CHAPTER I

Reading and its consequences

During the four centuries when printed paper was the only means by which complex texts could be carried in quantity across time and distance, almost everyone believed that reading had vital consequences. Reading, all were sure, shaped the knowledge, the beliefs, the understanding, the opinions, the sense of identity, the loyalties, the moral values, the sensibility, the memories, the dreams, and therefore, ultimately, the actions, of men, women, and children. Reading helped to shape mentalities and to determine the fate of the nation.[1]

But was their assumption correct? Can it be historically validated? And, if so, what are the implications for our understanding of the antecedents that have taken us, as societies, to our present mental states? If the assumption that reading has wide social and political consequences is even only partly valid, then should we not expect the reading of written texts to feature strongly in our explanations of how and why societies change? And, since we can be certain that mentalities are always changing, should we not take a close interest in the governing structures? Although there has always been much interest in the meaning of certain texts, how they came to be written, and in the lives of their authors, little attention has been paid to the processes by which the texts reached the hands, and therefore potentially the minds, of different constituencies of readers. Could histories of reading help us to understand how knowledge was constituted and diffused, how opinions were formed and consolidated, how group identities were constructed, and, more generally, why ideas that at one time seemed mainstream and unassailable could suddenly lose credibility, while others persisted for centuries largely unchallenged? Can we find explanations which apply to the print era as a whole? Can we begin to model the links between texts, books, reading, changing mentalities, and wider historical effects?

[1] For the texts that set out these beliefs in the romantic period see chapters 7, 14 and 16.

I

The questions I ask are not only of historical interest. The political and economic arrangements governing the production and sale of copies of written texts today (and the production of the many other cultural media invented later) are essentially unchanged since they were devised and put in place in the late fifteenth century and altered in the late eighteenth.[2] These include a presumption that, in addition to some offered free, the supply of copies of written texts should be largely determined by a market divided into two sectors, one for older texts, where the prices, and therefore the extent of access, are set in conditions of economic competition, and another sector for more recent texts, where the prices are set by private intellectual property owners in conditions of state-guaranteed monopoly. The governing structures which began as an economic response to the technology of paper, ink, moveable type, and hand-powered printing presses, are still in place in an age when copies of texts can be reproduced and circulated instantaneously direct from person to person, in limitless numbers, at infinitesimal unit cost. If an historical investigation reveals identifiable systemic links between texts, printed books, reading, mentalities, and wider consequences in the past, we may be able to take a more informed view of the public and private choices that we face in the digital age.

The main tradition of literary and cultural history has been to consider the texts of those authors whose works have subsequently been regarded as the best or the most innovative in a chronological order of first publication.[3] The printed writings of the past have been presented as a parade of great names described from a commentator's box set high above the marching column. Early Modern gives way to the Enlightenment, and then Romanticism. Here come the Augustans, to be followed by the Romantics, and then the Victorians, or whichever other categories are chosen. According to the conventions of this approach, those texts of an age which have later been judged to be 'canonical' in a wide sense, are believed to catch the essence, or some of the essence, of the historical situation from which they emanated. In recent decades this parade model has been supplemented by studies which present the printed texts of a particular historical period as debating and negotiating with one another in a kind of open parliament with all the members participating and listening. Under both the parade

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[2] The date of the effective outlawing of perpetual intellectual property in printed texts in England and the colonies. Discussed in chapter 6.

[3] The contradictions implicit in traditional literary history are well illustrated by David Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?* (Baltimore 1992).

and parliament conventions, the historian makes his or her own selection
of texts to be included and may draw on other evidence besides the written
word. Both approaches can be linked, although they need not be, with
critical and hermeneutic analyses which are not time specific, employ-
ing, for example, psycho-analytic theories to excavate hidden meanings,
or applying theories of myth to explain the enduring appeal of certain
texts and narratives.[4] And all can be situated in their specific historical
contexts.

