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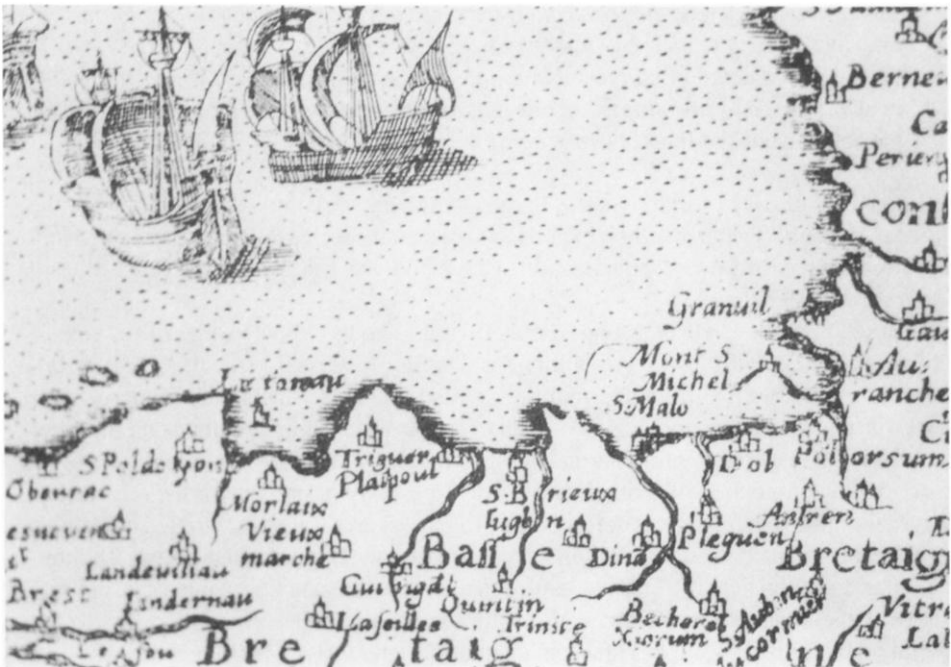
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LABORERS AND VOYAGERS: FROM THE TEXT TO THE READER

ROGER CHARTIER



Far from being writers—founders of their own place, heirs to the peasants of earlier ages now working on the soil of language, diggers of wells and builders of houses—readers are voyagers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves. Writing accumulates, stocks up, resists time by the establishment of a place and multiplies its production through the expansionism of reproduction. Reading takes no measures against the erosion of time (one forgets oneself and also forgets), reading does not keep what it acquires, or it does so poorly, and each of the places through which it passes is a repetition of the lost paradise.

—Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

This magnificent text by Michel de Certeau, which contrasts writing (conservative, durable, and fixed) with readings (always on the order of the ephemeral) constitutes at the same time a necessary foundation and a disquieting challenge for any history that intends to inventory and account for a practice—reading—that rarely leaves traces, is scattered into an infinity of singular acts, and purposely frees itself from all the constraints seeking to subdue it. Such a project fundamentally rests on a double assumption: that reading is not already inscribed in the text, with no conceivable difference between the sense assigned to it (by the author, usage, criticism, and so forth) and the interpretation constructable by its readers; and that, correlatively, a text does not exist except for a reader who gives it signification:

Whether it is a newspaper or Proust, the text has a meaning only through its readers; it changes along with them; it is ordered in accordance with codes of perception that it does not control. It becomes a text only in its relation to the exteriority of the reader, by an interplay of implication and ruses between two sorts of “expectation” in combination: the expectation that organizes a readable space (a literality), and one that organizes a procedure necessary for the actualization of the work (a reading). [Practice 170–71]¹

The task of the historian is, then, to reconstruct the variations that differentiate the “readable space” (the texts in their material and discursive forms) and those which govern the circumstances of their “actualization” (the readings seen as concrete practices and interpretive procedures).

Based upon de Certeau’s suggestions, I would like to indicate some of the stakes, problems, and conditions of possibility for such an historical project. Three poles, generally separated by academic tradition, define the space of this history: first, the analysis of texts, either canonical or ordinary, deciphered in their structures, themes, and aims; second, the history of books and, more generally, of all the objects and forms that carry out the circulation of writing; and finally, the study of practices which in various ways take hold of these objects or forms and produce usages and differentiated meanings. A fundamental question underlies this approach in associating textual criticism, bibliography, and cultural history. That is to understand how in the societies of the ancien régime between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries the increasing circulation of printed writing transformed the modes of social interaction [*sociabilité*], permitted new ways of thinking, and modified power relations.

