7. Jenna Wortham, "When Anyone Can Be Queer, Is Anyone?," *New York Times Magazine*, July 12, 2016.
8. Kirby, "Transgression," 97.
9. In homage to the 1821 Variorum Shakespeare.
10. *The Year-Boke of the Odd Volumes: Annual Transactions of the Sette, 1893–1894*, ed. W. M. Thompson (London: Bedford Press, 1894 [privately printed]), 56–57.
11. Peter Coviello, *Tomorrow's Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 205.
12. *The Year-Boke of the Odd Volumes: An Annual Record of the Transactions of the Sette, 1897–1898*, ed. John Todhunter (London: Bedford Press, 1898 [privately printed]), 36.
13. See Ellen Crowell, "The Necromancer and the Seer: Bibliophilia at the Fin-de-Siècle," *Times Literary Supplement*, December 18, 2015, 15–17.
14. Jordana Rosenberg, "*Gender Trouble* on Mother's Day," *Avidly: A Channel of the Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 9, 2014.
15. For a discussion of emergent terms that seek to recapture or retain queer "vitality," see Jack Halberstam, "Wildness, Loss, Death," *Social Text* 32, no. 4 (2014): 137–148.
16. Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977–1978)*, trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
17. Claude Cahan, *Disavowals*, trans. Susan de Muth (1930; Boston: MIT Press, 2005), 151.

Reader

DEBRA GETTELMAN

"'TIS an incalculable animal the general Reader!" George Henry Lewes wrote to George Eliot's publishing house about sales of the early books of *Middlemarch* (1871–72), which he hoped would "in time haul in the general public."[1] As literary critics we have a tendency to define the term "reader" by separating potential readers into different

epistemological categories. Lewes's "general Reader" and "general public" refer to actual people who read books. In contrast to these "readers," literary critics use "the reader" in an abstract sense to refer to the ideal or implied consciousness in the position of receiving the book. A book historian might study one particular, historical reader who left behind a record. Compartmentalized as these definitions are, they share a basic, but sometimes unacknowledged, premise that a reader is not the author. Thus it is striking to find in the correspondence between George Eliot and her biggest Victorian fan, Alexander Main, not only overlapping meanings of the term reader, but that both writer and reader seem to share a fantasy of collapsing this distinction between their positions.

In this brief essay I examine Main's unpublished letters in order to highlight some tensions around the various ways we envision, reconstruct, and ultimately project what we refer to as Victorian readers. An eccentric young Scotsman, Main wrote Eliot a fan letter in August 1871 on the premise of asking how to pronounce "Romola"; Eliot continued to respond for several years to his effusive letters (Eliot's publisher, John Blackwood, called him "The Gusher") in which she found, as she wrote to Main, "intense comfort . . . in the response which your mind has given to every 'deliverance' of mine."[2] That Eliot allowed him to collect sound bites from her novels and publish them as *The Wise, Witty, and Tender Sayings of George Eliot* (1873) has been seen as an unfortunate instance of Eliot's willingness to be flattered. Based on Main's own letters, Rebecca Mead alternatively suggests Eliot was touched by Main's appreciation of the higher moral purpose of her art.[3] Main's letters to Eliot continually refer to "the spiritual nourishment in your fiction" and her writing as "full of the tender yet strong Spirit of Humanity."[4] As Lewes wrote to Blackwood, Main's letters "have been a source of extreme gratification and sustainment to Mrs. Lewes . . . because of the real insight and appreciation of her meaning on points where most critics and admirers seem to have been dead."[5] An actual, historical reader, Main saw himself as an implied, idealized figure present in Eliot's mind. As he wrote to her, "I feel (as both you and your noble husband have *made* me feel) that I am in some sense—in some very real sense—present to your thought."[6]

