
Literacy: Quantity and Quality

The only literacy that matters is the literacy that is in use. Potential literacy is empty, a void. Literacy is not merely the ability to read; it is the act of reading.

M. M. LEWIS

The Importance of Reading (1953)

Schooling has been transformed into a quantifiable commodity. . . .

E. VERNE

*"Literacy and Industrialization—
The Dispossession of Speech" (1976)*

It is evident that despite the lavish production made for education, a large class of the rising generation is growing illiterate, for a few weeks schooling in the year is practically of no value.

HAMILTON

Palladium of Labour (1884)

Reviewing his experiences in Canada and the United States during the last third of the nineteenth century, Frederick Philip Grove, novelist, laborer, and schoolmaster, drew particular attention to the schools and their transmission of literacy.

Alas! Our schools! We worship the fetish of reading and writing. Useful arts they are, of that there is no doubt. But—I speak from manifold experience—show me the grown-up who wishes to master the arts of reading and writing and cannot do so in a short time—in one-hundredth the time we waste on them in our schools, incidentally making our children into verbalists and spoiling them for reality—and I will show you a mental laggard. We say that

there is an age for these things; that beyond that age it becomes nearly impossible to acquire their knowledge. That is simply one of the superstitions of the ages. Reading and writing and similar inessentials have formed the curriculum of our schools since time immemorial. Why?

Why do our children break away from school as soon as they can? Because they are forced to follow what seems to them futile, silly, purposeless routine. The children are right. Convince yourselves by going to the schools yourselves; by acquiring some art which is taught there in the same deadening way in which it is presented to them. I believe I should soon catch you in playing truant. We are ever-lastingly hitching the buggy in front of the horse; and we think that unfortunately it cannot be helped. A more systematic, organized, wilfully cruel waste than that conducted in our world-wide systems of education no genius of perversity could invent.¹

To Grove, who was only one of many critics, the process of schooling was not succeeding: time was wasted in the classroom, time that dulled, deadened, and literally repelled the young scholars. A child subjected to this routine, Grove averred, would either become a verbalist, unprepared to use his or her education, or would flee, presumably with even fewer useful skills. Observations like these, so common during the last decades of the nineteenth century, redirect our attention to the question of the *quality of literacy*, rather than the *quantity* alone: the level of the skills achieved through schooling and the congruence between that ability, the uses to which it was put, and the needs of the society.

This complex issue forms the basis of the final chapter in this exploration of literacy in the mid-nineteenth century. It is, in many ways, the most difficult problem in the historical analysis of literacy—transcending the treatment of literacy as a dichotomous (either-or) attainment, as the sources typically report it whether by signatures and marks or by census responses. Despite the required artificiality of such an assessment of literacy, general measures of qualitative levels of literacy skills do not exist for entire populations, outside of Scandinavia, making it exceedingly difficult to discover accurately the distribution of abilities, rather than the distribution of the possession or the lack of literacy. The problem is largely unamenable to systematic or quantitative analysis for this society. The few sources that might inform the question of readership, such as library or local institute subscription, membership, or circulation lists, are limited in their availability, representativeness of coverage, and utility. Membership, for example, need not mean use, and borrowing a book does not mean reading or understanding it—despite the assumptions often implicit in studies. Another potential indicator, circulation totals

¹ Grove, *A Search for America* (Toronto, 1927; reprinted: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), 302–304.

of newspapers or journals, is similarly restricted. Not only are circulation figures often quite unreliable, but they are also difficult to find for Upper Canada in this period. Comparing numbers of copies to the size of a potential audience is often no more than guesswork and certainly no more than that considering the number of readers who might hear their contents read aloud. This is not, of course, to say that such studies should not be attempted; they may tell us much about attitudes toward institutions, associations, membership, and values, and about borrowing habits, too. Nevertheless, their value to those raising basic questions about levels of literacy is limited.² The problem requires, instead, the use of a broader stroke and a wider search for indicators and opinion bearing on the *quality* of literacy and the uses to which that literacy could or should be put, successfully or unsuccessfully.

In previous chapters, the distribution of literacy and its limited, sometimes contradictory meaning to individuals of differing ethnicity, class, sex, and age were explored. We can not neglect the basic fact that this was an overwhelmingly literate population, with levels of adult literacy around the 90% mark in each of the cities, and perhaps in Upper Canada as a whole. What does this signify about that literacy *qualitatively*, other than that its possession did not reduce social inequality and was not a requirement for adaptation or some success?

As suggested in Chapter 6, a statistically *high* level of literacy possession may in fact obscure attention from a *lower* qualitative level of ability to use that literacy. In mid-nineteenth-century Sweden, as noted, the ability to read well orally did not always represent an ability to understand what was read. Of all those examined in one parish, only 10% read with passable to good comprehension; of those who read orally with "achievement," only 23% understood passably or better. Most literate individuals were limited in their potential for active employment of

² See the Introduction, above. The work of Paul Kaufman, Robert Winans, and Victor Neuberg is representative of this genre. See, for example, Kaufman, "The Community Library: A Chapter in English Social History," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 57 (1967), "Readers and their Reading in Eighteenth Century Lichfield," *The Library*, 28 (1973), 108-115, *Borrowings from the Bristol Library, 1773-1784* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1960); Winans, "Growth of A Novel-Reading Public in Late-Eighteenth Century America," *Early American Literature*, 9 (1975), 267-275; Neuberg, *Popular Education in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Woburn Press, 1972); Alvar Ellegard, *The Readership of the Periodical Press in Mid-Victorian Britain*, Vol. 63, No. 3, Goteborgs Universitets Arsskrift (Goteborg, Sweden, 1957). See also, Michael Harris and Donald Davis, eds., *American Library History: A Bibliography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978), for further examples. For one useful corrective, see Raymond Williams, "The press and popular culture: an historical perspective," in *Newspaper History*, ed. George Boyce, James Curran, and Pauline Wingate (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1978), 41-50.

their literacy skills, and there is no reason why such an examination, if possible, should uncover very different results in North America—revealing that literacy was, commonly, imperfect. The available evidence, as this chapter details, when evaluated as an indicator of the level of popular skills, points to a similar conclusion. We will consider, in the first two sections of the chapter, the question of ability and its quality.

Secondly, the necessarily related question of the uses of that level of skill and the correspondence between abilities and needs is confronted. No inclusive, systematic answer is now possible. The evidence and the logic of inquiry, nevertheless, do indicate that levels of popular literacy were at once sufficient to satisfy many of the demands of society yet inappropriate for others. The meaning and value of literacy to individuals and to the society was complex and in some ways contradictory. In the relationship between promotion and everyday uses and the primarily nonutilitarian bases of mass employment of literacy, needs were incompletely satisfied by abilities. The officially stated importance of literacy only partially corresponded to literacy's social roles.

I

The experience of schooling at mid-century provides one set of indicators that inform us about the level of literacy skills in the society. The history of public education in one of the cities examined above, Kingston, illustrates the number of complications militating against effective early learning and the development of proficiency in literacy. Problems of physical conditions, attendance, teacher ability, and instructional method intersected in the classroom. The reports of the local superintendent in the 1850s reveal the scope and magnitude of the factors that obstructed successful learning and the development of superior skills.

The description begins in 1850 with the simple, stereotypical comment "Our schools are obviously susceptible of much improvement." The physical setting of learning was identified as one impediment, for suitable school accommodations were a presumed prerequisite of successful education. In Kingston, however, "no one can teach, no child can learn, if exposed to a current of air from every side of a building, while the thermometer ranges from 20° to 25° below zero." Not only were classrooms unsuited climatically for effective education, but they were overpopulated as well. Schoolrooms were crowded; "children of all ages, are packed in their seats as close as one's fingers." The schools, local Superintendent R. S. Henderson urged, were improving in effi-

ciency, yet they continued to be plagued by "the want of suitable school-houses with furniture, books, and other requisites of study, and a proper classification of the pupils." Children of all ages were huddled in crowded, low, and ill-ventilated rooms, with insufficient numbers of desks and few aids "to assist in developing the intellect or lure the mind to study."

"Bodily health is essential to a vigorous mind," Henderson knew, "but this cannot be long retained in an atmosphere reeking with the impurities of sixty or seventy bodies." Teacher and student alike felt their minds benumbed; languor, inactivity, and impaired health were pervasive. The natural consequence, he judged, was not only an aversion to study but also sickness and disease. As these conditions turned children away from the school and all associated with it, so they negatively influenced parental actions, too, "A parent who cares for the health of his child, who has learned to value the inestimable blessing of 'a sound mind in a sound body,' will not send him to such a school and hence, perhaps, in some measure the alleged fact, that hundreds of grown-up children about Kingston never attend school."

Tied to these circumstances were problems of attendance. Henderson found, in 1851, that "the statistics of the number in daily attendance could scarcely be credited, and astonishment and incredulity were manifested at the large number said to be growing up without education of any kind to fit them to discharge the duties of life." The next year enrollment actually declined; daily attendance was at 50% or less. This, of course, was but one-half of the children enrolled, not the eligible ones; nor were the same children in school day after day. Individual attendance was very irregular. While gratified that so many sent their children (with "undiminished confidence"), Henderson still concluded that "as many as were in daily attendance at the common schools, were growing up ignorant of even a knowledge of reading." His own calculations, in fact, indicated that perhaps fewer than 20% of 5- to 16-year-olds attended regularly.

Bad teachers were another obstacle to successful instruction. Many were poorly qualified; many had difficulties in passing the second- or third-class certification examinations. "With such a staff of teachers in a large city to conduct the education of some thousands of children, many above the age of 15 years, it is not unfair to conclude that our schools can never arrive at a higher degree of perfection." With teachers like these, the children "may continue to move backward and forward over the same ground for a number of years; but they must finally retire from school in comparative ignorance of all but the elements of a very common education."

The organization of the curriculum further interfered with even

a good teacher's work. As instruction was designed, each teacher was required to teach all branches of the common-school curriculum, "involving an amount and variety of labor in a crowded school-room that cannot but be superficial and unproductive to any extent, of a thorough knowledge of any one of the branches taught." Only first class teachers, of whom there were too few, were qualified to teach all these subjects. Good teachers were not only exceptional, they also were insufficiently commended or rewarded for their abilities and efforts; rather, "they are employed today, dismissed tomorrow, and forgotten the next day."³

Finally, there is the question of how the teachers taught. In Kingston, each day instructors faced classes averaging seventy pupils, classified or unclassified by age and attainment, with a potential numbering twice that if all those enrolled were to attend simultaneously. The faces undoubtedly varied daily and monthly as schooling remained an irregular and discontinuous experience for many youngsters. Family mobility also uprooted pupils. Among those present, problems existed that centered on reading instruction. Henderson did not attempt to hide this, admitting that "probably there is no branch in which the pupils attending our schools are more deficient than in the art of good reading." This arose, he continued, not so much from incapacity on the teachers' part as from the inattention to and lack of appreciation of the importance of teaching children to read English fluently and correctly. Too often the other branches of study were permitted to encroach upon the time allotted to reading instruction.

At fault appeared to be the pedagogical method as well as the lack of time given to it. The old system of teaching the alphabet first, then advancing to the spelling of syllables of two or three letters remained the rule in Kingston's schools. The need to replace this "pernicious system" with teaching by whole words and the sounds of the words was recognized; its supposed endorsement by the Chief Superintendent and its applicability to the new National Readers were noted. But the old mode prevailed in the schools, only to "eventually be superceded." For better training in reading, Henderson was certain, the new "word method" must be instituted. In 1851, it was to replace teaching by letters and syllables "in none of which are the elementary sound of these letters heard," and in 1852 to supplant reading taught by the sounds of the letters. His confusion about instructional methods is important, as

³"City of Kingston," Excerpts from Local Superintendent's Reports, *Annual Report of the Chief Superintendent . . . for Upper Canada*, 1850, 1851, 1852. For English parallels, see R. D. Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 150. See also, Ian Davey, "Educational Reform and the Working Class," unpub. PhD. Diss., University of Toronto, 1975.

we will see; but regardless, "scholars were growing up in ignorance of even a knowledge of reading."

What Henderson decried was "children reading what they evidently do not understand, and hence the habit of what is called school reading." To Henderson and to many of his generation, good reading was primarily reading which sounded good: "The essential characteristics of a good reader are a just enunciation of sounds as well as words. . . . Children naturally speak correctly—their language is simple—they use only words of which they comprehend the full meaning," it was assumed. Their reading should be the same as their speaking: clear, distinct, emphatic, natural, and comprehending. Contradictions and differences between the language of the home and the street, on the one hand, and that of the school and the book, on the other, in style and diction, were apparently overlooked. Also neglected was the fact that reading adequate in terms of enunciation did not imply comprehension, even if a slight relationship did exist. Surely, though, that style of reading alone formed a limited goal, but not even this kind of reading prevailed in Kingston's schools at mid-century.⁴

Classroom management constituted another aspect of the inadequacy in pedagogical technique. "The most valuable part of a child's time" was wasted, for, on the average, pupils were called upon for a recitation of their ABCs twice daily, "the rest of the time spent in listless activity and stupor, if order is maintained in the school." Five of each six hours spent daily in class went unoccupied, the schoolroom becoming "a prison from which [the child] gladly escapes, and to which he unwillingly returns." The children dared not speak or ask questions; this would violate classroom order. "His active little mind, playing in his healthy body, looking for and desiring knowledge, is curbed, depressed, broken, under the discipline of the present system." Fondness for learning and study were presumed to depend on the nature of early encounters with the school. From the beginning, then, desire was being crushed.

Obviously, there were many impediments to learning, especially learning to read well either orally or comprehendingly, in Kingston during the 1850s. An account of such problems has a significance that transcends the experience of Kingston alone. As anyone familiar with the history of education (or inner-city schools today) will immediately recognize, these problems were hardly unique to that city. They repre-

⁴ See Daniel Calhoun, *The Intelligence of a People* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 80; "City of Kingston," *Annual Report*, 1851, 1852, 1853; Local Superintendent's Reports, RG-2, Box 21, Provincial Archives of Ontario. For a twentieth-century analogy, see H. R. Huise, *The Illiteracy of the Literate* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1933).

sented the common complaints of school reformers and many teachers at mid-century. In its educational condition, Kingston was typical; it highlights the manner in which these common difficulties converged and impinged upon the transmission of literacy and its resulting quality. In some places, urban or rural, the situation would be better, in others worse. Yet in these accounts are found important indicators which inform our assessment about the quality of literacy skills in the middle years of the nineteenth century. Even when one proceeds cautiously and allows for the effects of promotional aims on the published descriptions penned by schoolmen, the main conclusion is inescapable: Common schooling experiences were not in most cases likely to produce more than imperfectly skilled individuals.

