in Aberdeen in 1814. Books, he wrote, provided ‘glimpses, — the only glimpses afforded us of true, and natural, and rational existence’.58

These proletarian readers had quite distinctive methods of literary appropriation. Although many of them attended formal school, their attendance was usually brief and irregular. The need to earn a living as soon as possible, or to travel in search for work, precluded sustained periods of schooling. The autobiographers were on the whole autodidacts, men who had taught themselves most of what they knew. ‘My education was very meagre,’ wrote the Chartist John James Bezer; ‘I learnt more in Newgate than at my Sunday school’.59 Samuel Bamford and many others wrote works whose titles included the proud phrase ‘Written by Himself’, to stress their independence and the remarkable nature of their self-taught achievement.

Educational deprivation led autodidacts to treat schooling sometimes with abuse, sometimes with exaggerated respect. The rich ambivalence of the autodidact’s response to formal education is exposed in Maxim Gorky’s classic account, My Universities. Gorky’s title is ironic: his real teachers, he claimed, were his companions and his various work-places up and down the Volga, the drunken labourers, fruit-growers, bakers and itinerants he encountered on his journeys through Russia. He learned, too, from clandestine political meetings addressed by students and travelling lecturers, improvised in backrooms and private lodgings, where Gorky could satisfy his thirst for knowledge and discussion. His attention wavered between these lectures and the attractions of the Volga.

I did not find J. S. Mill very fascinating, and soon realized that I was very well acquainted with the basic principles of economics — I had learned them from direct experience of life and they were engraved on my skin... It was boring at those readings and I wanted to go off instead to the Tartar quarter, where good-hearted, friendly people lived their own pure and clean lives.60

He accused intellectuals of romanticizing the brutal, ignorant life of the people of Russia, but he himself talked of ‘the heroic poetry of everyday life’ among the Volga navvies.

Gorky well knew, however, that he had more to learn than the navvies could teach him. He had travelled to Kazan in 1884, when he was still under twenty years old, specifically intending to obtain a place at university. He never succeeded, but his attitude to formal learning remained ambiguous, for he wrote: ‘I would have endured even torture in return for the happy opportunity of studying in a university.’61 Although he found the Kazan students patronizing, he respected their learning, and freely acknowledged the sincerity of their desire for change.

The autodidacts pursued their desire for study and self-improvement with a determination that was sometimes obsessive. Indeed, it had to be, if they were to overcome the immense material handicaps that stood in their way. Poverty, lack of time and lack of privacy made study impossible for all except the most dedicated.

Crammed housing conditions forced many working-class readers to take to the woods and fields. The English labourer-poet John Clare worked outdoors, composing his work secretly in the fields. He would hide behind hedges and dykes, to scribble down his thoughts on the crown of his hat.62 Lack of light was another problem in working-class homes, Windows were rare in early nineteenth-century England, and candles were expensive. For W. E. Adams, candles and rushlights ‘did scarcely more than make the darkness visible’. ‘It was almost as well’, he continued, ‘that the general body of the people could not read for persistent efforts to turn the advantage to account after sunset would almost certainly have ruined half the eyes of the country’.63 There was very little gas lighting in British working-class houses before 1850. The family of Jean-Baptiste Dumay, at Le Creusot, shared this difficulty. They could only afford to light their oil-lamp at the evening meal. Dumay used to read by the glow of the coal-stove.

Industrialization was to produce a very clear distinction between leisure and work. The discipline of industrial labour and the regular rhythm of work it imposed made reading more difficult. It is no coincidence that the majority of autodidact autobiographers were craftsmen and artisans. Their work rhythm was irregular; it oscillated between slack intervals and very active periods; and it permitted impromptu holidays which became impossible for factory hands in the early phases of industrialization. According to William Aitken, ‘the hours of labour in cotton mills, when I was a piecer, were so protracted that improvement of the mind was almost an impossibility’.64 But the anonymous Stonemason, when employed as a roundsman, had taught the horse the route, and could read as he travelled.65

The literary culture of the autodidacts was of a specific kind. Although their early reading was frequently eclectic and indiscriminate, they tended to impose a stern discipline on their own reading. They confessed
to a ravenous appetite for literature of all sorts, which they admitted in retrospect was poorly directed. Thomas Cooper was also slightly ashamed to recall that he had ‘often diverged into miscellaneous reading’, by which he meant authors like Disraeli and Boswell, travel literature and the London Magazine. In Gorky’s case, this literary bulimia was extremely dangerous. In Tsarist Russia, ravenous and indiscriminate consumers of novels were bound to arouse police suspicion.

