

## **‘Folk stylistics’ and the history of reading: a discussion of method**

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### **Abstract**

The *Reading Experience Database 1450-1945* contains more than 20,000 pieces of evidence about reading habits and practices over five centuries, and of these, more than 1000 directly discuss the literary style of the works read, while others make indirect comments on style. This evidence shows literary critics and common readers alike commenting on issues of “good” or “imitable” style; describing how easy the work is to read aloud, recording their impressions of the “morality” of the style; identifying anonymous authors by their style; and making literary judgements on the basis of style. By tracing these remarks over a long historical period (1450 to 1945), we can reconstruct the prevailing stylistic concerns of individual readers and communities of readers, and test grand historical or literary narratives against the everyday experiences of common readers. This article focuses on the period 1800-1945, and considers the ways in which the historicist and evidence-based methods of the new sub-discipline of the history of reading might be used to complement traditional stylistic analyses and methods.

**Keywords:** *history of reading; style; nineteenth century; actual readers; hypothetical readers; reading aloud; morality in literature; affective fallacy; Jane Austen; Virginia Woolf*

### **Introduction**

What has the history of reading to do with stylistics? More than thirty years ago, Wolfgang Iser suggested that the meaning of a literary text could only be brought into being through a dynamic relationship between text and reader: ‘one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text’ (Iser, 1974: 274). Roland Barthes had previously espoused a more extreme position, claiming that an enduring literary work does not even exist until it is read, or – in Barthes’ terminology – ‘written’ by the reader (Barthes, 1971: *passim*)<sup>1</sup>. Theoretical positions that foreground the act of reading, such as those of Iser, Barthes, Stanley Fish and Hans Robert Jauss, combined with the burgeoning interest in the history of the material book over the past twenty years, have led inexorably to a focus on readers, both contemporary and historical. Reader-response theorists challenged literary critics to take the act of reading seriously, and, although for many years it was impossible to talk seriously about either authors or readers as *actual human beings* – in the

discipline of stylistics, for example, it has been a widely-accepted terminological principle that ‘It should always be borne in mind that “author” means “implied author” and “reader” means “implied reader”’ (Leech and Short, 1981: 262) – eventually a new sub-discipline, the history of reading, was born. This sub-discipline poses questions not only to literary theorists, but also to stylisticians: in part because many of the latter refer to or speculate about readers and reading (see Allington and Swann 2009), but more importantly because, when we are analysing the style of past works, it will clearly help us to avoid anachronism if we have some idea of how ‘style’ functioned and was understood at the time when those works were composed. We need to understand both the *habitus* and the habits of readers if we are to contextualise literature properly (see Bourdieu, 1979: 170-75 for a full discussion of *habitus*).

Historians of reading study actual (as opposed to ‘inscribed’ [Iser, 1974], ‘intended’ [Booth, 1961] ‘implied’ [Iser, 1974; Leech and Short, 1981], ‘ideal’ [Genette, 1972; Bakhtin, 1986] or ‘hypothetical’ [Fish, 1967]) readers, as well as the cultural, social, political and economic conditions surrounding the production and reception of books and texts. The discipline thus overlaps with scholarship on the sociology of taste. The history of reading uses a range of different methods, and encompasses a large variety of evidence, which divides broadly into two types: statistical evidence relating to the availability of books and texts to readers and readerships (see, for example, St Clair, 2006, and works on literacy, such as Cressy, 1980; Spufford, 1999; Vincent, 2000); and evidence that records individual or group reading experiences (see, for example, Baggerman, 1997; Brewer, 1996; Colclough, 2004; Grafton and Jardine, 1990; Pearson, 1999). Evidence of availability might consist of printers’, publishers’ or booksellers’ records, library subscription books, library catalogues, library loans registers, lists of censored works, auction catalogues and so on, as well as evidence about literacy rates. Evidence of reading experiences includes diaries, autobiographies, letters, marginalia and annotations, sworn testimony, commonplace books, reading notebooks, and official surveys, such as the Mass Observation project, now archived at Sussex University ([www.massobs.org.uk](http://www.massobs.org.uk)). In addition, fictional representations of reading constitute a type of evidence employed in the history of reading, although their use is somewhat contested. Literary criticism and stylistics also have a place in the history of reading. As Jauss puts it:

A literary work, even if it seems new, does not appear as something absolutely new in an informational vacuum, but predisposes its readers to a very definite type of reception by textual strategies, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics or implicit allusions. It awakens memories of the familiar, stirs particular emotions in the reader and with its ‘beginning’ arouses expectations for the ‘middle and end’, which can then be continued intact,

changed, re-oriented or even ironically fulfilled in the course of reading according to certain rules of the genre or type of text. (Jauss, 1970: 12)

By combining an analysis of the stylistic features of the text, the ‘textual strategies, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics or implicit allusions’ – *i.e.* what a text *itself* signals through its formal and linguistic qualities – with an understanding of the expectations that a reader brings *to* a text – that is, the cultural expectations, common in a given historical period, about what the genre of work, author or specific work in question is, does, or should be/do – we can begin to situate texts and their reception histories more precisely within a history of reading, and reverse the decontextualising assumptions of many ‘reader-response’ approaches.

Readers are, as countless critics have pointed out, as various as they are many, and each act of reading is different. A reader may respond completely differently to the same text on the second or subsequent reading, and many readers do not respond to texts in the ways that one might expect. It is impossible to reconstruct the expectations that every individual will bring to their reading experiences, because there will always be unanticipated, or unknown factors that influence readers and reading experiences. All that we can hope to do, therefore, is to take a broad view of the evidence within a historical period, and consider carefully what that evidence might mean.

One form of expectation that readers can be assumed to have brought to their reading of literary (and other) texts is an understanding of ‘style’, and there is in fact a great deal of available evidence regarding popular beliefs about style in different historical periods. By analogy with ‘folk linguistics’ – a term used ‘to refer to popular beliefs about language, many of which differ from (professional) linguistic understandings’ (Swann, Deumert, Lillis and Mesthrie, 2004: 112) – I term the study of these beliefs ‘folk stylistics’. This can be related to the work of Eugene Kintgen, who suggested that, using Fish’s (1980) model of interpretation, it should be possible ‘to reconstruct what stylistics would have been like in earlier periods’ (Kintgen, 1992: 93). Kintgen’s attempt to reconstruct the interpretative conventions of Elizabethan readers constructs, to use Jauss’s phrase, a ‘horizon of expectations’ (Jauss, 1970: 12) for the Elizabethan reader; in other words, Kintgen identifies the interpretative strategies that were familiar to Elizabethan readers, in this case through an analysis of their writings on language and style. Thus, in Kintgen’s essay, stylistics plays a part in the history of reading by showing us what an Elizabethan reader saw and valued in the style of the texts he read. My approach will differ from Kintgen’s in focusing primarily on the first-hand or ‘anecdotal’ writings of readers, rather than on

published treatises on style and language, but my aim is similar: to reconstruct and analyse the assumptions made by historical readers through a close study of their comments on literary works, and in so doing to suggest ways in which the future study of literary works might benefit from a consideration of some of the evidence used by historians of reading. This evidence can tell us not only about how past readers may have read the texts that interest us, and about why and how reactions to those texts have changed over time, but also about how those texts are likely to have been *written to be read*.

In this essay, I will discuss the stylistic preoccupations of readers in the period 1800-1945. I will focus on three specific issues – the value placed on works that are suitable for reading aloud during the nineteenth century; nineteenth-century confluences of style and morality; and the frequency with which readers respond to texts viscerally, rather than intellectually, throughout the period – in order to reconstruct, from the recorded responses of readers, the particular sorts of expectations (and prejudices) that they brought to the texts they encountered.<sup>ii</sup> My evidence derives from an AHRC-funded research project, the Reading Experience Database ([www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED](http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED) and [www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading](http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading)), which seeks to gather as much data as possible about the reading habits and practices of British readers and overseas visitors to Britain in the period 1450-1945, and makes this information available as an online resource.

## **1 Reading Aloud**

Dorothy Wordsworth's Grasmere journal for Sunday 6 December 1801 presents a fairly typical scene of reading throughout the nineteenth century: 'In the afternoon we sat by the fire: I read Chaucer aloud, and Mary [Wordsworth] read the first canto of *The Fairy Queen*' (Darbishire, 1958: 87). In the mid-century, on 31<sup>st</sup> December, 1854, George Eliot noted in her journal: 'Began Stahr's "Torso"... G [George Henry Lewes] read "Coriolanus". I read some of "Stahr" to him, but we found it too long winded a style for reading aloud' (Harris and Johnston, 1998: 41). A month later, Eliot recorded: 'Tried reading the 2nd part of *Faust* aloud, but gave it up, as it was too difficult for G. to follow it rapidly enough' (Harris and Johnston, 1998: 43). These pieces of first-hand evidence remind us of the importance of reading aloud throughout the nineteenth century, and prompt us to look again at the oral and aural features of texts written for a nineteenth-century audience. Eliot comments on the 'long winded' style of Adolf Stahr's *Torso: Kunst, Künstler, und Kunstwerken der Alten* (1854) precisely because the style makes it difficult to read aloud, while Goethe's *Faust* also suffers when judged by the