Hence the attention placed upon the manner in which (to use the terms of Paul Ricoeur) the encounter between “the world of the text” and “the world of the reader” functions [*Time and Narrative* 3: 6]. To reconstruct in its historical dimensions this process of the “actualization” of texts above all requires us to realize that their meaning depends upon the forms through which they are received and appropriated by their readers (or listeners). Readers, in fact, never confront abstract, idealized texts detached from any materiality. They hold in their hands or perceive objects and forms whose structures and modalities govern their reading or hearing, and consequently the possible comprehension of the text read or heard. In contrast to a purely semantic definition of the text, which characterizes not only structuralist criticism in all its variants but also literary theories concerned with reconstructing the modes of reception of works, it is necessary to maintain that forms produce meaning, and that even a fixed text is invested with new meaning and

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1. On the reading-writing duo in this book see the article by Anne-Marie Chartier and Jean Hébrard, “L’invention du quotidien, une lecture, des usages,” *Le Débat* 49 (March–April 1988): 97–108.

being [*statut*] when the physical form through which it is presented for interpretation changes. We must also realize that reading is always a practice embodied in gestures, spaces, and habits. Far from the phenomenology of reading, which erases the concrete modality of the act of reading and characterizes it by its effects, postulated as universals, a history of modes of reading must identify the specific dispositions that distinguish communities of readers and traditions of reading. This approach supposes the recognition of a series of contrasts: to begin with, the distinctions between reading competencies. The fundamental but rough separation between the literate and the illiterate does not exhaust the possible differences in the relation to writing. Those who can read texts do not all read them in the same fashion. There is a wide gap between the most skillful and the least competent readers—those who are obliged to read what they read aloud in order to understand it and who are at ease only with certain textual or typographical forms. Another contrast distinguishes between the norms and conventions of reading, defining for each community of readers the legitimate uses of the book, the forms of reading, and the instruments and procedures of interpretation. Finally, we have the contrast between the expectations and diverse interests that different groups of readers invest in the practice of reading. Upon these determining factors, which govern practice, depend the ways in which texts can be read—and read differently by readers who are equipped with different intellectual tools and maintain quite different relations to writing.

Michel de Certeau illustrated such an approach in describing the specific characteristics of the mystical reader: “By ‘mystical readers’ I have in mind all the procedures of reading which were suggested or practiced in the field of solitary or collective experience designated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as ‘illuminated,’ ‘mystical,’ or ‘spiritual’” [“La lecture” 67].² In the minor, marginal, and dispersed community that was mysticism’s milieu, reading, determined by norms and habits, invested the book with novel functions: to replace the ecclesiastical institution considered to be inadequate; to make a certain kind of speech possible (that of the prayer, the communication with God, the *conversar*); and to indicate the practices through which spiritual experience is constructed. The mystical relation to the book can also be understood as a trajectory in which several “moments” of reading succeed one another: the establishment of an otherness [*altérité*] which founds the subjective quest; the development of ecstasy [*jouissance*]; the marking of bodies physically reacting to the digestion [*manducation*] of the text; and, at the extreme, the interruption of reading, the abandonment of the book, and detachment. Consequently to locate the network of practices and rules of reading specific to diverse communities of readers (spiritual, intellectual, professional, and so forth) is a primary task for any history concerned with understanding, in its differentiations, the pragmatic figure of the “poaching” reader [*lecteur braconnier*] [see, for example, Jardine and Grafton].

But to read is always to read something. Certainly, to exist at all, the history of reading must be radically distinguished from the history of what is read: “The reader emerges from the history of the book, in which he was for a long time undifferentiated or indistinct. . . . The reader was taken as the effect of the book. Today he has become detached from the books of which he had seemed no more than a shadow. Suddenly this shadow has been released, has taken on a physiognomy, has acquired an independence” [de Certeau, “La lecture” 66–67]. But this founding independence is not an arbitrary license. It is confined by the codes and conventions that govern the practices of a community. It is also confined by the discursive and material forms of the texts read. “New readers make new texts, and their new meanings are a function of their new forms”

2. The suggestions in this essay are reconsidered in one of Michel de Certeau’s major works, *La fable mystique* [Paris: Gallimard, 1982], in particular the third part, “La scène de l’ énonciation” [209–73]. This work has recently been translated into English: *The Mystic Fable*, trans. Michael B. Smith [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992].

[McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* 20]. D. F. McKenzie thus points out with great acuity the double network of variations—variations of the dispositions of readers and variations of textual and formal devices—which must be taken into account in any history seeking to recover the shifting and plural meaning of texts. One can make use of this analysis in different ways: by locating the major contrasts distinguishing different modes of reading; by characterizing the most popular reading practices; or by paying attention to the publishing changes that offered old texts to new consumers, changes that made them more numerous and of more modest condition. Such a perspective translates a double dissatisfaction with the history of the book in France over the last twenty or thirty years, which has consistently taken as its objective to measure the unequal distribution of books in the different groups composing the society of the ancien régime. This led to the indispensable construction of factors revealing cultural divisions: for example, for a given location and time, the percentage of property inventories taken after death indicating the possession of books, the classification of collections according to the number of works they contain, or the thematic characterization of private libraries according to the proportion of different bibliographic categories present in them. From this perspective, to conceptualize reading in France between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries was, above all, to put together series of quantitative data, to establish quantitative thresholds, and to locate how social differences were culturally translated.

This approach, pursued collectively (including by the author of this essay), produced a body of knowledge without which other inquiries would have been impossible. However, it poses a problem of its own. To begin with, it rests on a strictly sociographic conception which implicitly postulates that cultural separations are necessarily organized according to a preexisting social division. I believe it is necessary to challenge the analytic model which links differences in cultural practices with social oppositions constructed *a priori*—either on the scale of macroscopic contrasts (between the dominant and the dominated, between the elite and the people) or on a scale of finer differentiations (for example, between social groups hierarchized by distinctions of status or profession and levels of wealth).

Cultural separations are not necessarily ordered only according to a single grid of social divisions, conceived as determining the unequal possession of objects and the difference between behaviors. The perspective must be reversed to outline, first of all, the social areas where each corpus of texts and each variety of printed materials circulates. To start out thus from objects, and not from classes or groups, brings us to the realization that French sociocultural history has for too long been based on an incomplete conception of the social. In privileging only socioprofessional classifications, it has forgotten that other principles of differentiation, also fully social, could explain cultural divisions with greater pertinence. Thus there are also considerations of gender or generation, religious belief, community membership, academic or group traditions, and so on.

In another register, the history of the book in its social and serial definition sought to characterize cultural configurations according to categories of texts considered specific to them. Such an operation proves to be doubly reductive. For one thing, it simply equates the identification of differences to inequalities of distribution; and for another, it ignores the process by which a text takes on meaning for those who read it. Against these claims it is necessary to propose several modifications. The first of these situates the recognition of the most deeply embedded social divisions in the contrasting uses of shared material. More than we have tended to acknowledge, in the societies of the ancien régime it is the same texts which are taken up by readers from the popular classes and by those who are not. Sometimes readers of humble conditions owned books that were not particularly aimed at them (this was the case of Menocchio, the Friulian miller; of Jamerey Duval, the shepherd from Lorraine; and of Ménétra, the Parisian glazier [see Ginzburg, Hébrard, and Ménétra]). Or sometimes creative and shrewd booksellers put within the

reach of a broader clientele texts that previously had not circulated except in the narrow world of the wealthy and well read (as was the case with Castilian and Catalan *pliegos sueltos*, English chapbooks, or the collection known in France under the generic term Bibliothèque Bleue). What is essential, then, is to understand how the same texts could be diversely apprehended, handled, and understood.