The autodidact’s aim, as William Lovett's autobiography eloquently proclaimed, was threefold: bread, knowledge and freedom. Self-improvement – material, moral and intellectual – was a very demanding objective. It required serious application and self-abnegation. Time had to be set aside for the acquisition of knowledge; money had to be saved for the purchase of books; sleep was sacrificed; health deteriorated, friendships were put at risk by the fervent determination to read and to know. The goal of self-improvement was often inspired by a Nonconformist Protestant faith; and it often went hand in hand with the taking of the ‘pledge’ to abstain from alcohol. This, too, was a sign of self-discipline and a desire to distinguish oneself from fellow-workers.

Reading, however, was a necessary instrument for self-education and self-mastery. The autodidacts’ reading was concentrated and purposeful. It was, in many ways, an ‘intensive’ mode of reading, relying heavily on repetition, recitation and oralization as aids to memory. Autodidacts had a specifically ardent and determined relationship with their texts. They read repetitively, closely rereading the few texts at their disposal and, in their own well-worn phrase, ‘committing them to memory’. They taught themselves through memorization, which often depended on reading and reciting aloud. Their relationship with the printed word occasionally resembled the ‘intensive’ mode of literary appropriation, encountered by historians in eighteenth-century Germany and Puritan New England.66

One distinguishing feature of the world of the ‘intensive’ reader was the frequency of reading aloud. Oralization was a very common way of absorbing the message of the Bible, and this was often how children were taught to read. John Buckmaster recalled that the Scriptures were read out morning and night by his grandmother.67 Alexander Murray, a young Scottish shepherd and future professor of oriental languages at Edinburgh, also learned to recite the Bible at an early age.68

Oral reading, however, occurred in secular, as well as religious, contexts. For Charles Shaw the potter, oralization added an essential dimension to the act of reading. As he remembered,

> no tea-meeting would have been complete without recitations . . . I began to enjoy the literary charms of certain recitations, not only when reciting them in public, but they sent their music through my daily drudgery. In the midst of this, when opportunity served, I recited a few verses or lines aloud, and found they were always more inspiring when I heard them than when I simply said them to myself.69

Reading aloud was an essential part of the culture of the work-place. In 1815 Thomas Carter worked for a tailor near Grosvenor Square, in London. He recalled:

> I became their news-purveyor; that is, I every morning gave them an account of what I had just been reading in the yesterday’s newspaper. I read this at a coffee-shop, where I took an early breakfast on my way to work.70

He read Cobbett’s Register, the Black Dwarf and the Examiner, leading radical titles of the turbulent period after the Napoleonic wars. Martin Nadaud had an almost identical experience in Paris in 1834: ‘Tous les matins’, he wrote, ‘on me demandait dans la salle du marché de vin de lire à haute voix le Populaire de Cabet.’71 He read Socialist brochures aloud to his comrades, and oral reading was thus an important part of working-class politicization and self-education.

George Seaton, an apprentice-saddler in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, read the Black Dwarf aloud to fellow-workers who gathered at the village cross of Bellingham for the purpose, as James Burn recalled of 1817.72 W. E. Adams remembered Sunday morning readings of O’Connor’s Northern Star in a local shoemaker’s kitchen.73 Perdiguier recalled oral reading of Racine and Voltaire among French carpenters in the early 1820s.74

The intense concentration required by the autodidact could sometimes only be achieved by a certain posture, and in the right surroundings. Thomas Carter needed a great deal of sensual stimulation. He usually read sitting on the floor in the ‘Oriental’, or tailor’s posture, in a vegetable store-room full of the aroma of herbs and onions, which he needed to stimulate his concentration.75

Whatever gestures or odours were needed to stimulate the brain, an effort of memory was required, and autodidact readers frequently began by memorizing parts of the Bible at home. Alexander Murray had to do this secretly, because as a child, he was not permitted to open or touch the family Bible. Nevertheless, he

> soon astonished all our honest neighbours with the large passages of Scripture I repeated before them. I have forgot too much of my biblical knowledge, but I can still rehearse all the names of the Patriarchs from Adam to Christ, and various other narratives seldom committed to memory.76
By the age of eleven, he boasted, his memory earned him the local reputation of ‘a living miracle’.