However, as methodologies for understanding how mentalities may have
been formed by reading, none of these approaches is satisfactory. For one
thing, any study of the consequences of the reading of the past ought to
consider the print which was actually read, not some modern selection,
whether that selection is derived from judgements of canon or from other
modern criteria. Nor can these approaches normally accommodate the fact
that the impact of a text on its readers invariably occurred at a different time
from when it was first written, and often in very different circumstances, the
writing and the reading being separated in some cases by a few days or weeks,
but in many others by years or by centuries. Secondly, in describing the
reading of a particular period of the past, it cannot be enough to draw solely
on the texts written during that period, specially significant though these
may have been. Readers have never confined their reading to contemporary
texts. Much of the reading that took place in the past, probably the majority,
was of texts written or compiled long ago and far away. In both parade and
parliament models, newly written printed texts succeed their immediate
predecessors, engage intellectually with them, and in some cases defeat
or supersede them, and it can be convincingly shown that this happened
in certain cases. As far as readers were concerned, however, chronological
linearity was not the norm. Not all readers had access to all newly published
texts as in the parade or parliament models, nor did they necessarily give
equal attention to those texts which they did read.

Furthermore, no historical reader, whatever his or her socio-economic or
educational status, read printed texts in the chronological order in which
they were first published. This was true even of modern texts. During the
romantic period in Great Britain, for example, many readers read the texts
of the Enlightenment only after they had been subjected to an intensive
school education in the texts of the Counter-Enlightenment, and many

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[4] For a discussion of author- and text-based approaches, see James Chandler, *England in 1819* (Chicago
1998), part 1.

others, including many women, read the Counter-Enlightenment without having read the Enlightenment at all. If, as we must posit in any historical inquiry into the effects of reading, the engagement between competing texts occurred mainly in the minds of readers, we must expect the trajectories of development to be different from those of the first writings or of the first printings of texts.

But the problem of relating printed texts to reading, cultural formation, and changing mentalities goes deeper than the need to find ways of off-setting the shortcomings of the parade and parliament conventions. While text-based studies can recover an understanding of what it was possible for their authors to think at the time when the texts were composed, they do not necessarily reveal what was thought by their readers. Nor can text-based studies enable us to judge impact. All exclusively text-based approaches, because they either ignore readers altogether, or they derive their readers from the texts, are caught in a closed system. Although they may help us to understand the meanings that the readers of the past may have taken from a text, or ought to have taken if they had been perceptive enough, they cannot, by themselves, without circularity, reveal the meanings that readers historically did construct.

Older readers of newly printed texts had memories going back to their childhood reading and education, and brought expectations to their reading acquired much earlier, whereas others were children whose minds were less fully formed. Any inquiry into the impact of the printed writings of any particular historical period must, therefore, span the reading of a minimum of two or three generations, as individual readers passed through the whole cycle from first reading as a child to ceasing to read in old age or at death. Text-based studies cannot by themselves recover the processes whereby readers filled in the gaps that exist in all texts, how they made their interpretations from their previous base of knowledge and expectations, or how their attitudes and actions may have altered as a consequence. We may find it useful to reconstruct the 'implied reader' addressed by the author, hoped for by the author, or implicit in the rhetorical strategy of the text and paratext. We may helpfully utilise notions of the 'critical reader' who is alert to the multiple meanings and effects of words, knowledgeable about the generic conventions of texts and intertextuality, and who picks up veiled allusions, hidden metaphor, ambiguities, underlying ideologies, and other subtleties. We may confidently accept the existence of 'communities of interpretation' who bring shared preconceptions and expectations about texts and genres to the act of reading, and accept as a premise that readers were normally much constrained in the meanings they created and accepted.

We may reasonably assume too that strategies were often successful in pre-setting expectations and responses, and that some readers may have devoted considerable efforts to trying to build a full and balanced critical understanding of the meanings of the texts which they read.[5] However, the general point seems to me to be incontestable that we cannot, without circularity, recover the range of actual responses to the reading of printed texts without information from outside the texts.