The second modification is to reconstruct the networks of practices that organize the historically and socially differentiated modes of access to texts. Reading is not only an abstract operation of the intellect: it puts the body into play and is inscribed within a particular space, in a relation to the self or to others. This is why attention should particularly be paid to ways of reading that have been obliterated in our contemporary world: for example reading out loud in its double function—communicating that which is written to those who do not know how to decipher it, and binding together the interconnected forms of sociability which are all figures of the private sphere (the intimacy of the family, the conviviality of social life, the cooperation of scholars [*connivence lettré*]). A history of reading, then, cannot limit itself only to the genealogy of our contemporary manner of reading—in silence and by sight. It must equally, perhaps above all, take on the task of discovering forgotten gestures and habits that have now disappeared. The stakes are important because they reveal not only the remote peculiarity of traditionally shared practices, but also the specific structures of texts composed for uses that are no longer those of their readers today. Often in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the implicit reading of a text, literary or not, was construed as a vocalization and its “reader” as the auditor of read speech [*parole lectrice*]. Thus addressed to the ear as much as the eye, the work played with forms and processes designed to submit the written word to the requirements of oral “performance.” From the motifs of the *Quijote* to the structures of texts published in the Bibliothèque Bleue, there are numerous examples of this link maintained between the text and the voice [see Chartier, “Leisure and Sociability”].

“Whatever they may do, authors do not write books. Books are not written at all. They are manufactured by scribes and other artisans, by mechanics and other engineers, and by printing presses and other machines” [Stoddard 4]. This remark introduces the third modification that I would like to propose. Against the representation developed by literature itself and repeated by the most quantitative histories of the book, according to which the text exists in itself, separated from all materiality, we must insist that there is no text outside the material structure in which it is given to be read or heard. Thus there is no comprehension of writing, whatever it may be, which does not depend in part upon the forms in which it comes to its reader. Hence the necessary distinction between two groups of apparatuses: those which reveal strategies of writing and the intentions of the author, and those which are a result of the publishers’ decisions or the constraints of the printing house. Authors do not write books. Rather they write texts which become objects copied, handwritten, etched, printed, and today computerized. This gap, which is rightly the space in which meaning is constructed, has too often been forgotten not only by classical literary history, which thinks of the work in itself as an abstract text for which the typographic forms are unimportant, but even by *Rezeptionstheorie*. Despite its desire to historicize the experience that readers have with works, *Rezeptionstheorie* postulates a pure and immediate relation between the “signals” emitted by the text (which plays with accepted literary conventions) and the “horizon of expectation” of the public to which they are addressed. In such a perspective the “effect produced” does not depend at all upon the material forms the text takes.³ Yet these forms contribute fully to shaping the anticipations of the reader vis-à-vis the text and to the production of new publics or innovative uses for it.

3. For a programmatic definition of *Rezeptionstheorie*, see Hans Robert Jauss, *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation* [Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1974].

We thus return to the triangle with which we began, defined by the intricate relation between text, book, and reader. The variations of this relation outline some elementary figures in the connection between “readable space” and “actualization” of the text. The first variation considers a linguistically stable text presented in printed forms which themselves change. In studying the innovations occurring in the publication of the plays of William Congreve at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, McKenzie was able to demonstrate how some apparently insignificant formal transformations—the change from quarto to octavo formats, the numbering of scenes, the presence of an ornament between each scene, the list of the *dramatis personae* at the beginning of them, the marginal notation of the name of the character speaking, the indication of entrances and exits—had a major effect on the status of the works. A new readability was created by a format easier to handle and by a layout that reproduced in the book something of the movement of the actual production, thus breaking with the ancient conventions of printing plays with no rendering of their theatricality. A new manner of reading the same text resulted, but also a new horizon of reception. The forms used in the octavo edition of 1710, borrowed from those used in France for the edition of plays, gave an unofficial legitimacy to Congreve’s plays, which from then on were inscribed in a classic canon. This is what could induce an author to refine his style in order to make the works conform to their new “typographic” dignity [see McKenzie, “Typography and Meaning”]. Variations of the most formal modes of textual presentation can modify the register of reference and the mode of interpretation.

The same is true on a larger scale concerning the principal alteration of the layout in which texts were presented between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries—what Henri-Jean Martin has termed “the definitive triumph of white over black” [see Martin and Delmas 295–99]: in other words, the opening up of the page through the multiplication of paragraphs that broke the uninterrupted continuity of the text common in the Renaissance and the indentations which, through varying the left margin, make the order of discourse immediately visible. A new reading of the same works or of the same genres was consequently suggested by their new publishers—a reading that fragments texts into small and separate units, an approach that reinforces the argument, whether intellectual or discursive, by a visual articulation of the page.