This conclusion derives support from other indicators, as we will soon see. And, importantly, an imperfect level of popular literacy ability was peculiar neither to Kingston nor to the 1850s. In the face of improvements in a number of the contributing factors, contemporary evaluations and other indicators reveal the persistence of less than perfect qualitative abilities. During the three succeeding decades, facilities changed, as larger, more commodious, better-lit and better-ventilated schoolhouses, stocked with more modern, up-to-date learning aids and equipment accompanied the expansion and systematization of education. This was especially true in urban areas. The quality and preparation of the teaching force grew more satisfactory, too. More first-class teachers were produced by the normal schools, and increasingly only first- and second-class teachers were hired by the city systems. The stabilizing of the instructional force accompanied the professionalization and the bureaucratization of education. Finally, by the 1870s enrollment levels among children aged 7-12 or 5-14 years rose to near universalistic proportions, especially in the cities of Ontario, and pupils were more efficiently classified and graded by age.

Along with this modernization of schooling, problems that were identified in Kingston and elsewhere persisted, blocking progress in elementary instruction. One obstacle was low daily school attendance—rather than total enrollment. In Hamilton, for example, in 1851 only at the ages 9 to 11 were even a majority of children enrolled, and by 1861 still fewer than two-thirds attended. Of course, more and more children were successfully herded into classrooms for longer periods, as the hegemony of the school was more firmly established. But little progress was made in the frequency of attendance, as Ian Davey has shown. From the 1850s through the 1870s, daily attendance remained at about 50% of the enrollment levels. On any given day, little more than half of those enrolled were found in the classrooms, despite the growth in the population of pupils from less than half of those eligible to nearly

all.⁵ With common attendance of 100 days or less for most children, we must ask how infrequent and irregular attendance exacerbated the other problems of instruction. Reading specialists today remain uncertain about the amount of time required for learning good reading skills, but there is agreement that irregular attendance is one important obstacle to progress toward more satisfactory levels of literacy.⁶

Classroom conditions, even if improving physically, continued to militate against the acquisition of proficiency in literacy. The pupil-teacher ratios found in Kingston were representative of those across the province and in the other cities. Ratios exceeding 100 enrolled pupils per teacher, and about 70 daily, remained common throughout the 1850s to the 1870s at least. Age-graded instruction, intended to homogenize the learning experience and narrow the disparate range of abilities within a group of youngsters, had little impact on class size, especially among the younger pupils. In addition, female teachers increasingly taught the youngsters, and they were underpaid, often with lower qualifications than men. Classroom management was expected to be as central to their work as instruction.⁷ The need to combine the two in daily practice could result in the stultifying routine censured by Superintendent Henderson. Whether discipline was harsh or soft, the 70 bodies and minds had to be kept occupied, often in rote exercises of recitation and imitation. Consequently, grouped activities, military-like drills, mechanical exercises, and rigid timetabling increasingly became common practice, so that no pupil would be unoccupied or become restless. This was one result of the "new" learning theory or "soft" pedagogy that replaced the older style of enforced inactivity and strict discipline, forming the classroom setting in which reading was to be learned.⁸ This was hardly a forum conducive to the acquisition of skills of a high quality.

The rates of adult literacy provide concrete evidence that some

⁵ See the *Annual Report of the Chief Superintendent, 1850-1871*, for documentation of change. See also Davey, "Educational Reform"; Michael B. Katz, "Who Went to School?" *History of Education Quarterly*, 12 (1972), 432-454.

⁶ For example, see Cyril Burt, "The Education of Illiterate Adults," *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 15 (1945), 23, 20-27; Jean Chall, *Learning to Read* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967); Chall and J. B. Carroll, eds. *Toward A Literate Society* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975).

⁷ *Annual Reports*; Alison Prentice, "The Femiinization of Teaching in British North America and Canada," *Histoire sociale*, 8 (1975), 5-20; Keith Melder, "Woman's High Calling," *American Studies*, 13 (1972), 19-32; R. M. Bernard and M. A. Vinovskis, "The Female School Teacher in Ante-Bellum Massachusetts," *Journal of Social History*, 10 (1977), 332-345.

⁸ Ryerson, "Report on a System of Public Elementary Instruction for Upper Canada," in *Documentary History of Education*, ed. J. C. Hodgins, 6 (Toronto, 1899); *Annual Reports*. See also Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), Part II, for the context of the Massachusetts discussion.

degree of instruction was assimilated by almost all children, yet these manifold complications and the continuing infrequency of attendance force us to consider that the common level of reading ability was far from perfect. Exposure to teaching, correction, practice, drill, and reinforcement was limited for a great many children in the years most essential for gaining the basic skills of education. No doubt the quality of literacy suffered as a result; this was not lost to contemporaries.⁹

II

Methods of reading instruction, considered by Henderson among the impediments, provide an especially revealing indicator of the obstructions to effective learning and of the quality of the literacy skills gained in the schools. Reading-instructional methods were a matter of great concern to educators throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. Several approaches, in particular those favoring either the letters or the words first, competed for attention and adoption in the classroom. Each had its supporters and detractors, ready and able to prove the success of what they championed and the failure of the other; each was tied to a style of pedagogy. This rivalry, often bitter and producing exaggeration and hyperbole in the context of the different values of pedagogical schools, makes an analysis of the debate very tricky. What does emerge clearly, nevertheless, is the common dissatisfaction with reading instruction and its results, which bears significantly on the quality of the literacy transmitted by the schools. The problem of teaching children, or even adults, to read is very complicated and less than satisfactorily resolved, as present-day research and teacher opinion continue to make evident. In the past century, controversy raged at least as often as it does today, and understanding lagged behind. Furthermore, the style

⁹ Reports from Commissioners, Popular Education, Great Britain, 1861, *Sessional Papers*, 21, Part I, esp. Sections II and III. Roger Smith, "Education, Society and Literacy: Nottinghamshire in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *University of Birmingham Historical Journal*, 12 (1969), 42-56, poses this question in an opposite but complementary way: "Our only general conclusion, therefore, must be that no simple relationship existed between school attendance and minimum literacy. . . . Considering the proportion of children in each district who had received a schooling of one sort or the other, we must be surprised that there were such high proportions of illiterates. Part of this may reflect the sheer inefficiency of many of the schools." Of course, his measure was the signature, whose learning we may presume required a period of schooling longer than that for the barest mechanical reading. See also, Calhoun, *Intelligence*.

of reading that usually formed the explicit goal of educators was one that confused oral with cognitive ability, reinforcing our conclusion that reading with comprehension was an accomplishment not always achieved.¹⁰ The debate over methods was widespread throughout Anglo-America with much of it conducted outside of Canada, but it was followed closely by men like Ryerson who made their contributions within the terms of the controversy.

In his omnibus report of 1846, Egerton Ryerson devoted seven pages to the importance of reading-instructional methods. Revealing his debt to his own and Horace Mann's observations in Prussia and to debates in the United States, he claimed, "I have thus adverted to this subject, not with a view of advocating any particular theory, but to show how much importance is involved in this first step of elementary teaching, and how much may be done." Primarily, he censured the dominant practice of teaching the alphabet first, as Henderson did six years later. This approach he found tedious to the teacher, stultifying to the student—"protracted for many months" in its purely mechanical process. Lacking were, in his opinion, meaning, ideas, and applications. Indignantly, Ryerson asked, "Is it not calculated to deaden rather than quicken the intellectual faculties? Is not such irrational drudgery calculated to disgust the subject of it with the very thoughts of learning?" In the rote repetition of the letters, sometimes extending to years, the intellectual side—the meaning of what was read—was neglected; obscured were "the meanings of the words used, the facts narrated, the principles involved, the lessons inculcated." Children learned neither useful skills nor fluency; they learned little more than indifference or aversion to reading, and with "so few pleasant recollections, that they engaged in it with reluctance, and only from necessity." Although he

¹⁰ On reading instruction, see H. B. Lampert, "A History of the Teaching of Beginning Reading," unpub. PhD. Diss., University of Chicago, 1935; M. M. Matthews, *Teaching to Read Historically Considered* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966); N. B. Smith, *American Reading Instruction* (Newark, Del.: International Reading Association, 1934); F. Adams, L. Gray, and D. Reese, *Teaching Children to Read* (New York: Ronald Press, 1949); E. B. Huey, *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading* (New York, 1908, reprinted, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968); W. J. F. Davies, *Teaching Reading in Early England* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1974); W. S. Gray, *The Teaching of Reading and Writing* (Paris: UNESCO, 1956); Chall, *Learning*; Chall and Carroll, *Literate Society*; "Reading, Language, and Learning," *Harvard Educational Review*, 47 (August, 1977); Calhoun, *Intelligence*. Calhoun's work is particularly valuable, although my conclusions about reading instruction in the nineteenth century were formed before his volume was published. See also, José Ortega y Gasset, "The Difficulty of Reading," *Diogenes*, 28 (1959), 1-17. We should note also the persisting problems and controversies over reading methods.

was convinced that the prevailing alphabetic method had to be replaced, Ryerson, revealingly, felt unprepared to advocate any specific substitute.¹¹

With Ryerson's comments, we enter the debate at midpoint. His comments were largely derivative, and Upper Canadians did not make novel or original contributions. They followed the discussions in the United States and usually sided with proponents of the new, so-called "soft" pedagogy: the "natural" way for learning to advance.¹² Henry Esson, Canada's first theorist of instruction, for example, followed this organic, natural view of language-learning in his *Strictures on the Present Method of Teaching the English Language and Suggestions for its Improvement*. Languages, in this view, represented nature; words carried the simple ideas, conceptions, and notions that were the indigenous productions of the mind. Following nature's order, the pupil should be taught "to dispose words, the signs of thought, as nearly as possible, in the order of the things signified, that is, in the order of the system . . . so as to fit it to the end of education." Learning in a progressive, organized way, the pupil would advance easily, rather than plodding "in darkness and disgust through the to him, unintelligible metaphysics of language coming . . . before his knowledge is such as to admit of the possibility of his understanding it" as in the other method. Understanding would therefore systematically and scientifically replace mechanical, unnatural, and preposterous instruction, as knowledge of the words fostered intellectual education and the act of thinking.¹³ In this perspective on learning theory and on reading approaches, Esson's conception paralleled the criticisms of older modes and the pedagogical innovations that swept Anglo-America and elsewhere in the west by mid-century. The recognition that the alphabetic method and the style of pedagogy associated with it produced individuals who, though technically literate, read poorly at best led to bitter controversy.

In the United States, the debate was more widespread, the criticism sharper, and the elaboration and defense of both methods more detailed. From these statements and descriptions, the level of reading ability may be assessed. Criticism of method and results, in fact, surfaced well before

¹¹ Ryerson, "Report on a System," 167, 163, 168.

¹² See George Combe, *The Constitution of Man* (Hartford, Conn., 1845) on the philosophical bases of the new pedagogy, as well as Katz, *The Irony*. See also Nelson Sizer, *How to Teach According to Temperament and Mental Development* (New York, 1877). For England, see Richard Johnson, "Notes on the Schooling of the English Working Class," in *Schooling and Capitalism*, ed. R. Dale, G. Esland, and M. MacDonald (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1976), 48. On the fallacies in such approaches, see Frank Smith, "Making Sense of Reading," *Harvard Educational Review*, special issue, 386-395.

¹³ (Toronto, 1852), 12, 14-15, 19, 23, 24.

the escalation of debate in the 1840s and 1850s. In 1830, William Russell foreshadowed the controversy in a lecture to the American Institute of Instruction, and several years later, Thomas Palmer discussed educational failings in an address to the same body. Both found too little attention paid to fundamentals like reading. Consequently, Palmer asserted, "not one out of twenty—nay, . . . not one out of fifty—who had no further privilege of education than our district schools afford, has derived that advantage which they ought to confer on every individual, the ability of going forward alone with his education." Very few were able to make practical use of their education, whether on the higher level at which reading and thinking reciprocally joined or on the level of a mind disciplined by reading to be able, for example, to follow the "chain of reasoning" of a minister. The causes were many, as in Kingston, as classroom instruction and "the result of the vicious habits acquired in learning to read" were blamed for the low quality of literacy. Not only did the younger pupils copy the bad habits of the older ones, but also reading represented little more than "a mere utterance of sounds," and "a mere affair of memory." "[A]s to the comprehension of the *meaning*," Palmer concluded, "the language might as well have been Greek, Arabic, or Chinese, as English."¹⁴

These criticisms, though revealing, were no more than a preamble to the major debate in Massachusetts, which erupted in the 1840s, between Horace Mann and the Association of Boston Schoolmasters. Constituting an important chapter in the reform of the schools, the rich detail of their exchanges provides a rare opportunity to examine mid-nineteenth-century reading instruction and practices. They permit us to focus specifically on the faults found inherent in each system and the problems involved in instruction for good reading skills. Importantly, the difficulties were more than matters of age-grading, physical conditions, or materials, all of which were eventually improved.

Mann's *Second Annual Report*, of 1839, frontally attacked the alphabetic method and the pedagogic values it represented. With others, he was impressed by the lack of mental activity and the "obvious want of intelligence, in the reading classes, respecting the subject matter of the lessons." Finding pupils unable to spell or understand, Mann estimated that fully eleven-twelfths of the reading students in the schools of Massachusetts neither understood the meanings of the words they uttered nor mastered the sense of their lessons nor grasped the ideas or feelings intended by the authors. Age-grading, contrary to the hopes of

¹⁴ Russell, "The Infant School System of Instruction," *Proceedings*, The American Institute of Instruction, 1 (1830), 98; Palmer, "Evils of the Present System of Primary Instruction," *ibid.*, 8 (1837), 211, 212, 214, 216.

many, had not countered the instructional problems, for (as today) "it is probable also, that this mischief may have been aggravated, in those places where there is a gradation of schools, by the conditions, prescribed in their regulations, for advancing from one school to another." To advance, fluent or good-sounding reading was required; yet "there is a great danger that the value of *intelligent* reading will be sacrificed to the worthlessness of mere fluent reading."¹⁵

Confusion about the sound of reading plagued schoolmen throughout the period. Fluency or naturalness represented good reading and supposedly symbolized understanding; yet, as Mann admitted, it could too easily obscure a lack of comprehension. Promoting students from level to level exacerbated these dangers, as the English Royal Commission on Popular Education discovered. Inspection there involved hearing each pupil read; 150 were examined in an hour and a half, a rate of one each 36 seconds—hardly a test assuring good reading ability. Parents, Mann emphasized, asked not "What have you read about?" but "How many times and how much have you read?" Comprehension and quality were subordinated to the number of pages "mechanically gone over." Inquiries centered on the amount of labor, "done by the organs of speech," the quantity of pages—not the skills learned and practiced.¹⁶ The result was pretending to read what was not understood, a fluency and articulation that did not represent comprehension but that could be taken for literacy.