same criteria. Complicated syntactical structures and complex ideas characterise both these texts, to which is added the difficulty of reading in a foreign language. It is perhaps no wonder that Lewes found them hard to follow and Eliot laid them both aside; what is significant is the expectation that all texts, even difficult foreign-language ones, should be accessible to a listener when read aloud.

In the period under consideration, readers frequently comment on the quality both of the texts that are read aloud, and on the quality of the reading itself, and it is evident that reading aloud well was a skill to be nurtured. When his mother told Edward Bulwer Lytton that she did not like Jane Austen's novels, the explanation that immediately sprang to his mind was that she must have heard them incompetently read aloud:

You surprise me greatly by what you say of *Emma* and the other books. They enjoy the highest reputation, and I own, for my part, I was delighted with them. I fear they must have been badly read aloud to you. At all events, they are generally much admired, and I was quite serious in my praise of them. (Bulwer Lytton, 1913: 1:457)

Here it is possible to reconstruct something of the expectations of a reader coming to Jane Austen's novels in the 1830s: they 'enjoy the highest reputation', and 'are generally much admired'. It seems likely, therefore, that Elizabeth Lytton could have expected to be impressed by them, as her son was, and to be willing to praise them. Her dislike may be, in part, the result of disappointed expectations.

Bulwer Lytton's assumptions about the quality of the performance of reading aloud also point to some stylistic features of Austen's novels: they contain a high proportion of dialogue, as well as Austen's innovative use of free indirect speech, in which the voices of the characters can sometimes be heard through the narrator's supposedly neutral tones. Austen's novels were originally written to be read aloud within the family circle – family sources and Austen's own letters frequently refer to the fact that her compositions were read aloud in this way – and her mature novels, as well as the remaining juvenile 'effusions' bear the traces of this, being full of elliptical allusions, jokes, and an easy assumption that the audience will make the necessary connections between characters and ideas. Nonetheless, they are not easy to read aloud, demanding from the reader the ability to present the voices of a variety of different characters, as well as to recognise and deal with a slippery and complex narrative voice that does not consistently separate itself from the idioms and distinguishing voice-patterns (idiolects) of the characters. As Austen herself wrote of the first edition of *Pride and Prejudice*, 'a "said he" or a "said she" would sometimes make the Dialogue more immediately clear –

but “I do not write for such dull Elves/ As have not a great deal of Ingenuity themselves” (Le Faye, 1995: 202). Knowledge of the style of Austen’s novels, coupled with a recognition of the importance of reading aloud at this period thus allows us to contextualise Elizabeth Lytton’s response to Austen’s novels.

Like Austen, many nineteenth-century writers read their manuscripts aloud to family and friends in order to gauge audience reaction before publication. Dorothy Wordsworth’s journals record William frequently reading his poems – including ‘The Recluse’, ‘Peter Bell the Third’, ‘The Seven Sisters’, ‘Ruth’, ‘Point Rash Judgement’, ‘The Pedlar’ and ‘The Butterfly’ – aloud to her, and ‘Joanna’ and ‘The Firgrove’ to Coleridge. Coleridge read parts of ‘Christabel’ aloud to the Wordsworths on at least three occasions, and Dorothy Wordsworth’s diaries also record scenes of reading ‘together’ such poems as ‘The Pedlar’, ‘The Prelude’, the ‘Descriptive Sketches’, and the ‘Lyrical Ballads’, both before and after publication, and note occasions when she transcribed Wordsworth’s poems and then read them back to him (Darbishire, 1958: 27, 47, 48, 50, 57, 63, 66, 93, 104, 115, 118, 123, 127, 132). Recent scholarship has clearly established Dorothy’s role not only in transcribing, but also in revising and redrafting Wordsworth’s manuscript drafts, and it is probable that this process usually began with reading aloud, as this entry from the Grasmere Journal of 18 April 1802 suggests: “William met me at Rydale [...] We sate up late [...] He met me with the conclusion of the poem of the Robin [*i.e.* ‘The Robin and the Butterfly’]. I read it to him in bed. We left out some lines” (146). Wordsworth was not the only author to consider reading his manuscripts aloud to be a necessary trial before submitting the manuscript for publication; many writers throughout the nineteenth century and beyond followed this practice. Robert Louis Stevenson’s stepdaughter writes:

After lunch was always a pleasant time at Vailima [...] that was the time Louis usually chose to read aloud something he had written. We were an eager, attentive audience, and when he had finished he welcomed suggestions and we were free to say whatever we liked. Usually we were unanimously enthusiastic, especially over chapters of ‘Weir of Hermiston’ [...] once, however, he read a story called ‘The Witch Woman’ that none of us cared for very much. My mother said it showed the influence of a Swedish author Louis had been reading, and was not in his own clear, individual style. She made no comment when he sent it to his publisher, and nothing more was heard of ‘The Witch Woman’. (Field, 1937: 294)

These family-circle listeners and readers commented on literary influence, plot, clarity, and originality of style, and it is evident that they saw their role as being one of critical engagement with the text. ‘In the evening I read aloud Charlie’s compositions, which show very good sense in their effort to arrive at

exactness of expression about common things', wrote George Eliot in October of 1861, for example (Harris and Johnston, 1998: 102).<sup>iii</sup> Listeners may also have a role in deciding whether or not controversial material should be sent into the public domain, as we see in this extract from Stevenson's stepdaughter's memoir:

Louis announced that he had written something he wanted us to hear. When we had taken our seats round the centre table he stood before us with a manuscript in his hand [...] then in his deep voice vibrant with emotion, with heightened colour and blazing eyes he read aloud the 'Father Damien Letter'.<sup>iv</sup> Never in my life have I heard anything so dramatic, so magnificent. There was deep feeling in every sentence – scorn, indignation, biting irony, infinite pity – and invective that fairly scorched and sizzled. The tears were in his eyes when he finished. Throwing the manuscript on the table he turned to his wife. She who had never failed him, rose to his feet, and holding out both hands to him in a gesture of enthusiasm, cried: 'Print it! Publish it!'. (Field, 1937: 245)

They may even be the means of bringing literary works into being: there are many of Tennyson's poems, for example, which would have been lost without his wife's work as an amanuensis (see Thwaite, 1996: 275). Although we read, analyse and evaluate the printed versions of Tennyson's poetry, we should remember that his was primarily an oral art.<sup>v</sup> It seems from the collected evidence that reading aloud and hearing works read aloud actively helped readers to judge style. In 1899, Joseph Conrad was advised by R.B. Cunninghame Graham to read Chaucer aloud in order to appreciate the style, although the attempt was unsuccessful: 'Chaucer I have dipped into, reading aloud as you advised. I am afraid I am not English enough to appreciate fully the father of English literature. Moreover I am generally insensible to verse' (Karl *et al*, 1986, 2: 172). Anne Lister, as a note in her diary dated 15 May 1824, suggests, found reading aloud more helpful than Conrad: 'From 7.40 to 9 1/2 reading aloud to myself from p.42 to 50 (very carefully) vol. I Rousseau's Confessions. I READ this work so attentively *for the style's sake*. Besides this is a singularly unique display of character' (Whitbread, 1992: 103; my italics).

The evidence in diaries, letters, autobiographies and other first-hand accounts suggests that many published texts in this period had already been tested by having been read aloud before they even reached the publisher. Readers could (and did) expect that the books they bought or borrowed should conform to conventions that would allow them to be read aloud, and they valued clarity and simplicity of style highly. The expectation that works would and could be read aloud therefore forms part of the horizon of expectations of a nineteenth-century reader.

## 2 Morality and style: nineteenth-century perceptions

It is worth remembering, too, the part played by expectations about morality in the period under consideration. While many readers were dismissive of suggestions that books could inculcate morality, or even that reading had anything to do with the morals, an older idea about the close connection between moral principles and reading still influenced many readers in the nineteenth century. In *Practical Education*, Maria and R.L. Edgeworth write: ‘Formerly it was wisely said, “Tell me what company a man keeps, and I will tell you what he is” but since literature has spread a new influence over the world, we must add, “Tell me what company a man has kept, and what books he has read, and I will tell you what he is”’ (Edgeworth and Edgeworth, 1996: 2:183). This connection was still current as late as 1901-19, when Edwin Muir, working as a clerk in Glasgow, ‘demanded from literature a moral inspiration which would improve my character’ (Muir, 1940: 114).