This textual segmentation [*découpage*] had fundamental implications when it was applied to sacred texts. The story of Locke’s anxiety regarding the practice of dividing the text of the Bible into chapter and verse is well known. For him such a division presented a considerable risk of obliterating the powerful coherence of the Word of God. Referring to the Epistle of Paul, he thus noted that “not only Common People take the Verses usually for distinct Aphorisms, but even Men of more advanc’d Knowledge in reading them, lose very much of the strength and force of the Coherence and the Light that depends on it.” The effects of such a division he thought disastrous, authorizing each sect or religious body to found its legitimacy on the fragments of the Scriptures that supported its views:

*If a Bible was printed as it should be, and as the several Parts of it were writ, in continued Discourse where the Argument is continued, I doubt not that the several Parties would complain of it, as an Innovation, and a dangerous Change in the publishing of those holy Books. . . . He [i.e., the member of a particular sect] need but be furnished with Verses of Sacred Scriptures, containing Words and Expressions that are but flexible . . . and his System that has appropriated them to the Orthodoxy of His Church, makes them immediately strong and irrefragable Arguments for his Opinion. This is the Benefit of loose Sentences and Scripture crumbled into Verses, which quickly turn into independent Aphorism. [qtd. in McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* 46–47]*

The second figure in our triangle of relations is that in which the text passes from one published form to another order, transforming the text itself and constituting a new public. This is clearly the case with the body of texts that constitute the catalogue of the Bibliothèque Bleue. If this collection has occupied French historians for a long time, it is because it seems to furnish direct access to the “popular culture” of the ancien régime, a culture supposedly expressed and nourished by texts distributed “en masse” to the humblest readers.⁴ But such is not the case for three essential reasons. To begin with, it is clear that the texts which formed the stock of French book peddlers were almost never written for this purpose. The Bibliothèque Bleue drew from the repertoire of already published texts those which appeared to be best suited to attract a large public. Hence two necessary precautions: first, not to take the texts put into the books included in the Bibliothèque Bleue as “popular” in themselves, because in fact they belonged to a wide variety of genres drawn from learned literature; and second, to consider that these texts generally had already had a published existence, sometimes quite lengthy, before entering the repertoire of “popular” books [*livres pour le plus grand nombre*]. The study of titles in this “popular” catalogue has moreover permitted registering how the most formal and material arrangements can inscribe in themselves the indices of cultural differentiation. Indeed the fundamental specificity of the Bibliothèque Bleue is in the editorial interventions it imposed upon texts in order to make them readable by the large clientele at which they were aimed. All this work of adaptation—which shortened texts, simplified them, cut them up, and illustrated them—was determined according to the manner in which booksellers conceived the competencies and expectations of their customers. Thus the very structures of the book were governed by what the publishers thought to be the mode of reading of the clientele they were targeting.

Such a reading always required visible references, and this is my third assertion. Thus the anticipatory titles or the recapitulative summaries or even the wood engravings functioned as protocols of reading or sites of memory [*lieux de memoire*]. Such a reading was comfortable only with brief, self-contained sequences, separated from one another—a reading that appears to have been satisfied with only minimal coherence. This manner of reading is not at all that of the lettered elite of the time—even if certain notables did not disdain to buy books from the Bibliothèque Bleue. These texts assumed their readers’ foreknowledge. By the recurrence of highly coded forms, by the repetition of similar motifs from one title to another, and by the reuse of the same images, the knowledge of texts already encountered (either read or heard) was mobilized to help in the comprehension of new readings. The catalogue of the Bibliothèque Bleue thus organized a form of reading that was more recognition or recapitulation than discovery. It is therefore in the formal particularity of the Bibliothèque Bleue publications and in the modifications they impose on texts that they possess their “popular” character.

In proposing this reevaluation of the Bibliothèque Bleue, my intention has been not only to better understand what was the single most powerful instrument of the acculturation to writing in ancien régime France.⁵ It is also to argue that the detection of socio-cultural differentiations and the study of formal and material devices, far from excluding one another, are necessarily linked. This is true not only because the forms are modeled on the expectations and competencies attributed to the public at which they are aimed, but above all because the works and objects produce the space of their social reception much more than they are produced by already concretized divisions. Recently Lawrence W.