Mann's colleague Cyrus Peirce, former principal of the Normal School at Lexington, continued the criticism of traditional methodology in his 1843 lecture "On Reading." Echoing Mann's disapproval, he censured repetition and the length of time spent learning the letters and their sounds, finding reading usually poor in understanding and enunciation ("nasal, drawling, twanging or the hurried slurring, indistinct utterance"). Ignoring that such speech habits were rooted in ethnic linguistic diversity, he apparently did not relate them to the applauded, natural, language of children. Rather, oral errors were signs of noncomprehension, from compelling children to read what they did not understand or to read words with which they were not familiar. Knowing only the letters, they were totally "occupied in deciding what to *call the word*; they have nothing to bestow upon the meaning, the understanding of which is necessary to bring out the proper tone and inflection," he presumed. They read neither intelligibly nor intelligently.

¹⁵ *Second Annual Report of the Secretary of the (Massachusetts) Board of Education* (Boston, 1839), 37, 39.

¹⁶ Commission, Popular Education, *Sessional Papers*, 239; Mann, *Second Annual Report*, 39–40.

Instead, Peirce, Mann, Esson, Henderson, among others, urged that *words* be taught first: short, simple, familiar words that could be combined to form sentences. This would be pleasing to the pupils, and the "form or appearance" of the word would be learned together with its pronunciation and meaning. In this manner—consistent with reason, philosophy, and common sense (they claimed)—up to one thousand words should be learned before the letters, with their names and "powers," were introduced: "Children begin to *talk* with words, and why should they not begin to *read* with *words*?" Peirce asked. The relationship between print and sound, and the connections between sight and speech, as bases for learning to read, were simply never considered.¹⁷

The final, and provocative, round in this attack on the alphabetic method began in the primary schoolrooms of Prussia, as was noted in observations made by Horace Mann and later by Ryerson. They found active, interested pupils, learning to read quickly without knowing the names of the letters, only their "powers." Pupils neither echoed the alphabet nor waited vacantly between recitations; they were taught reading simultaneously with spelling, grammar, and drawing. The letters were ignored, and the error of giving pupils names that were not elements in the sounds of words was avoided. Learning the letters contradicted children's normal habits, as Mann exaggerated; "were it not for keeping up [the pupil's] former habits of speaking, at home and in the playground, the teacher, during the six months or year in which he confines him to the twenty-six sounds of the alphabet, would pretty much deprive him of the faculty of speech." Words, it was concluded, must replace letters and even sounds in reading method, for the Prussian phonic system was considered ill-suited to the English language.¹⁸

Many schoolmen joined in criticisms of the "old method," finding it productive of readers who did not understand what they read. Yet alphabetic instruction did not swiftly disappear, as Henderson's and Ryerson's testimony shows. Some instructors remained convinced of its success, especially when they compared it to the word method. Challenging the claims advanced against their approach, they responded that the newly proposed method did not train children to read well, a claim for which they found support. Opposed to the pedagogical values the new learning represented, the Boston school masters, in particular, counter-attacked Mann and Peirce, devoting special attention to problems of

¹⁷ *Lectures*, American Institute of Instruction, 1843 (Boston, 1844), 143–184; 144, 159, 153, 157–158, 149–153, 156, 160–161. On problems with this approach, see Smith, "Making Sense," 388, ff.

¹⁸ *Seventh Annual Report . . .* (Boston, 1844), 86–90, 93, 99. See also Ryerson, "Report"; "City of Kingston," 1851, 1852.

reading instruction. They stressed, on the one hand, that the proponents of "words first" offered no good reasons to deviate from the scientific rule that "the elements should be taught first," and, on the other, that the new method did not even succeed. "Primary school teachers, who have tried the system," Samuel Greene wrote, "testify that when children learned a word in one connection, they are unable to recognize it in another, especially if there be a change of type." The masters were not persuaded that instruction in letters deprived children of their knowledge of language gained from hearing, speaking, and observing. Rather, "reading aloud is nothing less than translating *written* into *audible* signs, a knowledge of the latter, whatever may be the system of teaching, is presupposed to exist, and is about as necessary to the one learning to read, as would be a knowledge of the English language to one who would translate Greek into English." Surely there were no differences between the claims of the rival methods here, they urged, although the masters suggested that the word method confused written and spoken language, to the detriment of reading—an assertion supported by recent studies, in fact.¹⁹

Much of the attack on their method, the masters argued, was no more than a confusion of the names of letters with their "powers." Mann's oversight lay here, as he misunderstood the Prussian instruction which provided the form and "power" of each letter. These were then combined into written and spoken words, respectively—precisely the way they themselves taught, except that they added the letters' names as well: "to teach the alphabet . . . is to teach all that belongs to it." They simply could not understand how the Prussian example led Mann to promote such a change, "one which converts our language into Chinese," for they found the new method vastly inferior. It made the process of instruction more difficult, increasing the task tenfold if the alphabet were not known. Similarly, the new method, by avoiding letters, failed to escape the ambiguities and perplexities of the language—against the claim of its supporters. Enunciation, moreover, so important to all methodologists at this time, would suffer too. Only drill in elementary sounds could correct the habits of inarticulate speech, universally brought to school, especially by children from uneducated families. To the masters, the feelings and natural ways supposedly instinctive to

¹⁹ See Association of Masters of the (Boston) Public Schools, *Remarks on the Seventh Annual Report of the Honourable Horace Mann, Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education* (Boston, 1844), 56-103; Samuel Greene, "On Methods of Teaching to Read," American Institute of Instruction, *Lectures*, 1844 (Boston, 1845), 211, 213-216, 207-235. See also, Smith, "Making Sense"; Chall, *Learning*, on the problems associated with these common methods, as well as continuing failings today.

the children and applauded by "soft" pedagogues were more detriments to good reading than assets.²⁰

Behind these methodological differences were opposing conceptions of human nature and motivation. For example, the masters emphasized the importance of duty and discipline, contrasting with reformers' stress on activity and pleasure.²¹ In its own terms, each side found the other wanting; each urged, however, the value of the pleasure arising from apprehending meaning in reading. The masters thus denied that pleasure arose from the new method; to them the teacher provided the meaning in giving the word and its sound, neither teaching children to read for themselves nor providing a source of motivation. The testimony of teachers who had used both methods was sought, leading to the conclusion that "in the end, nothing is gained, but much is lost; that the task of teaching the alphabet, and the art of combining letters into words, are more difficult, and less satisfactory, than if the child had begun with the letters."²² Failure was also likely with the new system; children were not learning to read well, to understand, or to use their reading ability.

Regardless of the values inherent in the views of each side, the explicit criticisms and descriptions constituting the two sides of the debate join on one central issue: *children were not learning to read well, either fluently or comprehendingly*. Each argument employed the weight of science, philosophy, nature, and human nature; cited the opinion of teachers; recognized the importance of proper articulation, spelling, drill, and repetition; and valued reading for meaning. Yet each persisted in contending that children learned to read a language that they did not understand. Rivalry and competing values and methods must not obscure the major issue; both methods were condemned as failing in their goals. In this regard, Ryerson's inability and unwillingness to advocate any one method was telling. He had seen the Prussian technique, he had read Mann's critiques, and he had made observations in Upper Canada. But no one method would he support for instruction in either oral reading or the skills of comprehension. Failure to achieve good reading—for meaning—was, at the very least, quite possible regardless of the method adopted and the prevailing style of pedagogy.

The alphabetic method in fact was most common during the 1830s

²⁰ Masters, *Remarks*, 77–78; Greene, "Methods," 233.

²¹ See Katz, *Irony*, esp. 139–146, for larger pedagogical implications of the debate.

²² Greene, "Methods," 220, 221; Masters, *Remarks*, 56, 83–87, 99. The debate continued; see Mann, *Reply to the "Remarks of Thirty-one Schoolmasters"* (Boston, 1844), *Answer to the "Rejoinder" of Twenty-nine Boston Schoolmasters* (Boston, 1845); Masters, *Rejoinder to the Reply* . . . (Boston, 1845).

and 1840s. This was the time at which the future adult residents of Upper Canadian cities had their schooling, however limited, in Canada, the United States, or (for most) in the British Isles. English reports, importantly, stress the same problems in learning to read and in the quality of reading ability. A report to the Council of Education in 1851-1852, for example, maintained that instruction in reading was such that "the subject-matter of the book becomes practically of little importance," and that both teacher and pupil "remain equally ignorant of what it was intended to teach; and it is degraded into a mere implement for the mechanical teaching of reading. . . ." As elsewhere, comprehension was hardly the predominant result of reading instruction. Leaving school by age 10 or 11 was common, limiting exposure for many middle-class as well as working-class children. Even in the "best schools," less than one-third reached the standards; "a fair elementary education," the Commission on Public Education reported in 1861, was attained by only one-fourth of those who attended, or one-eighth of all children. Of those who reached the first class of the primary school, moreover, many had neither an ability nor a taste for reading; they soon forgot what they learned and relapsed into the condition of the uneducated, it was claimed. The large National Schools, furthermore, made proper education impossible; "in some reading is not taught at all in any real or sufficient sense."²³

The problem, as in North America, hinged on the concentration on oral reading and neglect of attention to meaning. Reading was the most deficient subject, and little proficiency was found in either aspect, as pupils learned by memory and were unable to connect the meaning with the sounds of the words. Pupils, in fact, could "often reach a comparatively high position in the school, reading inarticulately, spelling incorrectly, and with the vaguest notions of numeration." To many of the children, the language of books was a foreign language; "the children are baffled, confused, and disheartened, and as a natural conse-

²³ Rev. Moseley in *Minutes of Committee of Council of Education (1851-1852)*, 1, 288, as quoted in J. M. Goldstrum, *The Social Context of Education, 1808-1870* (Shannon: Irish Universities Press, 1972), 148; Commission, *Popular Education*, 239, 244, 248. Their goal for primary education is noteworthy too: a pupil should "spell correctly the words he will have to use; he shall read a common narrative—the paragraph in the newspaper that he cares to read—with sufficient ease to be a pleasure to himself and to convey information to listeners . . . write his mother a letter . . . legible and intelligible; he knows enough of ciphering to make out, to test the correctness of a common shop bill. . . . Underlying all, and not without its influence, I trust, upon his life and conversation, he has acquaintance with the Holy Scriptures . . . to know what are the duties required of him toward his Maker and his fellow men," 243.

quence, they subside into stolid indifference.”²⁴ The quality of literacy that immigrants brought to North America was apparently no higher than that acquired there.

In England, damning reports such as that of the Popular Education Commission were instrumental in changing the structure of school support, with the immediate effect of instituting the system of “payment for results” to promote an emphasis on basic skills. Yet this change brought no reports of progress in reading. Criticism remained harsh, as the Council on Education reported in 1865–1866: “If their reading is to mean not only the correct utterance of the printed words, but an intelligent comprehension of what is uttered, then I fear that the percentage of children whom I can pass will be very small indeed.” The ascerbic critic W. B. Hodgson reviewed the reading progress also, finding no stimulation or success, only that “it has injuriously affected . . . all that deserves the name of education, while it has not generally succeeded in ensuring even mechanical proficiency in the three arts specifically fostered.”²⁵ Skill in reading, even mechanically, remained to many observers at a low level, and what verbal fluency there was obscured the absence of comprehension. Much was wanting in the transmission of the quality of literacy in the places that were the original homes of many Upper Canadians.

Regardless of the location of primary schooling, then, failure to achieve good reading skills was quite common. No doubt pupils learned something that could be called reading, for over 90% of them considered themselves able to read. Yet given the circumstances in which they were educated, the irregularity of attendance, and the methods that prevailed, we may well conclude that their literacy skills were quite frequently imperfect. Additional evidence shows the persistence of “school reading,” older methods, and poor reading regardless of approach for the next several decades.²⁶ This was one important meaning of literacy in the society.

Taught either by the words or the letters first, children did learn to mechanically reproduce what they saw, whatever their proficiency in articulation or comprehension. Whether requiring a short or lengthy

²⁴ Commission, *Popular Education*, 246–261.

²⁵ *Report*, Committee, Council of Education, 1865–1866, 23, quoted in Goldstrum, *Context*, 166; *Exaggerated Estimates of Reading and Writing as a Means of Education* (London, 1868), 4–5. See also, M. M. Lewis, *The Importance of Illiteracy* (London: Harrap, 1953), 40–43.

²⁶ See Ryerson, *Annual Report*, 1871; William Russell, “On Teaching the Alphabet,” *Massachusetts Teacher*, 15 (1862), 209–212; “Methods of Teaching to Read,” *Ibid.*, 16 (1863), 87–90; “Reading Made Easy,” *Ibid.*, 17 (1864), 328; Calhoun, *Intelligence*, Ch. 2; “The Cultivation of the Expressive Faculties,” *American Journal of Education*, 3 (1857), 328; “City of Kingston.”

period of instruction, the rudiments of reading could be and were claimed by many. In his original and brilliant essay, *The Intelligence of a People*, Daniel Calhoun arrives at the same conclusion about learning problems at the time. He found that while children gained the bare mechanics regardless of instructional method,

pupils, once they progressed to more complex matter, relied on these elements and little more. They called out the words in a selection rapidly, and articulated them plainly for a listener who had the printed words to follow. But whether a pupil understood all the words he could pronounce was doubtful enough, and whether he understood whole passages and ideas was hardly doubtful. He did not.