Without implying that the reactions of readers were independent of the texts being read, we need to grant them autonomy. If we wish to investigate the consequences of reading, we need to recognise that readers had freedom, within their circumstances, to choose which texts to read and which passages to give most attention to, to skip, to argue, to resist, to read against the grain, to be influenced by irrelevancies, to be careless, to misunderstand, to be distracted, to slip into dreams, to disagree but to continue reading, to stop reading at any time, and to conclude that the reading had been a waste of time. Readerly autonomy also included the opportunity to pass on opinions and impressions, even if they were ill-informed, confused, or irrelevant, to anyone willing to listen. As far as children were concerned, if our own experience of real children is any guide, their mental responses to the reading of the texts chosen for them by adults were even less constrained.

Reports of individual responses to reading as recorded in letters, diaries, or other documents can help us to break out of the closed circle implicit in exclusively text-based approaches. For that purpose they are invaluable. But anecdotal information raises methodological difficulties of other kinds. When records are plentiful, it is easy to slip into the belief that they are a reliable record of actual acts of reception. It is easy to forget that, however many of such reports are found and collected, they can never be, at best, anything beyond a tiny, randomly surviving, and perhaps highly unrepresentative, sample of the far larger total of acts of reception which were never even turned into words in the mind of the reader let alone recorded in writing.[6] Even if we are willing to regard the written records of individual responses as reliable, as we probably normally should, they too are written texts which were produced by their authors, within the generic conventions of a specific historical time, with implied readers and intended

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[5] For 'reception theory' and the notion of 'horizons of expectations' as developed by Jauss and Iser, see the summary by Robert Holub, 'Reception Theory, School of Constance' in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, 8 (1995) 319. An essay by Wolfgang Iser, 'Interaction between Text and Reader' is reprinted in Finkelstein and McCleery 291. For a discussion of different approaches, see William Sherman, *John Dee, The Politics of Reading and Writing in the English Renaissance* (Amherst 1995) 53.

[6] A fuller discussion of the unrepresentative quality of anecdotes is given in chapter 20.

rhetorical effects in mind. The same methodological difficulties apply to the use of published reviews which are often taken as surrogates for 'reception' more generally. Although such reviews may be useful for some purposes, such as reconstructing horizons of readerly expectations, or the dominant discursive frameworks within which a particular text was understood and debated at the time of publication, they cannot be assumed to be representative records of the actual reception of the reviewed text by its many other readers. Nor can we recover actual reading from contemporary advice on reading that is to be found in, say, conduct literature, or by examining literary and visual representations of reading, useful though these sources may also be.[7] In crucial respects, the champions of modern reception theory, which emphasises that it is the reader who makes the meanings, have not yet faced the full implications of their insights. The concept of 'the reader' is needed for any investigation and analysis of a culture just as we need 'the investor' when we try to understand an economy. But whereas the 'investor' of economics is normally deduced from empirical quantitative studies of how real investors have been observed to behave in practice, the 'reader' of modern literary studies is seldom more than the reader implied by the text and the paratext.

How then can we trace the influence of texts, books, and reading without becoming presentist, determinist, circular, or anecdotal? How can we break free from the residual power of the fallacy that readers are the inert recipients of meanings created by authors? If, as I suggest, we conceive of a culture as a complex developing system with many independent but interacting agents, including authors and readers, into which the writing, publication, and subsequent reading of a printed text were interventions, then we need a systems approach to understand it.[8] From a scrutiny of the consolidated empirical records of historic reading we may be able to perceive patterns, to identify hierarchies, and to generate models, partial and provisional though they may have to be. We may be able to develop a conceptual framework from which provisional conclusions can be drawn, the data interrogated and re-interrogated, and the models themselves tested and refined.

The difficulties of applying such an approach in practice are severe. Although concepts such as idea, attitude, opinion, belief, feeling, value,

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[7] Discussed in chapters 14 and 19.