4. *The fundamental but contested study on this issue is by Robert Mandrou, De la culture populaire aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles. Among the criticisms addressed to this book is de Certeau, “La beauté du mort”; reconsidered in de Certeau, La culture au pluriel [49–80].*

5. *See Chartier, “The Bibliothèque Bleue and Popular Reading” and “The Literature of Roguery in the Bibliothèque Bleue” in The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France [240–64 and 265–342].*

Levine provided a persuasive demonstration of this fact [see his “William Shakespeare and the American People” and *Highbrow/Lowbrow*]. Analyzing the manner in which the plays of Shakespeare were produced in America in the nineteenth century (that is to say, combined with other genres: melodrama, farce, circus, dance), he showed how this type of representation created a diverse public—“popular” in the sense that it did not reduce down to just the lettered elite but actively participated in the production through its emotions and reactions. At the end of the century the strict separation established between genres, styles, and cultural sites dispersed this universal public, reserving a “legitimate” Shakespeare for the few and relegating the other versions to the status of “popular” entertainment. In establishing this “bifurcated culture,” transformations in the forms of presentation of a Shakespeare play (but also of symphony music, opera, or works of art) had a decisive role. Following a time of cultural mixing and sharing came another, in which the process of cultural distinction produced social separation. The traditional devices of representation in the American Shakespearean repertoire are thus of the same order as the “typographic” transformations imposed by the publishers of the Bibliothèque Bleue upon the texts of which they took possession: both aim, in effect, to inscribe the text in a cultural matrix that was not its original destination, thereby permitting readings, understandings, and uses possibly disqualified by other intellectual practices.

These two cases lead us to the consideration of cultural differentiations not as the translation of already concretized and static divisions, but as the effect of a dynamic process. On the one hand, the transformation of forms and devices by which a text is presented authorizes new appropriations and consequently creates new publics for and uses of it. On the other hand, the sharing of the same objects by the whole of society gives rise to the search for new differences, suited to marking the divisions that were preserved. The trajectory of printed works in the French ancien régime bears witness to this situation. We could say that the distinctions between the manners of reading were progressively reinforced to the degree that printed works became less rare, less threatened by seizure, and more ordinary. Whereas the simple possession of a book had for a long time signified a cultural division in itself, with the conquests of printing it is, rather, specific reading attitudes and typographical objects which progressively take on this function. Against refined readings and carefully made books were henceforth counterposed hastily printed material and unskilled interpreters. But both groups, let us recall, often read the same texts, for which plural and contradictory significations were produced according to their contrasting uses. The question consequently becomes one of selection: why do certain texts lend themselves better than others to these continuing and recurrent uses [see Harlan]? Or at least, why do the makers [*faiseurs*] of books consider them capable of reaching a very diverse public? The answer lies in subtle relations between the structures of the works themselves, unequally suited to reappropriations, and the multiple determinations, as much institutional as formal, that establish their possible “application” (in the phenomenological sense) to very different historical situations.

In the relation between the text, its printed form, and reading there is a third figure produced as soon as a text, fixed in its form and linguistically stable, is taken up by new readers who read differently from their predecessors. “A book changes by the fact that it remains changeless while the world changes” [Bourdieu and Chartier 236]—or, to make the proposition compatible with the scale of our reflection here, let us say, “when its mode of being read changes.” The remark serves to justify the project of a history of the practices of reading, which attempts to mark the major contrasts that can give diverse meaning to the same text. It is surely time to reexamine three fundamental oppositions that have long been considered incontestable: to begin with, between a reading in which comprehension presupposes a required oral articulation, whether aloud or barely vocalized [*à basse voix*], and another species of reading that is purely visual [see Saenger, “Silent Reading” and “Physiologie de la lecture”]. Let us recall (even if its chronology

is questionable) a fundamental assertion of Michel de Certeau that associates the freedom of the reader with silent reading:

In the last three centuries reading has become a gesture of the eye. It is no longer accompanied, as it used to be, by the murmur of vocal articulation, nor by the movement of a muscular mastication [manducation]. To read without speaking the words or at least muttering them is a modern experience, unknown for millennia. In earlier times, the reader interiorized the text; he made his voice the body of the other; he was its actor. Today the text no longer imposes its own rhythm on the subject, it no longer manifests itself through the reader's voice. This withdrawal of the body, which is the condition of its autonomy, puts the text at a distance. It is the reader's habeas corpus. [Practice of Everyday Life 175–76; translation modified]

The second of these oppositions contrasts “intensive” reading applied only to a few texts and sustained by hearing and memory with “extensive” reading—consuming many texts, passing without constraint from one to another, granting little consecration [*sacralité*] to the object read [see Engelsing and Schön]. Finally, the third of these oppositions is between the reading of intimacy, enclosure, and solitude—considered to be one of the essential foundations of the private sphere—and collective readings, whether orderly or unruly, in communal spaces [see Ariès, “Introduction”; and Chartier, “The Practical Impact of Writing”].