They could prattle through their lessons and be promoted through the system. They had difficulty, nevertheless, in talking about what they read, for the lack of training in the meaning of words or passages was common to the results of instruction, as Ryerson and others also reported. Further, the inability to read with understanding adversely affected all other attempts at learning, Calhoun reports, indicating even more the limits on the uses of literacy in the second half of the nineteenth century. Students continued to leave school early with imperfect and deficient skills, as Ryerson repeated in 1871.²⁷

By the 1870s and 1880s, pedagogical emphasis centered largely on the organic and natural in learning and particularly in reading, stressing natural articulation—one crucial element in the “new learning.” This focus only exacerbated the sources of failure and confusion. While attention to pronunciation and tone had been a concern of all instructional methods, the balance shifted even more through the 1850s and 1860s as the new style of pedagogy gained acceptance and was institutionalized. This emphasis continued until the rise of silent reading in the last decade of the century. Natural, expressive, emotionally committed behavior was elicited from the pupils by their teachers. Good reading meant, more and more, reading that sounded good, and this was equated with comprehension, one of Ryerson’s and others’ primary aims. This was the meaning of the common expression “intelligent reading.”²⁸ Instruction directed toward that goal not only erred in equating oral proficiency with comprehension, but educators made it

²⁷ Calhoun, *Intelligence*, 80, 85, Ch. 2; Ryerson, “Report,” *Annual Report*, 1871; N. A. Calkins, “Primary Reading,” *New York Teacher and American Educational Monthly*, 8 (1870), 34–35; T. P. D. Stone, “Reading in Common Schools,” *New York Regents, Annual Report*, 83 (1880), 529–535.

²⁸ Ryerson, *Annual Report*, 1871; “City of Kingston”; Calhoun, *Intelligence*; Ryerson, *Annual Report*, 1877, “Report on a System.” See also Katz, *Irony*.

even more difficult to judge how well the pupils understood what they articulated.

How easily confusion could occur is seen in Superintendent Henderson's list of the characteristics of a good reader: "a just enunciation of sounds as well as words; a careful regard to distinctness of pronunciation, and a proper fullness and modulation of voice. A clear and correct enunciation is of the highest importance." This was reading fluent and correct, supposedly corresponding to natural speech, for it followed, in theory, from children reading only what they understood. When newer methods were presented, such as phonetics, it was their ability to improve oral performance, not comprehension, that was applauded. Yet in Ontario, debate and discussion over method and criticisms regarding failures persisted, with no endorsement of any one successful approach. Ryerson, by 1871, continued to express dissatisfaction with reading instruction; even among advanced public and high-school students, oral ability was poor—deficiencies in articulation were threatening to become a national characteristic. Inattention to reading reflected, as earlier, inattention to meaning. If anything, the newer emphasis only further confused attempts at improvement in skills.²⁹

Failings in instruction, we must recognize, need not signify that the school was not achieving many of its aims: in fostering hegemony and in socializing pupils. The presence of books, for example, was seen as a weapon against profanity and levity; and the movement led by Ryerson and J. George Hodgins to establish libraries in schools, towns, and even prisons represented another thrust. Books' "bindings and illustrations," Prentice notes, "were considered as important as their contents . . . in humanizing and refining the minds of young readers." Training in literacy involved more than understanding all that was read. The moral bases could be transmitted and reinforced in a number of ways, symbolically and orally, in conjunction with literacy. The uses of literacy included oral training as cultural conditioning; understanding was only one goal among many. Respectability, manners, taste, morality, and

²⁹ "City of Kingston," 1852; *Journal of Education*, 18 (1865), 152; *Annual Report*, 1871. Rev. John May repeated these criticisms a decade later, revealing the continuing failure to teach good reading and the stress on articulation. Reading was not taught as it "deserved" to be; the result was "a sort of cross between reading and a Gregorian chant." Moreover, "good reading is not only a pleasing and elegant accomplishment, but also an excellent intellectual exercise." The issue of intelligence, of understanding, continued to be confused with articulation: "You must understand a passage and enter into its spirit before you can read it in public," as if this were a goal for all pupils. *Essays on Educational Subjects* (Ottawa, 1880), 21. Present-day problems and practices should be compared; see Chall, *Learning*; Smith, "Making Sense"; *Harvard Educational Review*, *passim*.

speech habits would be inculcated in the process of instruction. Good reading in this sense was a highly valued accomplishment, greatly desired by reformers and educators. The Reverend John May summarized these goals when he wrote, "If we cannot have intelligent reading, let us have at least distinct and audible reading . . . even from a fool."³⁰

One significant use of training in literacy was to homogenize the speech of the pupils. When schoolmen sought to foster natural patterns of expression, it was not the language of the streets or of the homes of the pupils that was to be instilled in the classroom and practiced in drill. The stress upon proper articulation was an aspect of the socializing function of the school, for the drawls, twangs, and slurring tones of children resulted from more than inattention to pronunciation. In an immigrant society, these were the distinctions of culture, class, and ethnicity; city streets heard a cacophony of vocal sounds and accents. By proscribing differences in speech under that comprehensive term of condemnation "school reading," reformers could then justifiably move to Canadianize or Americanize the children of the immigrant and the laborer. This strategy is clearly seen in the diction used to describe "school reading." For example, to Gideon Thayer, a former Boston principal, "a coarse style of pronouncing degrades the reader, and gives one a low idea of his breeding and his taste." As Prentice's work, in particular, has illustrated, schools in mid-century Upper Canada were promoting a class society, and one of the ways to ease social tensions was through homogenizing language, erasing some of the visible signs of diversity. Differences in acquired abilities and knowledge would persist behind the mask of similarity, as would those of class and status, but values of order and respectability could be inculcated through speech and language training. Analogously, Ryerson characterized poor spelling as discreditable; Mann asserted that an inability to spell "justly stamps the mind with the stigma of illiteracy."³¹

One use of literacy was thus to unite the heterogeneous peoples of new nations and to eradicate the *superficial* distinctions that separated classes and cultures. For this, instruction in literacy could be a valuable tool—inasmuch as classroom drill in articulation promoted cohesion and hegemony—in assimilating the values and manners of one class to those of the other classes. Simultaneously, linguistic differences readily

³⁰ Prentice, "The School Promoters . . .," unpub. Ph.D. Diss., University of Toronto, 1974, 120; May, *Essays*, 20.

³¹ "Letters to a Young Teacher, XIII," *American Journal of Education*, 4 (1857-1858), 226; Prentice, "Promoters," esp. Ch. 4; *Journal of Education*, 6 (1853), 175; Mann, *Second Annual Report*, 40.

identified the untrained, unassimilated, and uneducated, who were seen as threatening to unity and order. Moreover, and probably unknowingly, problems of reading instruction were complicated by an unsympathetic approach to these distinctions and their implications for learning.³²

The available indicators together suggest strongly that the reading ability commonly attained was deficient. A literate society statistically, this was also a society in which individuals could read only after a fashion. How well they read and understood is to be distinguished from their possession of nominal literacy. Yes, instruction in reading had been provided to virtually all, and they were able to mechanically reproduce words, presumably understanding the simple and familiar either by sight or by sound. Many other words, though, and combinations of words into sentences and pages were beyond the comprehension of many readers. The literacy with which many left the schoolroom and entered the world was a restricted one—which present-day observations indicate is still the case in the twentieth century.

Reading for understanding, knowledge, and advancement was difficult given these foundations. Yet that might not interfere with many aspects of daily life. In lacking reading that was truly proficient, literate men and women would in many ways be indistinguishable from illiterates; the advantages which imperfect skills brought to them may have been indeed limited. Verbal ability could be quite another matter, however; to this, schooling had more to contribute. If Calhoun is correct that nineteenth-century culture tended to be wordy and compulsive, that "the needs of American families led children to rush through that verbalism in a mechanical way, never having the time to develop a relaxed involvement with their school words" the results of schooling could mesh with the needs of society. Verbalism, rather than high-quality skills, may well have been more attuned to social settings and needs for literacy. Calhoun discerns an inability among children to accept learned ideas and techniques as having much to do with ongoing life. Literacy of a highly qualitative level apparently was not a need felt by many. What the young mind did demand, and presumed to need, was "automatic responses and rule-of-thumb techniques by which it became a productive

³² On literacy and nationalism, see among a large literature, Glanmour Williams, "Language, Literacy and Nationality in Wales," *History*, 56 (1971), 1-16. On the language differences of class and culture and their contributions to "learning problems," see D. R. Entwistle, "Implications of language socialization for reading models and for learning to read," *Reading Research Quarterly*, 7 (1971-1972); Basil Bernstein, "Determinants of Perception," *British Journal of Sociology*, 9 (1958), 159-174, "Social Class, Language and Socialisation," *Current Trends in Linguistics*, 12 (1973).

member of society." Levels of useful literacy were not high, perhaps because many saw no need for them to be high. Herein illiterates were not severely disadvantaged, and could succeed. Those without literacy suffered, however, a disability in verbal skills and in skills acquired in formal or institutional settings.³³ Perhaps this was one cause of their restricted occupational distribution and their inability to escape criminal conviction; certainly it could have hindered their social and occupational progress, although it did not debilitate all illiterates.

Training at home, at work, or on the streets could not prepare them for all exigencies. This deficiency in preparedness, coupled with class and ethnic stratification, blocked the paths of many. They also had greater difficulties in acquiring the responses and techniques learned by others in school; for them it would be perhaps harder and take longer to learn, restricting some kinds of success and threatening their positions. The importance of literacy *in practice* was limited, paralleling the level of skills, but even the imperfect levels commonly possessed had their social uses, not the least of which was the promotion of hegemony. Literacy in this society therefore functioned on several levels, for while the quality of literacy was adequate for many needs, it was inadequate for others, and not necessary for all aspects of life.

III

"Illiteracy is relative," observed the English psychologist M. M. Lewis. "The level of illiteracy is the extent to which an individual falls short of the demands of literacy current in his society." Conversely, the level of literacy demanded by society is also relative. The meaning of literacy in mid-nineteenth-century urban society can only be understood in context; it can be established neither arbitrarily nor abstractly nor uniformly for all members of the population. It cannot be determined realistically without reference to the structures of demands, needs, and uses for literacy skills, which themselves vary and change. Constructing

³³ Calhoun, *Intelligence*, 130-131. On the relevance to Canada, see Grove, *Search*; Ryerson, *Annual Report*, 1871. While there is no reason to consider illiterates disadvantaged in basic skills or in the ability to communicate, there are grounds to find them less able in higher verbal skills and especially in formally learned cognitive skills, perhaps useful (if not required) to gaining responsible work, performing some jobs, conducting themselves in formal settings, such as courtrooms, etc. See the work of Scribner and Cole and Greenfield, cited in Ch. 6, Note 34; Entwistle, "Developmental Sociolinguistics: Inner City Children," *American Journal of Sociology*, 74 (1968), 37-49.

an index, typology, or etiology of needs and uses, as noted in the Introduction, is a task not yet accomplished for any modern society; this reveals as much about the impact of the "literacy myth" as about the relativistic position of literacy itself. Societies make demands which are felt, met, and responded to differentially by various men and women; material, economic, social, and cultural needs for literacy vary from group to group, person to person. These may be either real or perceived needs. Expectations, anticipations, and the actual employment of one's literacy vary as well. As Lewis explained, "The pressure on [a man] to become more literate will depend not only on his ability, but on the attitude of those whom he lives with, and how strongly he himself is moved by ambitions which demand literacy. If the people about him—his family, friends, neighbors—set little store by literacy, when he leaves school, he is more likely to move backward than forward."³⁴ "Potential literacy," as Lewis termed it, may indeed be a void, but the very potential of that literacy can be valuable to the society and to some within it.

In the past century, literacy, even on an imperfect level, existed on a wide scale. How often it was needed and how frequently and in what ways it was employed are questions too seldom asked. Yet questions like these must be raised if we are to understand the meanings of the distribution and the quality of literacy explored in these pages. Through an approach to culture and society in mid-nineteenth-century urban centers, the place of literacy may be further specified and the outlines of its varying significance sketched. To do this, several principles must be established. First, we need to consider issues of needs and uses in the context of high levels of popular possession of some skills—but skills of an imperfect nature. Second, we must distinguish the uses and needs, in so far as possible, by class and sex, at least. And third, the conclusions reached before about the social and economic limits of literacy must form the demarcations of further discussion. The latter, especially in reference to nineteenth-century comments, points to the primarily noninstrumental but still important roles that literacy played in the daily life of individuals and in the culture of the nineteenth-century city. Recognizing the contradictions between the promoted values of literacy (the basis of the "literacy myth") and its more restricted place in actuality (reconciled by its hegemonic functions) allows us to assess the relationship of literacy to life and culture. In this context, we consider the needs and uses of literacy on several levels.

Contemporaries who valued and promoted the possession and use of literacy provide important indicators for evaluation, which illustrate

³⁴ Lewis, *Importance*, 160, 16.

the uses and nonuses of literacy, and which also reinforce our conclusions regarding quality. With few exceptions, they observed that the literacy popularly possessed was not always employed, and if it were, then it was not properly or most effectively used. Comments and complaints such as these represent one important measure (recognizing their normative bias), complementing the other evidence. Differential needs for literacy and the levels of skill that correspond to their fulfillment can be derived from these discussions, which are found, significantly, in very different perspectives: the religious and working-class press, in particular. These comments indicate that individual literacy was imperfect, neglected, or, if used, not employed in ways perceived as best by promoters. On the one hand, we find in them a tension between the ways in which many individuals found literacy useful to themselves and the purposes that others thought literacy served. On the other hand, we find that regardless of this discrepancy, uses of literacy were primarily noninstrumental ones, while popular skills were at once appropriate for many of the demands made on them and insufficient for others.

