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

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

for the same reader, who might approach the same text with a variety of different reading goals, fluctuating levels of motivation to pursue those goals, and new domains of background knowledge, to say nothing of the reader's variable moods, preferences, and physical surroundings. Psychological efforts to develop an architecture for reading do not discount these individual differences but are pitched at a scale of analysis that makes it possible to identify a set of processes that many reading acts share. This more abstract model of reading can in turn assist literary scholars with developing more sensitive accounts of how specific cultural and material conditions might affect actual communities of readers. Scholars can become attuned to how some of the conditions that contribute to the reading experience have transformed more rapidly than others, and to the fact that not all of these transformations affect every aspect of the reading process in exactly the same way. By imposing certain constraints on our assumptions about how reading works, cognitive perspectives on the comprehension process make it possible to develop more precise and powerful claims about the influence of specific cultural and historical conditions. They can also help us move beyond longstanding assumptions about what novels do.

For instance, even as critics of Victorian fiction have made powerful claims about how nineteenth-century novels teach, train, interpellate, conscript, and construct their readers, what exactly happens during the reading process in many ways remains a mystery in literary studies. While readers routinely reach for metaphors like being transported by or lost in a book, critics have sometimes framed this phenomenon as a process of narrative seduction. Georges Poulet goes so far as to assert that, when reading, his consciousness is overtaken "by the thoughts of another."[1] The sense of self-forgetfulness and surrender that can accompany a reader's absorption in fiction corresponds to psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's concept of "flow." In the 1970s, Csíkszentmihályi found that activities such as reading, painting, playing chess, sculpting, composing music, and dancing could give rise to optimal experiences of attentional absorption, in which participants reported becoming oblivious to everything else, losing track of time and awareness of themselves.[2] Such experiences are relatively rare because the activity being performed must be complex enough to hold our attention without being so difficult that it leads to frustration. It is only when a task is just right for our particular interests and abilities that we can become so absorbed in it that we feel passively borne along by the flow of the activity itself. In other words, as much as readers might feel as if they are gripped or riveted by a story,

achieving flow is possible only when they feel in control of their actions and environment.

Because the felt experience of reading is so distinct from the mental acts underlying it, knowing more about the basic architecture of reading permits us to draw sharper distinctions between what novels can and cannot do to their readers. Contrary to the longstanding assumption that novel reading can be a passive or mindless activity, readers become absorbed in a book because the process of comprehending a text places significant demands on their finite cognitive resources. According to the prevailing model of text comprehension first proposed in 1983, readers comprehend fictional sentences in the same way that they comprehend nonfictional ones.[3] To comprehend a sentence from *Bleak House* such as, "Mr. Guppy sat down at the table and began nervously sharpening the carving-knife on the carving-fork,"[4] readers must construct a mental representation of what is described based on the verbal cues that Dickens provides. These cues prompt readers to retrieve their existing background knowledge, such as what a table is or what it means to sharpen something, as part of making inferences about the action Guppy performs. Here I do not mean to suggest that readers pause to imagine for themselves all the details of the implied scene, but only that, as part of comprehending a text, readers necessarily come away with mental content that is more like the physical world than like the printed text.

Our discipline's longstanding concern with how novels provide readers with the knowledge and abilities they lack has obscured the extent to which literary experience is entwined with what readers already know and are able to do. According to cognitive theories of the embodied mind, features of our empirical experiences become encoded in memory as multimodal "traces" of the original experiences themselves, and these experiential traces can subsequently be retrieved as part of new mental representations.[5] This embodied view of the relationship between language, perception, and action reestablishes the importance of Ferdinand de Saussure's assertion in 1916 that words cannot be separated from the concepts they bring to mind.[6] If comprehending a narrative necessarily involves constructing a mental representation of what the text describes regardless of whether it really refers to objects that exist in the physical world, novelists bring their object "home to us in all its concrete particularity" in part by selecting details that are literally close to home.[7] Readers assist with the writer's effort to evoke fictional persons and places by drawing upon their own rich store of background knowledge, which they have in turn acquired from their own everyday labor

of engaging with the physical world. In this regard, nineteenth-century novels are not so much a training ground where readers practice forms of perception that they will apply in everyday life. Rather, the knowledge they have acquired and the capacities they have honed from the cumulative labor of everyday experience make it possible for readers to grasp a scene that is totally absent from the senses.

Notes

1. Georges Poulet, "Phenomenology of Reading," *New Literary History* 1 (1969): 53–68, 55.
2. Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: Experiencing Flow in Work and Play* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975), 36–48.
3. Teun A. van Dijk and Walter Kintsch, *Strategies of Discourse Comprehension* (New York: Academic Press, 1983).
4. Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. Nicola Bradbury (London: Penguin, 2003), 149.
5. Rolf A. Zwaan and Carol J. Madden, "Embodied Sentence Comprehension," in *Grounding Cognition: The Role of Perception and Action in Memory, Language, and Thinking*, ed. Diane Pecher and Rolf A. Zwaan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 224–45.
6. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 111.
7. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957), 29.

Reading

JESSE CORDES SELBIN

BY the end of the nineteenth century, few social questions had not been linked to what, in 1845, Sarah Stickney Ellis called "the art of reading well."[1] Little wonder, then, that many of today's most imaginative theories of this art have emerged among scholars of nineteenth-century literature; taking this object of study, theorists of methods such as surface reading, distant reading, and curatorial reading reproduce a major concern of their era of study. But unlike those of their