In outlining a preliminary chronological thread, which marks as major transformations the progressive advances of silent reading in the Middle Ages and the entry into the world of extensive reading at the end of the eighteenth century, these now classic contrasts suggest several reflections. Some of these tend to complicate the oppositional pairs presented: shifting attention to the model's inaccuracies, complicating criteria that too rigidly differentiate styles of reading, reversing the image of an automatic connection between the collective and the “popular” or between the elite and the private [see Darnton]. Others invite the articulation of three series of transformations whose effects have often been imperfectly sorted out: first, the “revolutions” that have occurred in the techniques of textual reproduction (with, most importantly, the passage from “scribal culture” to “print culture”); second, the changes in the forms of books themselves (the replacement of the *volumen* by the *codex* in the first centuries of the Christian era is the most fundamental; but others, certainly more subtle, alter the visual layout of the printed page between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries [see Laufer]); and finally, major alterations in reading abilities and in reading modes. These different evolutions do not proceed at the same pace and are not at all organized around the same turning points. The most interesting question posed to and by the history of reading today is without doubt that of the conjunction between these three sets of changes: technological, formal, and cultural.

The response we give to this question depends upon a reevaluation of the trajectories and cultural divisions that characterize the society of the *ancien régime*. More than has been recognized, these were themselves ordered according to the role played by printed works. For a long time their distribution was measured by two restricted series of criteria: one, based upon the proportion of signatures, which sought to establish percentages of literacy and hence to estimate variations in the ability to read according to period, place, gender, and social situation; and another which, by inventorying the catalogues of libraries established by notaries or booksellers, sought to establish the circulation of books and the traditions of reading. But neither in *ancien régime* societies nor in our own can access to printing be reduced simply to the possession of books: not all books read are privately owned, and not all privately owned printed matter is in the form of books.

Moreover written material occupies the very heart of the culture of the illiterate—in rituals, in public spaces, and in workplaces [see Chartier, *The Culture of Print*]. Thanks to speech which deciphers it and to images which accentuate it, it is made accessible even to those who are incapable of reading or who cannot by themselves have more than a rudimentary understanding of the text. Rates of literacy, then, do not give a fair indication of familiarity with the written—particularly because in more traditional communities, where instruction in reading and instruction in writing were dissociated and successive, there were many individuals (especially among women) who left school knowing how to read, at least a little, but not how to write [see Spufford]. Similarly, the private possession of books cannot adequately indicate the frequency with which printed texts were utilized by those who were too poor to have their own “library.”

Even if it is impossible to establish the number of the reading-literate [*lisants*] who did not know how to set their names on paper, or how many possessed not a single book (at least none worth mentioning by a notary establishing the inventory of a decedent’s possessions) but could still read posters and broadsheets, pamphlets and chapbooks, it is necessary to postulate that there were many such readers in order to comprehend the impact of print on the traditional forms of a culture that was still largely oral, gestural, and iconographic. The overlaps between the two modes of expression and communication are multiple: to begin with overlaps between writing and gesture, not only was writing at the center of everyday celebrations such as religious ceremonies, but numerous texts attempt to efface themselves as discourse and to produce, in practice, behavior conforming to social or religious norms. Such is the case, for example, of conduct books [*traités de civilité*], whose aim was to help individuals internalize the rules of worldly politesse or Christian decency [see Patrizi and Chartier]. There is equally an interweaving between speech and writing, in two ways. First, texts intended by their author and, more often, by their publisher to reach the most popular audience often contain formulas or motifs that are themselves drawn from the oral tradition of tales and recitations. The writing styles in certain occasional pieces that plagiarize the speaking style of storytellers or the variations introduced in the fairy tales in the Bibliothèque Bleue, themselves originally drawn from written compilations, are good examples of the emergence of orality in print [see Chartier, “The Hanged Woman Miraculously Saved” and Velay-Vallantin]. Second, as mentioned above, a number of “readers” do not understand texts except through the mediation of a voice. To understand the specificity of this relation to writing thus presumes that all reading is not necessarily individual, silent, and solitary but, on the contrary, marks the importance and diversity of a practice now largely lost—reading aloud.