Despite the literacy claimed by members of the society, commentators concluded that in practice literacy was insufficiently used. Its value was barely recognized; available time for reading was not seized. Individuals, it was felt, needed to be told to read, told how to read, and told why to read. "I have not time to read" is a complaint," the *Ontario Workman* reminded its audience, "especially of women, whose occupations are such as to prevent continuous book perusal. They seem to think, that because they cannot devote as much attention to books as they are compelled to their avocations that they cannot read anything." It was not the time that was lacking; it was the habit of reading that was absent. Others agreed. The average workingman, the *Palladium of Labor* claimed, did have enough time to read, but instead of using that time "he neglects mental culture." From labor's viewpoint, changes in patterns of work and movements to limit daily and weekly work hours freed time that could be well used for reading or other forms of mental culture. Furthermore, libraries in industrial areas were often underutilized by their working class patrons. Aside from other criticisms of improper use of literacy, this opinion indicates a neglect of the skills possessed. Of course there were other important reasons for little reading, especially by the working class: little time, poverty, exhaustion, alternative recreational habits, peer culture, poor lighting at home, unavailability or costliness of materials.³⁵

³⁵ *Ontario Workman* (*OW*), April 2, 1874; *Palladium of Labor* (Hamilton) (*POL*), Sept. 1, 1883; *Fincher's Trades Review* (*FTR*), Oct. 3, 1863; Alastair R. Thompson, "The Use of Libraries by the Working Class in Scotland in the Early Nineteenth Cen-

In these common complaints, shared by many observers, the neglect of reading stemmed principally from two equally revealing sources. Despite—or because of—some schooling and self-reported literacy, individuals needed to be taught, or at least, reminded, how to read; they also needed to be told the importance of exercising their literacy. It seems that many had acquired a distaste and aversion to books and reading—a fact that implies the inefficacy of their schooling. Thus, the *Workman* provided its readers with complete instructions on how to read. “Read slowly; read understandingly,” it advised, for cursory reading left little impression. The meaning of each word must be understood, its spelling noted. An atlas must be at hand, and used; each idea noted as well, and only one book read at a time. The men and women who presumably gained this tutelage by perusing a newspaper were seen as readers whose literacy required improvement and who needed reeducation in reading skills. The ability of gaining information from a newspaper, it seems, told little about one’s level of literacy. Those who read this much apparently needed further instruction in how to read effectively; nothing in their schooling had prepared them to continue their reading to advance themselves. They did not even know where to begin.³⁶

If some men and women were reading, official opinion was far from pleased with what they chose to read. Nevertheless, the popular habits revealed by typical criticisms are at least as revealing as the censure itself. It was usually agreed that “no part of education is of greater importance than the selection of proper books for perusal or study. . . .” Many, though, chose to exercise their literacy with materials considered either worthless or dangerous; thus, complaints focused on a literacy low in quality and unrestrained by morality or wise choice. “All the common, everyday reading that falls into a young man’s hands is quite sure to be bad.” Not surprisingly, censure most often fell on novels and other works of fiction—taking the definition of fiction in its most inclusive sense. To *The Church*, it included newspapers, periodicals, reviews, and romances—all classes of writing not conducive to the “welfare” of readers.³⁷

Regardless of its value to those who chose it, fiction-reading repre-

tury,” *Scottish Historical Review*, 42 (1963), 21–29; Alec Ellis, “Influences on the Availability of Recreational Reading for Victorian Working Class Children,” *Journal of Librarianship*, 8 (1976), 185–195; Altick, *Reader*; Gareth Stedman Jones, “Working-Class Culture and Working-Class Politics in London, 1870–1900,” *Journal of Social History*, 7 (1974), 460–508.

³⁶ *OW*, Nov. 21, 1872; *POL*, Mar. 1, 1884; *FTR*, Oct. 3, 1866; *The Church (TC)*, Oct. 27, 1843; *Christian Guardian (CG)*, Dec. 13, 1837.

³⁷ *CG*, July 31, 1850; *TC*, Oct. 27, 1843.

sented, to social commentators, an unwise use of literacy, wasteful to the individual and harmful to society. Novel-reading was pernicious; novels made few appeals to the intellect and they were habit-forming. Good men did not write novels; therefore, good men and women should not be their readers. Not only threatening to thought, intelligence, religion, and morality, "no dissipation can be worse than that induced by the perusal of exciting books of fiction . . . a species of experience of a monstrous and erroneous nature." The danger was perhaps greatest to young unmarried women and to children, whose innocence it was most important to protect. The *Workman* advised the parents in its audience that "a bad book, magazine, or newspaper is as dangerous to your child as a vicious companion, and will as surely corrupt his morals and lead him away from the paths of society." Schoolmen added their voices to these cries against novel-reading; yet, as we saw in Chapter 5, the working class press blamed the public school system for this state of affairs. Making attendance and reading instruction compulsory, schools gave the children "dime novels for perusal, having previously given them a taste for such reading." This, obviously, was not desirable.³⁸

Beneath the heavy layers of censure and reform efforts, we find examples of the uses to which literacy was popularly put. The early to middle years of the nineteenth century saw the rise and easier availability of cheap, popular literature, aimed at the pleasure and amusement of the lower as well as the middle class. Many found this reading material quite well-suited to their tastes. Street literature, in particular, was easy to buy, sold on corners and hawked on the pavements; it could be bought by all but the very poorest. This was literature, moreover, which was short, easy to read and understand, appealing, and exciting, as well as socially and politically current. Illiterates also heard the broadsides and pamphlets read by others and cried out in public; this material was integrated easily into popular traditions and oral culture, without sharp discontinuity. This was one part of daily street education, for which popular skills were sufficient, aimed overwhelmingly at noninstrumental aspects of entertainment, amusement, and common culture.³⁹ The

³⁸ *CG*, Jan. 28, 1852, July 31, 1850, Nov. 7, 1849; *OW*, Feb. 12, 1874; *POL*, Feb. 2, 1884.

³⁹ On street literature, see Leslie Shepard, *The History of Street Literature* (Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1973); Victor E. Neuberg, "The Literature of the Streets," in *The Victorian City*, ed. H. J. Dyos and M. Wolff (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1973), 191-209; Martha Vicinus, *The Industrial Muse* (London: Croom Helm, 1975); Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961). See also, Altick, *Reader*; R. K. Webb, *The British Working Class Reader, 1790-1848* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1955). On the middle class, see Peter Baily, "'A Mingled Mass of Perfectly Legitimate Pleasures': The Victorian Middle Class and the Problem of Leisure."

middle-class criticism (an outgrowth of the reforming instinct) directed at this class of literature and its readers must not detract from its significance, as an important employment of imperfect literacy skills. Popular literacy was of value to many ordinary men and women, which contemporaries were not prepared to accept: when they pleaded for people to read, they had other uses of literacy in mind.

Even the form of literature most frequently attacked, novels, had significance to the lives of contemporaries, especially to middle-class women. The Victorian sentimental novel, according to Sally Mitchell, "supplied for women of the middle classes both a means of filling leisure time and a mode of recreation in the true sense of the word." Popular novels gratified common needs, providing vicarious experience, which gave repressed feelings a form of acceptable release and made the novels a source of pleasure. Fantasy supplied a needed, socially conservative outlet. In other words, the "women's novel provides satisfaction which real life lacks. It offers vicarious participation, emotional expression, and the feeling of community that arises from a recognition of shared dreams. . . . sensibilities about her own character, her virtues, and her moral values are not violated." Literacy in this way also had many uses: from socialization, satisfaction, entertainment, amusement, self-identification, and legitimation, to expression, escapism, or therapy. Though certainly neither praised nor considered as exercising useful skills, this mode of literacy and consumption of literature no doubt occupied a valued place in many women's—and men's—lives.⁴⁰

While men and women of the working and middle classes used their imperfect skills in ways like these and other common employments relevant to their daily lives, the promotion of loftier uses of literacy continued. The two seldom intersected in practical applications, whether instrumental or noninstrumental ones. "Never read to pass away time," *The Church* instructed; "always read with a view of learning something." Read for information, they urged, not for opinions. Some persons undoubtedly did; tales of the self-educated, the improved and improving—artisans or clerks, and the respectable reader (working or middle class)—are hardly rare. Their representativeness and typicality, however, remain to be assessed.

In response to reforming impulses the religious and labor presses joined in urging the populace to read. That they felt the need to pro-

Victorian Studies, 21 (1977), 7–25. *Leisure and Class in Victorian Society* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978).

⁴⁰ Sally Mitchell, "Sentiment and Suffering: Women's Recreational Reading in the 1860s," *Victorian Studies*, 21 (1977), 29, 34, 40, 45; Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 61–63.

mote reading, even to those exposed to the press, speaks again of a situation in which the habit of reading was seen neither as common enough nor as properly employed. To promoters, reservoirs of potential literacy had to be tapped and filtered. Thus, commentators preached the advantages of approved reading. "The truth is," *The Church* explained, "the love of reading is just as much a natural bent or desire, as other habits." Selection of reading matter was like the choice of food; good reading nourished the mind as good food did the body.⁴¹

These uses of literacy had to be promoted. They were not the everyday practice, and they required a level of literacy different from and beyond that necessary to read newspapers and novels. To the *Christian Guardian*, for example, there were certain proper advantages of reading: Readers would acquaint themselves with the "affairs, actions, and thoughts of the living and the dead, . . . something from all parts of mankind"; and reading would teach them their place in history and civilization as well as in the present society. How very different from the typical kinds of reading these are and even from the more pragmatic ones; but at once, these would be no more practical or instrumental employments of individual literacy than many of the others. Fully understanding such lessons, the press realized, required a higher level of skills. With this practice, though, the readers could improve their abilities, as the proper use of literacy would provide examples and stimuli to advancement and social integration. And of course, wise and refined sentiments would be learned, with reviewing the lessons recommended for their reinforcement. These uses had to be taught; they represented both a level of skill and an employment of literacy quite distinct from popular abilities and uses. To religious and labor promoters and reformers of reading habits, these were the proper uses of literacy. The expected and desired use of literacy was to support the moral bases of society and order.⁴² But even a lower level of ability could serve that purpose. Gaining inspiration and learning sentiments and morality need not presume total and reflective comprehension or deep involvement with the words.

The agents of promotion such as the *Guardian* apparently knew the common habits, for while they condemned novel reading, they supported newspaper reading. Though of course, only "well conducted" or religious journals should be read. This involved a selection much like that of the choice of books, but it is likely that newspaper reading was far more common than reading of books. Significantly, these comments were often aimed at poor families, who were told of the value of a religious paper for enjoyment and quiet entertainment on a Saturday night. As

⁴¹ *TC*, Oct. 27, 1843.

⁴² *CG*, Nov. 11, 1835, Feb. 19, 1840, May 28, 1848.

opposed to the amusement that reading fiction would bring, a religious newspaper instructed in values and morality, while easing the pains of poverty. Never was it suggested that poverty would be alleviated through reading, however. The instructional role of the press benefitted children too. Assisting them in acquiring education, it "brought them intelligence from the four corners of the globe." In this way, newspapers—cheap and widely-read—were promoted; habits of reading already in use should be shaped to encourage the proper use of literacy. And, as Ryerson and Mann had done, the *Guardian* could also appeal, if rarely, to economic self-interest.⁴³ No doubt important, practical daily information was thereby acquired.

The working class press similarly instructed its audience in the advantages of reading. "A taste for reading is one of the true blessings of life," the *Ontario Workman* urged. To readers, the benefits were three: as a resource, an amusement, and a solid gain. "As a resource, it is pre-eminent . . . the 'Open Sesame' which admits us to realms of enchantment. . . ." This was not an instrumental approach to literacy; in fact, in Scotland, workingmen who used libraries were disinclined to borrow vocational or utilitarian books, preferring instead imaginative literature. This was reading on a higher plane, too, which required advancing well beyond the foundations typically laid in schools, for the superstructure of knowledge was gained in books. (The base of it, however, was lacking.) Indeed, to the working class press, the promotion of reading was complex. Reading brought enchantment; it also brought comfort in lonely hours and consolation as well as amusement. To satisfy these needs required varying degrees of ability, some of which would not be held by all literate individuals. Recognizing this, both the *Workman* and the *Palladium* provided instruction in reading skills, and they inveighed against recurring illiteracy and the degradation of education.⁴⁴

⁴³ *CG*, Jan. 16, 1850, Jan. 8, 1834, Oct. 17, 1849; see also *FTR*, Feb. 4, 1865. Revealing in this regard is the observation of Isabella Lucy Bird: "It is stated that thousands of the subscribers to the newspapers [in cities] are so illiterate as to depend upon their children for a knowledge of their contents. At present few people, comparatively speaking, are more than half-educated. The knowledge of this fact lowers the tone of the press, and circumscribes both authors and speakers, as any allusions to history or general literature would be very imperfectly, if at all understood." *The Englishwoman in America* (London, 1856; reprinted, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966), 317. Aside from her tone of condescension and inaccurate labelling of many as illiterate, Bird pointed to the imperfect level of skills possessed and the wide audience of the press.

⁴⁴ *OW*, Nov. 21, 1872, Dec. 19, 1872; A. Thompson, "Use of Libraries"; *POL*, Feb. 7, 1884, Mar. 1, 1884, Feb. 7, 1885, May 16, 1885. See also Phillips Thompson, *The Politics of Labor* (New York, 1877); Ch. 5, above.

The working class press also pointed to uses of literacy beyond the commonly held low levels of ability, for example in discussing the selection of materials for family reading. When they wrote about entertainment, information, or amusement, they spoke of uses of literacy that a less-than-perfect grounding in skills could meet. Simultaneously, popular literacy could meet some demands and fail at others; a low level of ability would serve "the poor man who can read, and who possesses a taste for reading, [who] can find entertainment at home without being tempted to repair to the public house for that purpose." It could also provide relief from toil, and a cheap means of communication, preventing economic losses which resulted from a lack of information.⁴⁵ The prevailing levels of literacy could meet many of these practical and important needs much as they could generally satisfy the demands of the religious press. The literacy popularly possessed was typically sufficient for the requirements of daily survival, most work, and hegemony, if it were employed in ways related at least peripherally to those promoted. The experience of schooling may well have laid an adequate foundation for the society and culture. Illiterates, of course, suffered greater—if not insurmountable—obstacles in meeting these needs.

Nevertheless, there were other demands that this ability simply could not meet. Higher intellectual demands would not be satisfied. It would not necessarily serve to promote labor's cause as the *Palladium* felt it must, for in their view, one "must be a Reader and a Thinker." Reading critically was the the key to thought, and workingmen, the *Workman* emphasized, "must educate themselves to think; they must learn to think for themselves." Thought of course can progress without reading, but reading itself does not result naturally in the habit of thinking. That would require much more practice and attention, as they constantly remarked. The ability of abstracting information was not the ability of critically analyzing, or of creating, as E. P. Thompson, among others, concluded. "The ability to read was only the elementary technique. The ability to handle abstract and consecutive argument was by no means inborn."⁴⁶ In urging men and women to read, the labor press

⁴⁵ See, for example, *OW*, Jan. 2, 1873; *FTR*, July 11, 1863, Sept. 17, 1864, Feb. 4, 1865, Jan. 16, 1864, Apr. 29, 1863, April 29, 1865; P. Thompson, *Politics*, 11. See also, Chs. 1 and 5 above.