If one of the great themes of Eliot's novels is the ordinary distance between any two conscious minds, and the lyricality of those rare, sympathetic moments when they converge, she held a similar view of authors and readers. "What one's soul thirsts for," Eliot wrote in a letter about the critical reception she sought for *Middlemarch,* "is the word which is

the reflection of one's own aim and delight in writing—the word which shows that what one meant has been perfectly seized, that the emotion which stirred one in writing is repeated in the mind of the reader."[7] Unlike Dickens, for whom the bigger the audience was, the better, Eliot believed few readers would "perfectly seize" her meaning. "Careful, appreciative readers are a small minority," she wrote in defense of the relative unpopularity of *Romola* (1863).[8] Lewes famously helped to keep Eliot apart from critical readings of her novels—"in a mental greenhouse," Margaret Oliphant said—which seems to have fostered a near-sightedness about the reception of her work.[9] Eliot as an author expressed a need for the same sympathy she scripted for her characters, and her exchanges with Main read like a scene from of one of her novels in which that sympathy is, for one climactic moment, embodied. Referring to his own letters, he writes, "I beg you to accept them, always, as the expression, however imperfect, of a sympathy with you and all your thoughts and feelings, which knows no bounds."[10] She received them as such: "The thought of your letters, with all the evidence they contain of no smallest effort on my part at truthful expression being thrown away, has been a sustainment to me quite next to that of my husband's sympathy."[11] Eliot's correspondence with Main gives dimensionality to how she imagined not just an ideal reader, but the act of reading as ideally interpersonal and interdependent, two minds coming together temporarily through sympathy.

But because Main was an actual, historical reader, he eventually showed the same irksome tendency as Eliot's other Victorian readers to forecast the plot. Even after Eliot warned him about "that sort of construction beforehand which makes everything that actually happens a disappointment," far into *Middlemarch*'s serial publication he continued to describe to her, in detail, why Will Ladislaw and Dorothea Brooke should part for life.[12] He adds, somewhat apologetically and somewhat boldly, "You must not be angry with me for having ventured to finish the novel in my own way."[13] Acknowledging his prescribed status as the novel's recipient, Main commands Eliot not to chastise him for overstepping it; he rationalizes to her that the very "interest this part compelled me to take in Dodo & Will . . . would not give me rest till I had followed them, in imagination, to the close."[14] In consequence, Main's letters to Eliot ultimately heighten, rather than collapse, the division between an ideal reader "present to your thought" (as Main flatteringly thought himself to be) and an actual person who reads novels. Exciting current work is happening towards recovering the ever-elusive, subjective experiences

of actual Victorian people who read novels. What we can know is that Victorian authors like Eliot were already aware of how little such minds could be scripted or calculated, and of the vital, creative role that projection plays—ever on the part of all those involved, author, reader, historian, and critic—in constructing and reconstructing any relationship between a reader and a text.

Notes

1. George Henry Lewes to George Eliot, January 1872, in *The George Eliot Letters*, Vol. 5, ed. Gordon Haight (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 243.
2. Eliot to Alexander Main, 14 November 1872, 325.
3. Rebecca Mead, *My Life In Middlemarch* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2014).
4. Main to Eliot, 7 August 1871, in Alexander Main, *Letters from Alexander Main, 1871–1876* (National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh); Main to Eliot, 31 August 1871, in *Alexander Main*.
5. Lewes to Blackwood, 29 September 1871, in *George Eliot Letters*, Vol. 5, 193.
6. Main to Eliot, 26 March 1872, in *Alexander Main*.
7. Eliot to Charles Ritter, 11 February 1873, in *George Eliot Letters*, Vol. 5, 374.
8. Eliot to Ritter, 3 July 1872, in *George Eliot Letters*, Vol. 5, 287.
9. Margaret Oliphant, *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*, ed. Elisabeth Jay (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2002), 50.
10. Main to Eliot, 16 December 1871, in *Alexander Main*.
11. Eliot to Main, 14 November 1872, in *George Eliot Letters*, Vol. 5, 325.
12. Eliot to Main, 29 March 1872, in *George Eliot Letters*, Vol. 5, 261.
13. Main to Eliot, 29 September 1872, in *Alexander Main*.
14. Main to Eliot, 29 September 1872, in *Alexander Main*.

Reading

ELAINE AUYOUNG

NO two occasions of reading are ever exactly the same, not just for different members of the same interpretive community but even