From this initial assertion, which registers the powerful penetration of printed culture into the societies of the ancien régime, several others follow. It allows us to understand the importance given to writing, and the objects in which it is found, by the authorities, whose intentions were to regulate behavior and to shape minds. Whence the pedagogical, acculturating, and disciplinary role attributed to texts placed in circulation for broad readerships; and the surveillance exercised over printing, subjected to a censor who was supposed to eliminate all that might endanger order, religion, or morals. Concerning these constraints, Michel de Certeau urges us to recognize both their power—all the stronger because of the strength of the institution that decreed them (“The creativity of the reader grows as the institution that controls him declines” [*Practice of Everyday Life* 172])—and their modalities, ranging from brutal prohibition to authorized interpretation, from exterior disciplines (administrative, judicial, inquisitorial, academic, and so forth) to the mechanisms which, in the book itself, seek to restrain the freedom of the reader.

Out of practices of writing and diverse treatments of printing, traditional texts constructed representations in which we can recognize the divisions that were considered decisive by the producers of books. These perceptions are fundamental because they

found the strategies of writing and printing, regulated by the competencies and expectations of the different target audiences. They thereby acquire an efficacy of which the trace can be found in the protocols of explicit reading, in the forms given to typographic objects, or in the transformations that modified a text as soon as it was offered to new readers in a new published format. It is thus from these diverse representations of reading and from the dichotomies constructed in the modern age (between the reading of a text and the reading of an image, between literate reading and unskilled reading, between intimate reading and communal reading) that an attempt must be made to understand the agency and the uses of those printed texts, more modest than the book, but also more pervasive—texts ranging from individual images and posters (always accompanied by words) to occasional pieces and pamphlets like those found in the Bibliothèque Bleue (often illustrated with images). The representations of traditional ways of reading and of their differences from each other (revealed on the practical level by the transformations of printed materials [*mises en imprimé*] or in their normative purposes [*finalité*] by their literary, pictorial, or autobiographical stagings [*mises en scène*]) constitute the essential data for an archeology of reading practices. Yet while they may articulate the contrasts most apparent to the minds of their contemporaries, they should not be allowed to mask other divisions which may have been less clearly perceived. For example, it is certain that there are many practices that reverse the very terms of the frequently described opposition between readings in bourgeois or aristocratic solitude on the one hand, and mass communal readings on the other. Indeed, reading aloud (for others to listen to) remained an enduring, unifying element in elite society, and, conversely, printing penetrated to the very heart of intimate popular culture, capturing in unpretentious objects (not all of which were books) the traces of an important moment of existence, the memory of an emotion, the sign of an identity. Contrary to classic imagery—in fact, a product of the modern age—“the people” are not always plural, and it is necessary to rediscover in their secret solitude the modest practices of those who cut out images of occasional works, colored printed etchings, and read books from the Bibliothèque Bleue for their personal pleasure.

Attached to a particular country (France between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries) and having chosen a specific problem (the effects of the penetration of printed works into popular culture [*la culture du plus grand nombre*]), the approach suggested in this text (and at work in several others) attempts to make functional two propositions of Michel de Certeau. The first reminds us, against all the reductions that cancel out the creative and inventive force of practices, that reading is never totally constrained and that it cannot be recursively deduced from the texts to which it is applied. The second emphasizes that the tactics of readers, infiltrating the “special space” [*lieu propre*] produced by the strategies of writing, obey certain rules, logics, and models. Thus is articulated the founding paradox of any history of reading, which must postulate the freedom of a practice of which, broadly, it can only grasp the determinations. To construct communities of readers as “interpretive communities” (to use the expression of Stanley Fish), to detect how material forms affect meaning, to locate social difference more in real practices than in statistical distributions—such are the paths outlined in our attempt to understand historically this “silent production” which is the activity of reading.

Translated by J. A. González

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