⁴⁶ *POL*, Jan. 5, 1884; *OW*, Jan. 22, 1874; P. Thompson, *Politics*, 11; E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1963), 713. See also, Webb, *British Working Class*, 122, 160; Ortega y Gasset, "Difficulty"; Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973). See also, Jonathan Kozol, "A New Look at the Literacy Campaign in Cuba," *Harvard Educational Review*, 48 (1978), 341-377; Richard Jolly, "The Literacy Campaign and Adult Education," in *Cuba: The*

certainly realized that the usual reading skills did not meet such demands. They also saw that one needed a "deeper and broader intelligence," and that too much reading and too little thinking were of little active value. Yet in their stress on reading habits and the uses of literacy, they also lost sight of the limits of reading itself. They erred in the way many others erred as Hodgson illustrated in his *Exaggerated Estimates of Reading and Writing as a Means of Education*. Reading and writing—literacy—were just one means of gaining knowledge and ideals, Hodgson reminded his audience. They were not the only means: "It ought never to be forgotten that the power to read does not in the least determine the use to which it is put."⁴⁷ If we admit such distinctions today, we may begin to understand and to supplant the "literacy myth."

The potential uses of literacy, then, were diverse: gaining useful information; inculcating values of morality and culture; maintaining hegemony; pursuing entertainment and amusement; as well as labor's quest for organization, economic knowledge, and action; further self-guided education, higher learning, inspiration, and thought. A low level of literacy might well be suitable for the first four aims, but probably not for the last two. And, as Phillips Thompson understood, the level of literacy generally transmitted was one which bolstered the present political and economic system. Acceptance of capitalism was

traceable to the wrong ideals of life and worldly success which are held up before the young from their very cradles. The whole tendency of modern education—not merely in the sense of book-learning, but in the broader significance which includes every influence which shapes men's thoughts and contributes to their intellectual and moral development—is to make rascals.

This spirit, he maintained, was taught in school, and by the newspaper, platform, and fireside.⁴⁸ Literacy of the common quality had its social uses and was taught in that manner. This was the purpose of its moral bases and its central contribution to hegemony. To go beyond required much more than only the ability to read, to gain information or sentiments. Transcendence of mechanical literacy involved independent thought and criticism, which were not encouraged or practiced in in-

Social and Economic Revolution, ed. Dudley Seers (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), 190-219.

⁴⁷ *POL*, Sept. 1, 1883, Jan. 5, 1884; Hodgson, *Exaggerated Estimates*, 11. On the relationship of literacy to intelligence, see Lewis, *Importance*; Burt, "Education of Illiterate"; see also Alex Inkeles *et al.*, "Some Social Psychological Effects and Non-effects of Literacy in a New Nation," *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 16 (1967), 3.

⁴⁸ Phillips Thompson, *Politics*, 195.

struction and which were largely lacking in a population with few good readers.

IV

Demands for a higher literacy failed, as Daniel Calhoun's work implies, because the young mind was "not empirical in the higher active sense; it could not set up an interchange between ideas, needs, and external reality." It was empirical in another sense, as automatic responses and rule of thumb techniques could be easily assimilated.⁴⁹ Into this process, literacy and schooling fit. Demands for higher qualitative levels of ability did not have broad appeal; their uses were not obvious to most members of the society, and they were required for the activities of even fewer. Calhoun found that most children's inability to perform such an interchange related simply and directly to the needs of their lives. Book-learned ideas had little place in survival; the relationship between needs and realities was satisfied on a lower level.

We need only pause to reflect, even briefly, on the daily needs, uses, and requirements for literacy in nineteenth-century cities. The society and culture were not dominated by print; access to information and to work did not often demand much literacy. Consider the normal affairs of an unskilled or semiskilled worker. Doing his or her job seldom, if ever, required the use of reading and writing; no applications were required; print materials were rarely part of the work process; peers and community supplied important stimuli and information. At higher levels of skilled work, such as the artisanal level, literacy was more often needed; this appears clearly in the differential access to this occupational level and to its rewards which separated the experiences and attainments of some literate workers from most uneducated ones. While a real difference appears here, the evidence presented forces us to evaluate it cautiously, for the uses and demands made on literacy can all too easily be exaggerated and taken out of context. Much skilled work consisted of practical knowledge, job experience, and good work sense and abilities; these must not be confused with the potential, but not necessarily required, contributions from literacy.

Nonmanual workers, of course, often, if not always, had a more pressing and instrumental need for literacy skills; clerical work, book- and recordkeeping, billing, inventorying, and ordering all depended to

⁴⁹ Calhoun, *Intelligence*, 130-131.

some degree on the ability to read and write. Yet, here the "automatic responses" and "rule of thumb techniques" may well have played a more common role than higher, more advanced literary skills. The differences separating the very literate, the imperfectly literate, and the illiterate were in practicing more relative than absolute, much less than in theory or in potential. Simply, high degrees of literacy were often not required for work or welfare. We can not neglect, however, to recognize their important potential uses in gaining further knowledge and enrichment, facilitating access to culture and learning, and influencing social standing, self-esteem, and respectability. These were the areas in which illiterates suffered most, and in which a lack of abilities could lead to personal losses and to embarrassments.

Demands for a higher literacy also failed because the culture neither required nor desired it. Despite the criticisms of contemporaries, and present-day commentators too, I suspect that the society and the culture *did not need* a qualitatively high level of popular skills. A corrective to the usual viewpoint seems justifiable for a number of reasons—for the present as well as the past—as I shall sketch here. But first, several comments are necessary. Most generally, as a result of the promotion and acceptance of the "literacy myth," literacy's social and cultural role is neither well understood nor systematically evaluated, even in terms used in the preceding section. Rather, it is often (but certainly not always) overvalued, its significance in some areas exaggerated. Critics might well benefit from reading nineteenth-century observers like W. B. Hodgson. In censuring popular uses or neglect of literacy, in reporting the ubiquitous declines in literacy which remain largely undocumented and recur at least generationally, we typically fail to ask how important and in what ways literacy is related or central to different aspects of life and culture, such as I have attempted in a preliminary fashion in this study.⁵⁰ Without denigrating the potential of literacy or neglecting the very real contribution and value it may have to individuals, society, economy, or culture—which are crucial to note—we need, however, to look at literacy

⁵⁰ On the myth of the literacy decline, see my comments in "Literacy Past and Present," *Interchange*, 9 (1978), 1-21; Richard Ohmann, "The Decline in Literacy Is a Fiction, If Not a Hoax," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Oct. 25, 1976; "He doesn't think reading skills have dropped," *Dallas Times Herald*, Apr. 28, 1978; Egil Johansson, "The Postliteracy Problem," Department of Education, Umeå University, 1977; Calhoun, *Intelligence*; the inconclusive 1977 report, *On Further Examination* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1977); George Douglas, "Is Literacy Really Declining?," *Educational Records*, 57 (1977), 140-148; Roger Farr, *et al.*, *Then and Now: Reading Achievement in Indiana* (Bloomington: University of Indiana, School of Education, 1978). See also, my comments and selections in a forthcoming anthology on "understanding literacy," which I am preparing for publication.

in new ways and put reading and writing into perspective. Breaking from the pervasive "literacy myth" which has spawned a great deal of concern and renewed speculations about the presumed (and unverified) transformations wrought by print and literacy (e.g., those associated with McLuhan), we may begin the long-required reconsideration.⁵¹ While granting their significance—both real and ideal—we must simultaneously recognize the limits of literacy alone, re-examine its conceptualization, and also remind ourselves of the distinctions in literacy between the medium, the message, the process of training, and the different effects and uses.

The history of the west since about 1800 or 1850 is usually written in terms of the rise of mass institutions and mass communications; and the decline of community, the family, interpersonal relations, and small (primary) groups. The rise of mass society and the media are seen as separating and privatizing individuals and destroying communities, local societies, and traditional cultures. "Other-directedness," consumerism, and pluralism are considered among the results of these many and related changes. Literacy and print ("the rise of the book") are held to be closely connected to and an integral part of these consequences of modernization and their presumed alterations of social and psychological consciousness. New paradigms of culture, thought, and awareness are assumed to have replaced traditional oral and localized patterns. Writing, for example, is said to create new means of communications among individuals, objectifying speech and transmitting it over time and space. More generalized and abstract relations replace earlier forms of oral relations; attitudes toward history and the past are fixed and fundamentally reshaped; distinctions between myth and history arise. Logical procedures accompany literacy, it is argued, as visual culture replaces an oral-auditory one; standardization proceeds with alphabetization and literacy. Psychic rootlessness, alienation, and privatized-individualized relations become more likely. The works from which these speculations derive are fascinating and important; yet they remain largely undocumented—and, I believe, somewhat overstated and exaggerated as well.⁵²

⁵¹ For two recent and revealing attempts to evaluate modern literacy, which end in accepting *more of the literacy myth* than they reject, see David R. Olson, "Toward A Literate Society: Book Review," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Education*, (1975-1976), 109-178; H. S. Stout, "Culture, Structure, and the 'New' History," *Computers and the Humanities*, 9 (1975), 223-225. See also, the essays in Leon Bataille, ed., *A Turning Point for Literacy* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1976); Joyce Appleby, "Modernization Theory and the Formation of Modern Social Theories in England and America," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 20 (1978), 259-285.

⁵² See, for example, Stout, "Culture, Structure"; Thomas Cochran, *Social Change in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); Olson, "From Utterance to Text,"

In fact, researchers have only recently begun to reconsider the dimensions of modern (nineteenth and twentieth century) society and culture. Among our discoveries—insufficiently assessed, I feel—is the persistence of traditional oral means of communications. In the nineteenth century, for example, print media, while gaining in importance, had hardly achieved dominance. Oral communications, symbols, and visual signs abounded; sharp dichotomies between the visuality of modern life and the orality of traditional societies are unacceptable. As E. P. Thompson argues for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,

Both practices and norms are reproduced down the generations within the slowly differentiating ambience of 'custom'. Hence people tend to legitimate practice (or protest) in terms of customary usage or of prescriptive rights and perquisites. (The fact that—from rather different premises—such arguments tend to control the high political culture also acts to reinforce this plebeian disposition.) Traditions are perpetuated largely through oral transmission, with its repertoire of anecdote and of narrative example; where oral tradition is supplemented by growing literacy, the most widely circulated printed products (chapbooks, almanacs, broadsides, 'last dying speeches,' and anecdotal accounts of crime) tend to be subdued to the expectations of the oral culture rather than challenging it with alternatives. In any case, in many parts of Britain—and especially those regions where dialect is strongest—basic elementary education co-exists, throughout the nineteenth century, with the language—and perhaps the sensibility of—what is then becoming the 'old culture'.

The parallels to Richard Hoggart's classic *The Uses of Literacy* and many linguistic analyses are powerful. Oral culture and its fundamental sig-

Harvard Educational Review, 47 (1977), 257-282; Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," in *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, ed. Goody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 27-68; G. H. Bantock, *The Implications of Literacy* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1968); the works of Walter J. Ong, Eric Havelock, Harold Innis, Elizabeth Eisenstein, and Marshall McLuhan; David Reisman *et al.*, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961 ed.); the writings of Peter Berger and his associates; Chall and Carroll, *Literate Society*, among a huge literature including textbooks as well as specialized studies.

But see also, for recent attempts at reconsideration, Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change in America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1978); Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450-1800* (London: NLB, 1976); François Furet et Jacques Ozouf, *Lire et Ecrire* (Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 1977), among others. Recent anthropological and sociological studies of modern societies—of community, social organization, family, communications, etc.—point to many areas of necessary revisions of the "received wisdom," including those of the decline of community, family, face-to-face communications, primary groups, and the *gemeinschaft/gesellschaft* dichotomy. Historians and contemporary researchers have much to learn from recent studies of early modern society and culture, especially those in France.

nificance do not simply vanish under the attack of print, schooling, and modernization; rather, it dialectically accommodates the impact of them, one neither assimilating nor replacing the other. Too often, they are dichotomized, seen as in constant conflict with one another. Instead, in recognizing the persistence and the daily significance of oral communication, we need to study their relations: the ways in which, in some settings, one dominates or conflicts with the other, and, in others, they reciprocally support one another. A better understanding of their changing relations is required, too.

Oral patterns still form a crucial base for socialization, education and training and the learning of attitudes, norms, and habits, as well as skills; they are important to much cultural transmission and to entertainment—not just locally and regionally but nationally too. On local levels, personal contacts are daily affairs, vital to the livelihood of the community and those within it. Oral relations bind individuals and groups to each other and to their larger society while preserving distinctions; literacy often tends to reinforce these processes. With modern media—dependent on sound and sight rather than on printed texts—differences between oral and literate communications further diminish. Film, television, and radio have their foundations more in nonliterate than in print sources, although a rigid separation would distort more than advance understanding. They may integrate people, rather than isolate them—as print may as well. The telephone, for example, has facilitated oral communications over distances vast and small, allowing family and community to spread and widen rather than simply decline or disappear. The electronic media not only support older modes, but they can also reinforce the newer ones and assist in their communicating, integrating, homogenizing, and controlling functions. The use of radio and television by political leaders, and the cinema for news and “novelizing” are among the most familiar examples. At the least, oral patterns continue; and the impact of print is mediated by both older and newer forms of communication.⁵³

⁵³ Thompson, “Eighteenth-century English society,” *Social History*, 3 (1978), 153; Hoggart, *Uses of Literacy, On Culture and Communication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); Henri-Jean Martin, “Culture écrite et culture orale, Culture savante et culture populaire dans la France d’Ancien Regime,” *Journale des Savants* (1975), 225–282; Natalie Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 189–269; David Reisman, *The Oral Tradition, the Written Word, and the Screen Image* (Yellow Springs, Ohio: The Antioch Press, 1955); Stout, “Culture, Structure”; Gerald Suttles, *The Social Order of the Slum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Charles Tilly, *An Urban World* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974); Alejandro Portes, “Rationality in the Slum,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 14 (1971–1972), 268–286; the work of Michael Young and Peter Wilmott; that



Reading the city's streets—print and lettered signs were not primary in knowing the city and using its facilities and services. “Dundas, Ontario: King Street looking East from 50 feet east of Sydenham St. c. 1856.” [Archives of Ontario, S11902]



Reading the city's streets—symbols and icons supplemented and competed with signs and letters in identifying businesses and other urban places. “Guelph, Ontario, St. George’s Square, 1874.” [Archives of Ontario, S8392]



Reading the city's streets—in large urban centers print, while more pervasive, continued to compete with and be supplemented with other visual symbols and markings. “King Street, Toronto, looking East from Church Street, 1870s.” [Archives of Ontario, S13376]

In the nineteenth century, oral and visual (but not literate) means of communications and existence were even more important than in the present century, as Thompson suggests. Taverns, stores, and other buildings were often demarcated by symbols as well as lettered names. Pubs with their charming as well as socially significant signs are just one example (tools, animals, ethnic symbols). They were social and cultural centers, places of communications, news, debate, and dialogue. There is little reason, in fact, to suspect that the daily culture of a nineteenth-century city overly emphasized the printed word, or that much literacy was required to learn its ways. Residence, commerce, and industry intermingled more than not; walking was sufficient to dissect and "read" the city. Oral directions were quite adequate to find one's way about. The city was a place of sights and sounds more than of print and text, with structures both obvious and hidden, to be "read" and explored with all of the senses.