The conduct literature of the eighteenth century had consistently linked aesthetic and moral taste, suggesting that the latter could be inferred from the former. The following passage from Hannah More’s *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799) is typical of the genre:

I would make it the criterion of true taste, right principle, and genuine feeling, in a woman, whether she would be less touched with all the flattery of romantic and exaggerated panegyric, than with that beautiful picture of correct and elegant propriety, which Milton draws of our first mother, when he delineates *Those thousand decencies which daily flow/ From all her words and actions.* (More, 1799: 1:7)

There existed, therefore, a close (if sometimes unconscious) association between literary style and morality, which pervades many of the responses of nineteenth-century readers to the works they encountered, to the extent that works in which the style was perceived to be good, while the moral tendency was considered to be bad, were considered to be particularly pernicious. Jane Austen’s novels were considered, in the early nineteenth century, to be particularly salutary in combining ‘elegant language’ with ‘pure morality’ (Chapman, 1954: 431)<sup>vi</sup>, while Lord Chesterfield’s *Letters to his Son* fell into the opposite category, condemned by Benjamin Newton in 1817 for combining a ‘gentlemanly style’ with a ‘lax morality’ that is ‘shocking to every serious thinking man’ (Fendall and Crutchley, 1933: 53).

Very frequently, readers comment on the ‘morality’, ‘decency’, ‘purity’, or ‘goodness’ (or lack thereof) they find in the printed matter they have been reading as if it were a necessary adjunct to the style. The



Austen family, for example, were revolted by Madame de Genlis's *Alphonsine*: '*Alphonsine* did not do. We were disgusted in twenty pages, as, independent of a bad translation, it has indelicacies which disgrace a pen hitherto so pure; and we changed it for the *Female Quixotte*, which now makes our evening amusement...' (Le Faye: 1995, 115-16). Nellie Weeton, writing in January 1813, comments on M.A. Hanway's *Ellinor, or the World as it is*, a novel in four volumes: 'An entertaining production written in a light, easy style [...] [The story] cannot have the slightest tendency to injure the morals of any reader, whether they have common sense or not...' (Hall, 1969: 2: 78). Thomas Egerton praised Austen's *Mansfield Park* 'for it's [*sic*] Morality, & for being so equal a Composition' (Chapman, 1954: 431), while Lady Caroline Lamb commented on the 'immorality' of Robertson's *History of Scotland* on the grounds that his portrayal of Mary, Queen of Scots made her appear too sympathetic (Douglass, 2006: 38). Of course, some readers considered art to be more important than morality, as Macaulay shows in his scribbled marginalia in *King Lear*, written some time between about 1815 and 1850: 'Excellent! It is worth while to compare these moral speeches of Shakspeare [*sic*] with those which are so much admired in Euripides. The superiority of Shakspeare's [*sic*] observations is immense. But the dramatic art with which they are introduced, – always in the right place, – always from the right person, – is still more admirable' (Trevelyan, 1978: 2:415). For Macaulay, 'dramatic art' is clearly 'more admirable' than 'moral speeches'. Sarah Harriet Burney, on the other hand, felt style to be less important than the 'corruption' she sensed when reading Madame de Stael: 'Do you agree with me in thinking, that with all her brilliant varnish, she is corrupt at heart? Had Satan himself written "Pauline", one of the stories published with "Zuma", he could have produced nothing more offensive to decency, more detestably disgusting' (Clark, 1997: 176). Mary Shelley, similarly, thought 'cleverness' no excuse for 'immorality', writing to Charles Ollier on 16 December 1831 of William Johnson Neale's *Cavendish; or, the Patrician at Sea* (1831): 'It is very clever – but the beginning is best – & it is immoral – why [wr]ite about certain things; it is bad enough that they are' (Bennett, 1983: 2:152).

Strictures about immoral reading making immoral readers are obviously behind Elizabeth Barrett's comment to Mary Russell Mitford in a letter of 27 November 1842, in which she writes: '*Leila* [...] made me blush in my solitude to the ends of my fingers – blush three blushes in one – for *Her* who could be so shameless – for her sex, whose purity she so disgraced – & for myself in particular, who could hold such a book for five minutes while a coal-fire burnt within reach of the other' (Kelley and Hudson, 1988: 6:179). It is clear that Barrett found the book both immoral and badly written, writing a month later to Mitford:

Because I would not, *could not* send you *Leila* a serpent book both for language-colour & soul-slime & one which I could not read through for its vileness myself, [...] I sent this *Jacques*, which seemed to me to stink less in the *phrase*, altho' the bearing & countenance & general moral tone are identically bad [...] *Indiana*, less revolting as a whole leans alike & with the bent of the author's peculiar womanhood, to the sensual & physical – and yet that work does appear to me very brilliant & powerful, & eloquent beyond praising. (Kelley and Hudson, 1988: 6:233)

Although Barrett claimed to “blush” for Leila’s shamelessness, it seems here that her preoccupation is less with the immorality of George Sand’s books than with the lack of literary merit in *Leila* and *Jacques*. Nonetheless, her insistent commentary on the morality of these literary works demonstrates her powerful sense that judging the morality of a work is an integral part of making judgements about its literary quality. Barrett’s view of Sand was shared by others. Indeed, by 1867, praising the artistry of Sand while denigrating the immorality of the works had become a ‘commonplace criticism’:

To say the truth, much as I like reading them [French writers] & specially Balzac and Sand, & little as I am given to overstrictness in my tastes, I do believe that the commonplace criticism is correct. I do think they are as a rule prurient & indecent & that they treat love affairs a good deal too much from the point of view of the whore and the whoremonger. They are very clever and very artistic; but I don’t think delicate either in the sense of art or morals. The books are put together with great skill to produce a given effect; but the effect is apt to border on the nasty & they are too anxious to keep everything in due harmony to give proper contrasts & variety of real life. (Bickness, 1996: 54)

We see here a subconscious dislike of the French nation, as well as the disapproval of works that are ‘clever and artistic’ but immoral, in Leslie Stephen’s comments about Balzac and Sand. Passing the time by reading on board the *HMS Pelorus* moored off Jeddah in 1859, Albert Battiscombe, a lieutenant of the Royal Navy, went further still, considering ‘the generality of French novels’ to demonstrate bad morality:

Reading the *Les filles des plâtre* [*sic*] by M. Xavier de Montépin<sup>vii</sup> it is like the generality of French Novels, and does not give a very exalted notions of French morals; the more I read French books, the more I am struck at the immense difference there is between the two nations that are only seperated [*sic*] by a narrow channel, twenty miles across; Customs manners & morals are entirely different; there is no nation in the world so much in love with domestic happiness & domestic comfort as the English, and none less so, than the French; that which affords great pleasure to our neighbours, excites only disgust in an Englishman; this I gather not only from the Books I read, but also from what I saw myself during my stay in France, and the older I get, the more thankful I am that I was not born a Frenchman. (Battiscombe, 1857-59:138)

Battiscombe's chauvinism is probably more extreme than that of many, but there is no doubt that, despite appreciation of its 'artistry', French fiction was regarded with suspicion by numerous nineteenth-century British readers on the grounds of its supposed licentiousness. When Caroline Clive wrote to Mary Mitford to ask for recommendations for a book club she had just started with some neighbours in 1848, she felt the need to stress that any French novel recommended must be 'moderately moral', but only asked that an English book be 'very amusing' (L'Estrange, 1882: 2:93-94). The disapproval of 'naughty French novels' already had a long history by the middle of the nineteenth century, and any nineteenth-century reader who dabbled in reading them knew that some justification for their taste was conventionally expected, even if he or she did not feel it was actually needed. The insistent stress on the morality of books can be traced to a fear about the ways in which readers might be judged by their choice of reading matter.

As late as 1931, Virginia Woolf could conclude in her diary, after commenting on Scott's *Ivanhoe* and Hugh Walpole's *Judith Paris*, that her own judgements, though couched as opinions about style, come down to a 'question of morality', adding, 'we are all moralists; with a temporary standard' (Bell, 1977-84: 4:41). Despite the various literary movements of the nineteenth century that attempted to separate art from morals, readers seem to have continued to judge works on the basis of their morality throughout the nineteenth century, because of a deep-rooted belief that style and morality could not be separated, and that literary and moral taste could not be divorced. The furores over the publication of Joyce's *Ulysses* in the 1920s, of Nabokov's *Lolita* in the 1950s and the Chatterley trial of 1960 suggest that such views remained current well into the twentieth century. When considering responses to literature that discuss style in the nineteenth century, therefore, it is as well to remember that comments about style are often actually comments about morality and *vice versa*. 'Taste' of all kinds is culturally relative and culturally determined; nineteenth-century writers and readers expected both to judge and to be judged in moral terms, and their commentary on the morality of the works they read seems entirely natural in this context.