Thomas Cooper, however, whose assiduous reading programme has already been outlined, is a more striking example of the intense effort at memorization by recitation made by the autodidacts. Cooper employed every available moment to acquire learning. He worked from the early hours of the morning until too exhausted to go on, reading, reciting and memorizing poetry, or mathematical theorems for much of the day. He memorized Shakespeare, Milton, Coleridge and the Romantic poets by constant daily oral repetition.

Cooper was perhaps an extreme case: but many others appropriated their literary culture in a similar manner. Samuel Bamford, for example, read Homer ‘with an absorbed attention which soon enabled me to commit nearly every line to memory’. William Cobbett learned grammar by copying his textbook, learning it by heart, and repeating it to himself daily on sentry duty. Ebenezer Elliott, the ‘Corn-Law Rhymer’, knew the Bible by heart by the time he was twelve years old, and when he was sixteen, could recite Books 1, 2 and 6 of Paradise Lost.

The private memo-book or notebook was another intimate method of appropriating a literary culture and conducting a personal dialogue with the text. Samuel Bamford copied works of Milton, ‘and this I did’, he tells us, ‘not only on account of the pleasure which I felt in their repetition, and in the appropriation – so to speak – of the ideas, but also as a means for the improvement of my handwriting’. Cooper made notes on Gibbon and religious works as he read them, and recorded all his reading in a journal. Maxim Gorky used his notebook for writing down anything he could not understand, and Robert Owen, aged twelve, transcribed Seneca’s moral precepts, to ponder on solitary walks. The memo-book was thus not merely an aid to memory; it also served to conduct a personal debate with the text, to absorb it and refute it. It was an essential part of the process of self-education and self-improvement.

The working-class autodidacts thus adopted a style of intensive reading which was peculiar to their time and to their needs. It answered their serious purpose and determination to succeed with meagre resources.

The Persistence of Oral Reading

The peasantry was only partly integrated into the nineteenth-century European reading public. A recent oral history survey conducted in France suggested that, during the Belle Époque, all white-collar workers and 80 per cent of shopkeepers bought a daily newspaper. Two-thirds of urban workers interviewed bought a daily newspaper, but only one out of five peasants did so.

In the cities, the book had become an object of everyday consumption, but sections of the peasantry still belonged to a traditional mode of reading. For them, books were still respected and rare possessions, encountered most often in a religious context. They were the ‘generations of listeners’, who had not yet become ‘generations of readers’, for whom reading was often a collective experience, integrated into an oral culture.

Oral reading still persisted, in spite of the trend towards individual, silent reading. It was often encountered by Mayhew, the assiduous observer of London street life. Costermongers would persuade someone to read to them from an illustrated periodical or Sunday newspaper, being careful to save it afterwards to use as a wrapper for their merchandise. In London taverns Mayhew found young boys hired to recite the most popular scenes from Shakespeare. When the editor of the very bourgeois Sydney Gazette attacked his more plebeian rival, The Australian, in 1825, he ridiculed the way it was read aloud in a cramped settler’s hut, with the entire family and servants gathered together for the occasion, at the end of a long day’s labour.

On the streets of London, song-sellers sold song-sheets by the yard, chancers sang their ballads for sale, and others hawked parodies, satires and ‘gallows literature’, offering the ‘last confessions’ of condemned criminals. Much of this street literature was designed to be read or sung aloud.

Oral reading still survived, too, in middle-class circles. Kilvert, the diarist and Shropshire parson (with an erotic interest in the young girls of his parish), often visited his parishioners to read aloud to them. He participated in public recitals, or ‘penny readings’, at which ‘There were sixty people standing outside the school. They were clinging and clustering around the windows, like bees, standing on chairs, looking through the windows, and listening, their faces tier upon tier.’

This love of the recital of familiar pieces, of the orality and music of poetry, was part of a traditional, or ‘intensive’, relationship between the reader/listener and the printed word. This relationship was disappearing in the nineteenth century. Its passing was lamented by conservatives who regretted the way that individual, silent reading was dissolving traditional forms of sociability. The mellow atmosphere of Hans Thoma’s painting, Evening: The Artist’s Mother and Sister in the

New Readers in the Nineteenth Century

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*Garden* (1868), expresses this nostalgia. The mother reads, presumably from a Bible, to daughter and son, in a deliberately idealized image of two generations of German piety. This longing to put reading practices back, once again, into a religious and family context is a symptom of the nineteenth-century transition from 'intensive' to 'extensive' reading practices.
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Chapter 12  New Readers in the Nineteenth Century: Women, Children, Workers


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