Experience was as much, and probably more, the teacher for everyday life than the school: "the urban setting is itself educative, and . . . it may have far stronger effects than do any specific schools," Calhoun reminds us. In this regard, we need new, conceptionally imaginative examinations of the influence of specific environments: the family and child-rearing, religion, community, and other learning settings, both formal and informal, as well as that of the press and institutions. As he suggests, "the urban environment has had an educative effect, independent of formal schooling. But the independence . . . has imposed difficulties and challenges that men could often accept only by buffering their consciousness with indirection, with defense mechanisms, even with outright cultural lies. . . . As part of those particulars, men have continually reconstructed and repictured the bits and pieces of the environment that came their way." As the school, mass literacy, and the printed word joined the environment, the "literacy myth" was added to those cultural lies.⁵⁴

For communications, work-places and mixed residence as well as

of Elizabeth Bott; Howard H. Irving, *The Family Myth* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1972); Kozol, "A New Look." See also, the discussion in Chs. 2 and 5, above. For different views, see the literature cited in Note 51, 1st part; Donald Gordon, *The New Literacy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971); the writings of Edmund Carpenter; David Reisman, "The Oral and Written Traditions," *Explorations*, 6 (1956), 22-28.

⁵⁴ See the work of Brian Harrison on pubs, cited in Ch. 2, above; Jon Kingsdale, "The 'Poor Man's Club': Social Functions of the Urban Working-Class Saloon," *American Quarterly*, 25 (1973), 472-489; Daniel Calhoun, "The City as Teacher," *History of Education Quarterly*, 9 (1969), 313, 319, *passim*; Steven Marcus, "Reading the Illegible," in *The Victorian City*, 257-276. The latter two offer brilliant, original suggestions for new approaches.

recreational settings like pubs provided news and daily information. They also provided contact points, culture, and learning. The import of oral media also derives support from new studies of religious revivals and the American Revolution, contrary to the usual emphasis on literacy and reading by the few. The functions of spoken and everyday language can be very influential: for widespread communications, raising consciousness, and transmitting ideology. As Harry Stout comments, "The link between print culture and the people, between pamphlets and popular ideology, is assumed, not demonstrated."⁵⁵ This important revision, true for the American Revolution, holds as well far beyond the events of the 1770s, as the foregoing suggests. The rise of literacy and the school, as important and powerful as they are, do not negate the ongoing, traditional processes of communications.

Other information could be easily gleaned from a brief perusal of the newspapers, broadsides, or printed notices for which a high level of reading comprehension was not required. Pictures and other symbolic representations frequently adorned these forms of printed matter, too, adding both to their appeal and to their meaning; in this way, the visual sign corresponds to but is not synonymous with the letters of literacy. Advertisements were also, and continue to be, simply worded and highly stylized, with pictorial presentation of the product often featured. Handbills, flysheets, and even many schoolbooks followed the same mode of presentation, the first two generally with a minimum of print and text. Despite the growing encroachment of print, politics, religion, leisure, and other forms of cultural expression—both new and old—remained within the oral and visual focus. Hearing and seeing persisted along with the new literate culture and society. For many persons, they were undoubtedly more valuable and more regularly employed in daily affairs than the literacy virtually all were taught, and by which they certainly were influenced. Literacy and its impact can only be understood within this context—not abstractly, all powerfully, or in isolation.

Styles of social and cultural life reveal the same patterns, especially for the working class but also for the middle class. From the seminal analysis of Michael Anderson, we can point first to work, family, and critical life situations, in industrializing Lancashire in the mid-nineteenth century. None of these was much affected by the concomitant rise of

⁵⁵ See Rhys Isaac, "Dramatizing the Ideology of Revolution: Popular Mobilization in Virginia, 1774 to 1776," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 33 (1976), 357-385; H. S. Stout, "Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution," *ibid.*, 34 (1977), 519-541; Calhoun, "The City as Teacher"; Ch. 5, above. It is revealing that Isaac and Stout incorporate undocumented elements of the literacy myth into their otherwise original interpretations.

literacy and schooling. Most interesting are the life crises that he interprets; they reveal that the basic means of survival and assistance to families and individuals came from informal, traditional means, and not from bureaucratic, institutional settings in which literacy could be more significant. The Poor Law, the agency of bureaucratic aid, was avoided as the last resort. Rather, it was kin, co-villagers, neighbors, the community, and voluntary societies (burial, friendly, building associations), probably in that order, to which those in need turned. This included assistance for the young and the old, the orphaned and the sick, widows and the deserted, as well as those seeking employment.⁵⁶ In these basic aspects of ongoing life, literacy, even if more significant, was at best secondary.

In other areas of life—culture, leisure, recreation—literacy was also limited as a direct influence: in its impact and in its employment. We must distinguish, at the least, between different strata of the working class and between the hegemonic functions of mass literacy and schooling and their role in daily life, in offering even these preliminary comments. Literate and other patterns intersected in complex ways. Consider, for example, broad cultural patterns in the mid- to later-nineteenth century. As Stedman Jones, along with other researchers on both sides of the Atlantic, has recently argued, working class culture was transformed under the impact of the many changes of the nineteenth century, including commercial and industrial capitalism, efforts at reform (by an insecure, anxious middle class), the rise of institutions, and patterns of urban growth. Yet none of these forces had simple, unmediated impacts. While traditional patterns of social integration and control were replaced by more modern ones, the results were not only those that reformers and educators desired. The changes were related, albeit unclearly, nevertheless. Some members of the working class seized elements of the middle-class habits of morality and respectability (the moral bases of literacy) as they were able—like those marginal members of the lower-middle ranks. The promoted values of education and literacy were accepted least critically in their quests for security and mobility, limited of course by their means. To them, possession of literacy took on a greater importance.

For the greater numbers of the urban working class, however, the direct use of reading and writing remained peripheral to many, if not most, everyday activities. The pub, while shorn of many of its economic functions and frequented more often by women, served still as a focal

⁵⁶ Michael Anderson, *Family Structure in Nineteenth Century Lancashire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), esp. Ch. 10. I do not accept Anderson's theory of a rational, economic calculus dominating these relationships, however.

point, perhaps more narrowly associated with leisure than previously. Drink remained important. Respectability and morality, inspired by schooling and other reform efforts, were assumed without the strictly middle-class habits of religious observances, rational recreation, or teetotalism. Leisure and recreation changed, too, but in ways that did not necessarily put a primacy on literacy or print. Earlier behavior was replaced by gaming, betting, sports (participant and observer), railway excursions, the popular theatre, fairs, pleasure gardens, and especially the music hall. These all became much more important than the new libraries or persisting institutes to the vast majority of workingmen and their families. Public lecturers flourished, too, the most popular seeking to entertain at least as much as instruct. Working-class society did become more stable and orderly; cleanliness and order, dress and decency, and familial and home-centered activities were observed more frequently by the last third of the century. This reflected not only some rise in living standards (though hardly a deterministic or constant element), an increase in leisure time, and basic alterations in places and forms of production, but also the impact of the hegemony of the moral bases. Its effect took hold, however, without completely remolding the working class into the image of their would-be reformers and without totally permeating this culture with print and literacy. Demands for entertainment and amusement increased in the last decades of the century, but the kinds of reading activity whose endorsement and promotion were considered above had little to do with the new forms of recreation. The culture shifted toward the family and the home, on the one hand, and the new leisure habits of entertainment and sport, on the other. In some measure, entertainment and family even replaced politics. To these overall patterns, education certainly contributed, more importantly and subtly than Stedman Jones' characterization as "the deadening effects of elementary education" would suggest it could.

Yet the results were not only the reformers' intended ones. More reading probably did take place, but it was not based on desires for either virtue, morality, or knowledge. Street literature, the increasingly illustrated "penny" press, cheap and entertaining fiction, sporting news, and magazines proliferated; mass markets for the consumption of cheap literature developed rapidly in the second half of the century, as did the installment novel and books of knowledge, too. This is what the people read, if contemporary reports and sales and circulation figures can be trusted. This was the popular use of literacy. Forming one component of domestic recreations, reading was nonetheless shared with indoor games, music, arts and crafts, and handiwork as time and means allowed. We can not dispute the significance of this use of reading, but neither

can we neglect its more limited role in life and leisure. Nor was it the road to organization and power that Phillips Thompson and other leaders hoped it to be. The impact of literacy was much more mixed than either a Thompson or a Ryerson had hoped would result from their promotion of it—more mixed in its consequences perhaps than some present-day speculators would expect as well.

The full complexity of these issues emerges most clearly in the case of the "labor aristocracy," the upper stratum of the working class, the interpretation of which has divided many scholars. The so-called "aristocrats of labor" were those most likely among the working class to secure for themselves and their children a greater exposure to the school and the moral bases of literacy. Of its impact upon their behavior and attitudes, furthermore, there is little doubt. Yet the question remains of the degree of influence and of their resulting independence: this is the area of scholarly controversy. Judging from the available evidence, this group illustrates especially well the issues at hand and the impossibility of simple statements of literacy's historical legacy. Although they clearly sought respectability, independence, morality, and distinction from many beneath their social position, artisans and "aristocrats" did not merely mimic those above them. Rather, they sought their social and cultural goals overwhelmingly within the working class, but struggled to separate themselves from both the middle class (whose habits and attitudes they nonetheless resembled, and to some degree adopted) and the poorer, less conscious workers below them. Thus, they rejected patronage but courted social approval and status confirmation.

As ambiguity marked their social status and ambitions, it also influenced their uses of literacy and education. Respectability and morality therefore meant more than passive acceptance of the moral economy, yet their very actions reveal the process of cultural hegemony in operation, with its contradictions and complexities, as R. Q. Gray's analysis of nineteenth-century Edinburgh illustrates most clearly. To gain the rewards of respectability, separation without isolation, homeownership, security, and status required a basic commitment to such valued Victorian characteristics as morality, character, industry, sobriety, and thrift. Discipline, decorum, restraint, and proper manners signified to them, however ironically, the marks of the respectability for which they strived. The desire for education, in schools and by one's self, accompanied and was linked to this process. Consequently, basic attitudes, values, and habits were shared by both the middle class and labor aristocrats, even though motivations and the meaning of the beliefs could differ (e.g., working class collectiveness versus middle class individualism). The values and their relationship to literacy differed, too, in efforts to

exist and to contend with their experience of the world around them. Despite these crucial differences, the results with regard to literacy and its social functions deviated much less.

This element of the working class defined itself less by badges of education, degree of literacy skill, and what was read than the middle-class members did. Yet its members also valued their schooling, sought it for their children, and considered it more instrumentally than others within the working class. To a significant degree, regardless of the realities or contradictions of their daily use of literacy (probably not too different from others) and its economic value to them, they accepted the "literacy myth," and aided in its promotion and endorsement. They did partially mediate, however, the maintenance of hegemony within the social and cultural system.⁵⁷ The contribution of literacy and hegemony itself is neither simple, direct, nor crudely obvious, as the process functioned within divided and changing societies: this is one meaning of literacy, subtle, dialectical, and mediating.

The place of literacy in middle-class society and culture is at once more difficult and easier to outline. In some ways, the differences between the classes can be all too easily exaggerated; in others, however, one hundred years of easy generalization and Victorian stereotypes, in addition to material and ideological variations, intrude to blur the issues. Little research has thus far penetrated the ideology and the veneer, respectively, of the Victorian middle class. To complete this sketch, a

⁵⁷ Gareth Stedman Jones, "Working-Class," 488-489, *passim*, *Outcast London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); Geoffrey Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain, 1854-1875* (New York: Schocken, 1972), Ch. 3; Bruce Laurie, "'Nothing on Compulsion': Life Styles of Philadelphia Artisans, 1820-1850," *Labor History*, 15 (1974), 337-366; Paul Faler, "Cultural Aspects of the Industrial Revolution: Lynn, Massachusetts, Shoemakers and Industrial Morality, 1826-1860," *ibid.*, 367-394; Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976); Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (New York: Knopf, 1976), esp. Ch. 1; Gregory Kealey and Peter Warrian, eds., *Essays in Canadian Working Class History* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976); R. Q. Gray, "Styles of Life, the 'Labour Aristocracy,' and Class Relations in Later Nineteenth Century Edinburgh," *International Review of Social History*, 18 (1973), 428-452, *The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976); Geoffrey Crossick, "The Labour Aristocracy and its Values: A Study of Mid-Victorian Kentish London," *Victorian Studies*, 19 (1976), 301-328; Crossick, ed., *The Lower Middle Class in Britain* (New York: St. Martins, 1977); Standish Meacham, *A Life Apart* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977); Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975); Williams, "The press," among others. I hardly need to note that the issues raised in this sketch and that which follows are much more complex and require further detailed study. See also, Ch. 1, above. I plan to extend this analysis in a social history of literacy in the west, in progress.

few comments are in order. In the first place, there can be no doubt that middle-class parents and their children acquired much greater educational opportunities, especially in years of enrollment and in regularity of attendance. It was the middle class that constituted the source of reform and reformers, in their social, cultural, and economic anxieties about social change and about the present and future conditions of their youths. They, of course, sent their children to the schools, although to private schools when possible, and collected the benefits from education's socially stratifying and reproducing functions.

The middle class virtually came to wear education and literacy as a badge of status and identification. Literate culture and book culture are associated primarily with the bourgeoisie: in readership, scholarship, and in domestic life, as well as in forms of commercial and professional life. There is much truth in all of this, to be sure. As education expanded, at elementary, secondary, and university levels, so did the clerical and professional spheres of work; their relationship is not monocausal, but it is nonetheless distinct. The middle class dominated in opportunities for postprimary schooling as its members did in literacy-based employment and in literacy-oriented cultural expression and cultural life. They led in the rising incomes and time for leisure associated with these and other related changes. The values of the moral bases of literacy—morality, character, respectability—were theirs, of course; their identification and close affiliation with education and literacy should not surprise us. The achievement of education, after all, was more than ever before a requirement for the maintenance and transmission of their class and status in those times of insecurity.