[8] The basic notions of systems thinking are summarised by Peter Checkland, *Systems Thinking, Systems Practice* (revised edition 1991). 'The central concept of system . . . embodies the idea of a set of elements connected together to form a whole, this showing properties of the whole, rather than properties of its component parts. Systems thinking is . . . the use of a particular set of ideas to try to understand the world's complexity – an epistemology which, when applied to human activity, is based upon the four basic ideas: emergence, hierarchy, communication, and control, as characteristics of systems.'

world-view, cultural change, and mentality are serviceable within their limits, there are few easily identifiable units which can be traced through the system. In the case of texts which contain an identifiable cluster of new ideas, such as Adam Smith's *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, we can use normal historical techniques to try to trace how the ideas were spread within society, advocated by converts, adopted by policy-makers, and carried into effect, just as we can to trace the invention, development, and industrial application of a newly invented technology such as the printing press or the steam engine.[9] In the case of most texts, however, and especially the texts of imaginative literature, that were always amongst the most often read, it is hard to identify any but the loosest clusters of ideas, and when we try to trace them into the busy world of mentalities, we quickly lose sight of them in the crowd. Even when we believe we can trace the ideas of one text, we know that readers seldom, if ever, read only one text, and that the meanings offered by the range of texts that they read was seldom fully consistent with one another. Then there is feedback, perhaps the most intractable of all the methodological problems that arise in tracing ideas. Printed texts are the products of their times as well as helping to shape them, authors have potential readers in mind when they write, readers bring expectations to their reading, the environment in which ideas prosper and perish is itself, to a large extent, an outcome of mental factors, including reading, and the notion of a national or group 'culture' implies that there is a large measure of shared stability, as well as development, across the generations.

However, in writing histories of ideas, we have a unit which can be more readily identified and traced. If we could trace print, and understand how certain texts came to be made available in printed form to certain constituencies of buyers and readers, we would have made a good start in narrowing the questions to be addressed in tracing ideas. Books, furthermore, are material goods which were manufactured, sold, rented, and distributed by processes which are receptive to economic as well as to historical analysis. Indeed, since the production and sale of print was the business of an industry with its own economic characteristics, it is to the disciplines and methodologies of the social sciences that we should initially turn. In advocating and adopting this approach, I emphasise that I do not wish to imply that printed books can or should be regarded simply

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[9] The early publication history of Adam Smith's two main works is summarised in appendix 9 'Adam Smith.' For indications of readership in the romantic period see chapter 13. For an example of a case in which an innovative text which is admired today failed to make much of an impact when it was first published, see the discussion of Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman* in chapter 14.

as material goods which were manufactured for sale, nor that the governing structures and customary practices of the printed-book industry were the only, or even the main, determinants of the texts which were made available to be read in printed form. The whole literary system of writing, texts, books, and reading, has to be conceived of as existing within wider historical contexts, including what Bourdieu calls the *habitus* of literary production within which, by the interplay of numerous agents, including authors, publishers, and critics, certain texts are accorded value.[10] Nor do I wish to imply that the authors of the past should be regarded principally as economic agents, or to exclude or downplay the contribution of individual agency at any point of the chain that linked authors with readers. To attempt to match the production of printed texts with the weight of influence of that print or to equate numbers of acts of reading with numbers of transfers of textual meaning would be to revert back to the notion of readers as inert recipients of textual meanings which my approach is intended to correct. It would be simplistic too to expect that models which may help to explain the production, distribution, and sale of books can also explain the states of mind which caused texts to be written or which resulted from the reading of those texts and the subsequent diffusion of the ideas.