### **Emotional responses to literature and the 'affective fallacy'**

On 16 August 1922, Virginia Woolf wrote of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which had come out in novel form that year:

I have read 200 pages so far – not a third; & have been amused, stimulated, charmed interested by the first 2 or 3 chapters – to the end of the Cemetery scene; & then puzzled, bored, irritated, & disillusioned as by a queasy undergraduate scratching his pimples [...] An illiterate, underbred book it seems to me: the book of a self-taught working man, & we all know how distressing they are, how egotistic, insistent, raw, striking, & ultimately nauseating [...] I may revise this later. I do not compromise my critical sagacity. I plant a stick in the ground to mark page 200. (Bell, 1977-84: 2:188-89)

By 6 September, on finishing the book, she had not revised her opinion:

I finished *Ulysses*, & think it a mis-fire. Genius it has I think; but of the inferior water. The book is diffuse. It is brackish. It is pretentious. It is underbred, not only in the obvious sense, but in the literary sense [...] I'm reminded all the time of some callow board school boy [...] full of wits & powers, but so self-conscious & egotistical that he loses his head, becomes extravagant, mannered, uproarious, ill at ease, makes kindly people feel sorry for him, & stern ones merely annoyed; & one hopes he'll grow out of it; but as Joyce is 40 this scarcely seems likely. I have not read it carefully; & only once; & it is very obscure; so no doubt I have scamped the virtue of it more than is fair. (Bell, 1977-84, 2: 199-200)

Noticeably, in both these extracts, Woolf's commentary focuses insistently on the book's effect on her (she is 'stimulated, charmed interested', then 'puzzled bored, irritated, & disillusioned'; the work makes her nauseated and queasy, it 'reminds' her of working men and callow schoolboys, which leads to further emotional responses: pity and irritation). Her response is couched in terms of physical revulsion, and it is what the book *makes her feel* that matters to her here, rather than how that effect is created. Faced with the novelty of Joyce's technique, Woolf, usually an elegant and accurate critic of style, cannot describe the work and falls back on the vocabulary of affective response. It is as if Woolf has been overcome by her snobbish dislike of the 'underbred' book to the extent that 'critical sagacity' seems no longer relevant to her. Though Woolf herself was far from a 'common reader', in this case her reaction is not that of the highbrow literary critic, but of the middlebrow reader.<sup>viii</sup>

On 30 August 1922, *The Nation* published a review of *Ulysses* by Gilbert Seldes that focused on the book's stylistic innovations, identifying it as a burlesque of *The Odyssey* and praising the fact that the style ('a travesty of the whole of English prose') so closely matched what Seldes saw to be its subject matter (the defeat of 'ecstasy and lyric beauty' by 'the reality of experience'). Seldes discussed the form of the novel, as well as its 'method', describing and analysing Joyce's 'stream of consciousness' narration (Seldes, 1922: 211-212). He commented on the different types of parody throughout the book before turning to a close textual analysis of the play scene, described as 'a masterpiece', and concluded:

This epic of defeat, in which there is not a scamped page nor a moment of weakness, in which whole chapters are monuments to the power and glory of the written word, is, in itself a victory of the creative intelligence over the chaos of created things and a triumph of devotion, to my mind one of the most significant and beautiful of our time. (Seldes, 1922: 212)

On 7 September, Leonard Woolf showed his wife Seldes' review, which changed her opinion of the book: 'L. put into my hands a very intelligent review of *Ulysses*, in the *American Nation*, which, for the first time, analyses the meaning, & certainly makes it much more impressive than I judged.' (Bell, 1977-84, 2:200) Virginia Woolf, it seems, needed the prompting of a reviewer to re-focus her attention on the *meaning* of the work (by which it seems to me she means the style, as the burden of Seldes review is that style and meaning are so interconnected as to be inseparable) rather than on the *effects* it had on her.

Virginia Woolf's emotional and physical reactions are not unique; it is very common to find such responses to literature, in diaries, letters and other sources, and they are not confined to works as insistently physical as *Ulysses*. The majority of nineteenth-century readers record emotional as well as intellectual responses to texts. Readers record being 'moved' by literature in a vast number of different ways: weeping, laughing, shaking in terror, recoiling in disgust, falling asleep with boredom, and hurling books across the room in anger are only a tiny sample of the kinds of reactions recorded. Frequently, readers record an ardent sense of friendship, either with fictional characters, or with the author, as in this letter of 1830, from Catharine Sedgwick to Mary Russell Mitford:

My dear Miss Mitford, I cannot employ the formal address of a stranger towards one who has inspired the vivid feeling of intimate acquaintance, a deep and affectionate interest in her occupations and happiness. You cannot be ignorant that your books are re-printed and widely circulated on this side of the Atlantic[...] your name has penetrated beyond our maritime cities, and is familiar and loved through many a village circle and to the borders of the lonely depths of unpierced woods – that we eagerly gather the intimations of your character and history that we fancy are dispersed through your productions – that we venerate 'Mrs. Mosse', are lovers of 'Sweet Cousin Mary' and have wept and almost worn mourning for dear bright little 'Lizzie', that, in short, such is your power over the imagination that your pictures have wrought on our affections like realities. (L'Estrange, 1882: 1: 216)

It seems that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century readers prized the sorts of works that provoked these kinds of intense emotional responses – although almost completely forgotten today, Mitford's *Our Village*, to which Sedgwick's letter refers, had been an immediate success, going into a second

edition almost immediately, selling well on both sides of the Atlantic, and spawning four further volumes of *Village* stories. Although emotional responses tend to be dismissed by literary critics, thanks to the overwhelming influence of the ‘affective fallacy’ argument (Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1954), the historian of reading must acknowledge such reactions, and the past importance attached to them, as an integral part of the history of reading. They may even, if we look carefully enough, tell us something previously suppressed or ignored about the text itself, and suggest why some works fade out of memory while others remain popular with successive generations of readers and critics.

## Conclusion

As we can see from the evidence presented above, real readers do not necessarily respond to texts like ‘hypothetical’, ‘implied’, or ‘ideal’ readers. They are not Bakhtinian ‘superaddressees’, whose perfect sympathetic understanding of the texts in hand can be taken for granted (Bakhtin, 1986), or Barthesian ‘writers’ of texts. They do not seem to form consistent ‘imagined communities’, the members of which envisage others reading as they do and bind themselves into nationhood through their reading (see Anderson, 1983), although the shared dislike of the French in the examples above suggests that the concerns of nationhood may play a substantial part in reading experiences (c.f. Absillis in this issue). The readers considered in this paper do share some features with ‘interpretive communities’ (Fish, 1980) – including shared reading practices that may now seem alien to a twenty-first century readership; shared ideas about style and morality; and a shared prejudice about French literature – but this theoretical construction does not take account of the variety and messiness of actual reading practices, which defy attempts to theorise and define them. I hope, however, that these examples have demonstrated the extent to which both reception histories and studies of the formal and stylistic qualities of literary works might benefit from taking account of the ways in which actual historical readers respond to texts.

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<sup>i</sup> Barthes’ argument also distinguishes between the ‘text’ (an enduring literary work of quality, which demands that its readers should engage actively with it in reading it, to the extent that it is constantly actively ‘written’ and ‘re-written’ by its successive readers, thus gaining new life with each reading) and the ‘work’ (which needs only a passive readerly engagement, thus never gaining new life). A ‘work’ could therefore be said only to exist in the very brief time-span of a

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single reading, whereas a 'text' is constantly renewing itself in a fruitful engagement with other 'texts' in the mind of its reader(s). In this essay I do not use Barthes' rather specialised meaning of 'text' and 'work', using the two terms interchangeably, and differentiating only between 'text/work' (work of literary art that can exist in many different forms) and material book (single physical artefact).

<sup>ii</sup> First-hand evidence of reading must, in itself, be subject to interpretation, since readers, in recording their reading, may have a variety of motivations, and the reliability of their testimony may be variable. For a full discussion of the issues involved in the interpretation of recorded reading experiences, see Halsey (2007); Allington (2007) looks at the interpretative problems raised by readers' and viewers' representations of their own 'inner' and 'outer' responses to texts.

<sup>iii</sup> 'Charlie' is Charles Lewes, son of Eliot's common-law husband, G.H. Lewes.

<sup>iv</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Father Damien, an Open Letter to the Reverend Dr Hyde of Honolulu' (Sydney, 1890).

<sup>v</sup> I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of *Language and Literature* who alerted me to Emily's role in producing Tennyson's poetry.

<sup>vi</sup> This is not the place for a history of the novel; it must suffice to note that the poor reputation of the genre in Austen's period is also relevant in considering readers' expectations.

<sup>vii</sup> Xavier de Montépin was taken to court over the supposed indecency of *Les filles de plâtre* (1855). He was fined 500 francs, and sentenced to three months' imprisonment.

<sup>viii</sup> The most relevant studies of middlebrow readers and culture are Radway (1984 and 1997), Rubin (1992) and Long (2003). See also Fuller (2008).

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