But just because a model cannot be run mechanistically to provide a full answer to my questions, to take us, as it were, all the way from the minds of authors, through the materiality of print, to the minds of readers, that does not mean that it cannot produce worthwhile results, let alone that the traditional parade or parliament conventions are to be preferred. There are many other advantages. Although it is always likely to be extremely difficult to judge the extent to which the readers of a particular text may have been influenced by it, we can be certain that those persons who had no access to that text cannot have been directly influenced by it at all, but may have been influenced by many other texts to which they did have access. The possible links between texts, print, reading, and mentalities are not symmetrical. If we could discover who read what, we would have a far more secure basis than exists at present upon which to employ other approaches, including traditional critical scrutiny of texts, to try to understand the appeal and assess the effects. An analysis of the printed-book industry, furthermore, can proceed initially without reference to the nature of the texts being produced, the personal characters or motives of individual participants, the rise and fall of firms, or the claims and explanations offered by contemporaries, however honest and sincere they may have been. If we could elucidate and

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[10] See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, edited by Randal Johnson (1993).

model the factors which determined which constituencies of readers had access to which printed texts at which times, we would have advanced from explanations which are textual, local, and time-specific to a fuller and more theoretical understanding. Since much of the study will be concerned with attempting to elucidate the long-term constraints and determinants which affected the materiality of texts, I ask to be excused from repeating these qualifications on the many occasions where they arise.

The largest practical obstacle to writing histories of reading has been the absence, in readily accessible form, of the consolidated and comparative quantitative information that is indispensable to any analysis of the kind I suggest. Although, for Great Britain, we have excellent descriptive bibliographies and library catalogues of the titles of English-language books known to have been printed since the fifteenth century, we lack information on costs, prices, print runs, and sales. We have no reliable indices of book prices, even in general changes, for periods before the nineteenth century.[11] As the late D. F. McKenzie, one of the founders of modern book history, wrote in his posthumously published work, 'There is still no satisfactory model of the economics of the London [book] trade', and he picked out the lack of information about edition sizes as amongst the worst of many 'crippling deficiencies' from which the subject suffers.[12] I know of no studies of how the changing internal trade customs of the book industry, its marketing policies, and the private intellectual property regime have influenced texts, availability, prices, access, and readerships.

The standard, indeed the only, book on readerships that includes more than a sprinkling of quantified information, remains Richard D. Altick's *The English Common Reader, A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800–1900*, an excellent and pioneering work on which I have frequently drawn and which can still be warmly recommended. But Altick wrote nearly half a century ago; he did no archival work but relied on scattered mentions in printed sources; and he made no claim to be offering consolidated information or economic analysis. That modern writers on reading have made little or no attempt to update, add to, or look behind Altick is a tribute to the strength of his work, but also shows an unfamiliarity with what would be regarded as the indispensable minimum demanded by practitioners in disciplines that attempt to describe, understand, and theorise complex systems. The history of reading is at the stage of astronomy before telescopes, economics before statistics, heavily reliant on a few commonly repeated traditional narratives and favourite anecdotes, but weak on the

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[11] See Eliot.   [12] *CHBB* iv, 553, 556.

Figure 1. 'Industry'. An allegory of how all knowledge in the arts and sciences depends
upon printed books. On the right is an English printing shop in the age of moveable
type, showing the writing, composing, type-setting, inking, drying, and pressing.
From George Bickham, *The Universal Penman* (1735–41).

spade-work of basic empirical research, quantification, consolidation, and
scrutiny of primary information, upon which both narrative history and
theory ought to rest.[13]

Although, in the present state of knowledge, it is impossible to write general
histories of reading, we may be able to answer at least some of the main
questions by making a formal case study of the reading of a particular his-
torical period in a specific culture. Provided it is large enough to encompass
both the long-term governing structures and the long-run consequences, a
study of one historical period may yield results which have a wider applica-
bility. The period which I have chosen as the central case for my inquiry is
the romantic period in Great Britain, roughly the years between the 1790s
and the 1830s, a remarkably rich and distinctive period of literary and intel-
lectual history, as contemporaries knew, and one of great change. Suddenly,
towards the end of the eighteenth century, the number of men, women,
and children who read printed texts began to grow rapidly. The more highly
educated members of society read more books, journals, and newspapers

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[13] See the useful collection of Finkelstein and McCleery.