Yet there is, I think, more to the question than these important truisms. The literacy acquired at school by many middle-class children was less than a perfect skill. For the great majority who were unable to afford private schooling for their youngsters, the educational conditions discussed before prevailed. Learning problems and teaching problems were not an issue for working-class pupils alone; they pervaded the educational system and included schools in middle-class districts and private facilities, too. Low-quality education did not produce highly skilled readers; parents who realized this and who wanted better for their children would have had a very difficult time finding it. The uses of that literacy are less clear, but the available indicators suggest that their literacy was often neglected and that it was typically employed in reading for amusement, entertainment, and the like—noninstrumental and censored uses of literacy, instead of or in addition to promoted or pragmatic uses. Novel- and fiction-reading, newspapers and magazines were much more popular than educational, religious, and serious literature and

journals of opinion. While they surely read more frequently and in greater quantities than the working class, the middle class, as today, probably read not very often and not very edifyingly. Some of course did read voluminously and seriously, and took delight and benefit in exercising their literacy—they, however, may not have been typical.

For the middle class, there were many alternative forms of leisure that competed with private reading or family reading circles. With the spread and lengthening of leisure time came the family excursion, the holiday or vacation to the seashore, the theatre, concerts, lectures, choral societies, gardening, clubs and associations, conspicuous consumption, church and chapel, and of course middle-class sports. In the prized, sentimentalized domestic refuge, there were also activities from which to choose: music (the status-symbolic piano), toys and games, crafts and sewing, in addition to reading. Some of these activities could relate to uses of literacy, while others provided attractive diversions and competition. Literacy, in other words, must be considered in such a context of variety and choice. Even for the bourgeoisie, there was more to life than literacy; their culture spanned beyond the use of reading and writing.

By mid-century contemporary reformers in fact were quite concerned about the new opportunities that leisure presented to the middle class. Their efforts to control and rationalize their own class' recreation paralleled the reformers' attack on the working class, illustrating their anxieties and the perceived threat which morally uncontrolled activities represented. The existence of a "problem of leisure" among the middle class is revealing; the forms of enjoyment and entertainment in which individuals apparently took pleasure were seen as improper and dangerous, in the period in which opportunities for leisure first expanded. With the rise of leisure came the problem of leisure, as with the rise of literacy came the awareness of a similar problem. As leisure was severed from its traditional bases in work, community, and custom, and removed to more private settings, it stimulated fears of excessive freedom from restraints and controls. Critics of middle-class recreations, thus, inform us that this class also found more to occupy themselves than reading and other approved activities, and that when they read the material was often other than that promoted as acceptable, even after we allow for reformers' moral exaggerations. Compromises were made, and otherwise improper recreations, such as billiards, were tolerable if they took place at home, were done in moderation, and prepared without distraction for one's work and duty. Despite reformers' efforts, diverse forms of leisure grew more and more popular during the second half of the nineteenth century; they became more assured and luxurious as well.

How well this fit within the veneer of respectability and morality we can not be sure.⁵⁸

By the end of the century, recreations and leisure pursuits in all their variety were common and accepted; they were shared by members of all classes. In many respects, patterns of cultural activity among the middle and working classes (albeit within material limits) were becoming more similar and less disparate: the homogenization and standardization of culture were increasing. Literacy and print media contributed distinctly to this vital transformation; their role was played much more at a lower than a higher level of skill and comprehension. Education and literacy naturally remained one sign of the middle class, more valuable for status and work opportunities than for their active use, I suspect, while others increasingly sought its certification. Real differences declined, though they were certainly not erased, with the arrival of universal schooling and literacy and the mass media. Newer media only exacerbated this trend. Thus, we may conclude that literacy is important to modern culture and its impact, but that it need be neither always dominant nor central to make its contribution. Furthermore, a high level of skills is not required for literacy's manifold significance to be felt.

Consider next, work in the nineteenth century. A constant use and a high quality of reading and writing were required only by clerical workers and professionals. As society bureaucratized and modernized, record-keeping functions were concentrated in the care of a small number of hands. Formal procedures and printed applications were not yet used or needed by many, and in fact not a great deal of literacy was demanded to cope with them, from either side of the counter or ledger. Commercial literacy demanded copying, recording, and tallying, at best automatic responses and rule-of-thumb techniques. Much professional work also demanded a similar empiricism, but one more practiced and on a higher level of skill, involving more comprehension and consistency

⁵⁸ Baily, "'A Mingled Mass'"; Best, *Mid-Victorian*; Crossick, ed., *The Lower Middle Class*. See also, Crossick, "The Labour Aristocracy"; Gray, *Labour Aristocracy*; H. J. Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society* (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1969); Michael R. Marrus, ed., *The Emergence of Leisure* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); J. F. C. Harrison, *The Early Victorians* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971); S. G. Checkland, *The Rise of Industrial Society in England* (London: Longmans, 1964); Edward Pessen, *Riches, Class, and Power Before the Civil War* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1973); Rush Welter, *The Mind of America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975); F. C. Jaher, ed., *The Age of Industrialism in America* (New York: Free Press, 1968); John Cawalti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); Irwin G. Wyllie, *The Self-Made Man in America* (New York: Free Press, 1966).

than creative thought or originality. It was the very few, no doubt, who needed or who succeeded in achieving a truly intellectual employment of their literacy. They, in most cases, responded to a different range of demands and needs, perceptions and expectations.

For most people work was not yet taught in a formal sense. It was learned on the job, sometimes by apprenticeship, always by experience. Few forms of employment required much literacy either, and illiterates were spread throughout the occupational spectrum, even if few rose above semi- and unskilled labor. In nineteenth-century cities, needs were little different from M. M. Lewis' 1953 description: "For the great majority of workers the order of importance is: first to grasp what is heard; then, to be able to speak; next, to be able to read; and only last, to be able to write. . . ." ⁵⁹ Certainly this hierarchy of needs is even truer for the mid-nineteenth than the mid-twentieth century, as few kinds of work demanded extensive or high quality acquaintance with the printed word. The imperfect skills and the verbalism which pupils took from school were well suited to their careers. Learning by doing, following instructions, and occasionally using literacy constituted what was required. Virtually all possessed this much skill by the seventh or eighth decades of the century.

Surely though, literacy could benefit workers, particularly some skilled and nonmanual employees, for whom it related in some ways to their jobs. Imperfect reading skills were no hindrance to many of them, however. They were sufficient to read building plans, for example, or follow machine or shop instructions, complete a shop bill, or take an inventory. Not all workers on a job site, in a shop or factory, or in a commercial establishment were in positions that demanded the use of their reading or writing abilities. More perhaps needed to sign their names or to count. Schoolmen, significantly, stressed that even those who left school with a merely mechanical proficiency in reading knew how to sign and knew how to count. Even if literacy were unused and neglected and the imperfect skills deteriorated, evidence suggests that the decline was least in the arithmetic of everyday affairs. ⁶⁰ Numerical ability ("numeracy") apparently had more practical uses to a worker—artisan, nonmanual, or even semiskilled—than an ability to read well, whether it involved the drawing of plans, measuring, simple counting, or keeping accounts. The training in mechanical and automatic responses

⁵⁹ Lewis, *Importance*, 138. See also, Ortega y Gasset, "Difficulty"; Ch. 5, above.

⁶⁰ T. P. D. Stone, "Reading," 529; Burt, "Education of Illiterate," 20. See also the discussion and references in Ch. 5 above and the contemporary comments in Note 23, above.

and in rule-of-thumb techniques, a product and concomitant of instruction in literacy, was more important in getting the job done than high levels of reading comprehension would be.

This empiricism was ideally suited to most work and a low level of literacy put few restraints on most aspects of people's lives. Aside from its utility in gaining basic information from the press or handbills, it opened to many the burgeoning quantities of cheap literature available for amusement, leisure, entertainment, and sometimes information about current events and politics. Changing patterns of work provided more time for this form of recreation—and the others—too. The common level of literacy, thus, while it limited most literate men and women from higher goals and higher demands, was quite functional for work, recreation, and daily living; it satisfactorily met most needs as it simultaneously met many of the society's and economy's needs.

The place of the illiterate in this society, interpreted in the preceding chapters, broadens our perspective. Illiteracy undoubtedly hindered people's advancement culturally, materially, and occupationally (in normative sociological terms); but the level of literacy demanded for survival was not one to block all progress or adjustment. Class and ethnicity primarily determined social position—not literacy or education by themselves. Literacy exerted an influence which worked cumulatively; entry into skilled work was more difficult, and even some of the limited demands placed upon literacy skills could not be met by such disadvantaged individuals. The responses and techniques useful to work, institutional contacts, and other activities were more difficult for them to acquire. Nevertheless, demands made on individual illiterates who persisted in the cities seldom precluded occupational stability, economic and property mobility, or the transactions that homeownership entailed. Nor did illiteracy prevent successful adaptation to new urban environments, access to channels of communication, or opportunities for intergenerational mobility. Demands made on literacy for practical uses in this society were insufficient to deter some success, limited as it was, by these illiterate adults. Illiteracy was restrictive, but its limits were surmountable. Class, ethnicity, and sex were the major barriers of social inequality. The majority of Irish Catholic adults, for example, were literate—and selected migrants—but they stood lowest in wealth and occupation, as did laborers and servants. Women and blacks fared little better, regardless of literacy. Possession of literacy was not in itself an achievement that brought material rewards to individuals; it guaranteed neither success nor a rise from poverty. In practice the meaning of literacy was more limited, mediated by the social structure and narrowly circumscribed for many individuals; social realities contradicted the pro-

moted promises of literacy. The potential uses of literacy were many, but in common activities potential literacy alone carried few concrete benefits while an imperfect literacy was sufficient for many needs. Literacy's uses were very often noninstrumental ones. Yet, the higher uses of literacy and the corresponding benefits and status were often precluded.

On the larger, societal level, literacy even if imperfect was especially important. This related directly to the moral bases of literacy and to the reestablishment and maintenance of social and cultural hegemony. Literacy was more central to the training, discipline, morality, and habits it accompanied and advanced than to the specific skills it represented. In this way, we can understand the significance of literacy's perceived contribution to attitudinal and value preparation and socialization, relatively unchanging from the mid-nineteenth to the late twentieth century. Here as well, we may locate the full meaning of the contradictions between the perceived and promoted influences of literacy and schooling and the existential reality. Literacy, it seems certain, was not the benefit to individuals that it was promised to be; nevertheless, it had sufficient impact at the level of skilled work and in its consensual acceptance for its larger limitations and other purposes to be blurred and largely ignored. Consequently, on the basic level of social and economic progress and those who determined it, literacy was more valuable to the society's goals and needs than to those of most individuals within it. Conceptually, as should be clear, the meaning, needs, and assessment of literacy shift as the focus moves from one level of society to another. The needs for literacy, and the demands made, differed not only from the larger unit to the individual, but also from individual to individual, much as the ideals for literacy's role and the practical needs and uses of literacy were not always synonymous. Individual employment of reading and writing and the uses that reformers promoted for popular literacy were not the same, as we have seen; and, in fact, they could be contradictory, as nineteenth-century reading habits indicate. These contradictions or conflicts, however, did not interfere with the everyday employment of literacy or its social purposes.

V

It is not part of our intention to revive the ridiculous thesis that the Reformation was the child of the printing press. It is perhaps the case that a book on its own has never been sufficient to change anybody's mind. But if it does not succeed in convincing, the printed book is at

least tangible evidence of convictions held because it embodies and symbolizes them; it furnishes arguments to those who are already converts, lets them develop and refine their faith, offers them points which help them triumph in debate, and encourages the hesitant.

LUCIEN FEBVRE AND H-J MARTIN
The Coming of the Book (1976)

What would happen if the whole world became literate? Answer: not so very much, for the world is by and large structured in such a way that it is capable of absorbing the impact. But if the whole world consisted of literate, autonomous, critical, constructive people, capable of translating ideas into action, individually or collectively—the world would change.

JOHAN GALTUNG
"Literacy, Education, and Schooling—For What?" (1976)

The parallels and continuities between past and present discussions and concerns about the importance of literacy, its uses, and its quality are especially striking. How repetitive so many of the comments and observations seem. They are not in the least surprising, however. After reviewing the transmission of literacy in England in the second half of the nineteenth century, M. M. Lewis exclaimed, "How familiar all this sounds today! There is the same belief that illiteracy is on the increase, as shown by the retrogression of children after leaving school. There is the same belief that the mischief is due to teaching methods in vogue, countered by an equally robust faith in these very methods." Written in 1953, this observation seems even more pertinent today. Lewis concludes, "Society today insists upon the importance of illiteracy without realizing why it is important."⁶¹ Controversy continues to rage over instructional methods, the quality of education, the influences on learning, the disuse and misuse of literacy skills, the low quality and declining levels of abilities, the negative impact of broadcast media and leisure activities, and the moral and social components of schooling. Studies show adults not reading very often, children not learning to read, and pupils graduating without useful levels of literacy.

Yet we reside in a society in which literacy, as measured by the

⁶¹ Lewis, *Importance*, 43, 98. See also, Chall and Carroll, *Literate Society*; Chall, *Learning*; Bataille, *A Turning Point* (esp. The Declaration of Persepolis: Final Report of the International Symposium for Literacy, September, 1975); "Illiteracy in the U.S.," *New York Times*, Spring Survey of Education, Apr. 30, 1978; Olson, "Toward A Literate Society." See also my "Literacy Past and Present"; Introduction and Preface, above.

census and comparable instruments, is universal: 98 to 99% of adults are "literate." At the same time, other indicators point to something else: 20 to 50% of adults and high school students are, according to some estimates, without *functional* literacy. Ironically, the recent movement toward competency-testing in schools constitutes the first concrete effort at specificity in the matter. The point is that we are in the grips of the "literacy myth." We do not know precisely what we mean by literacy or what we expect individuals to achieve from their instruction in and possession of literacy. As a result of this severe and long-standing conceptual failing, we flail out at schools, teachers, parents, and the media and make dire predictions about the future of civilization and the conditions of people's lives. We continue to apply standards of literacy that—owing to our uncertainties—are inappropriate and contradictory, and usually far beyond the basics of reading and writing that literacy literally signifies.⁶²

The underlying assumptions of the importance of literacy, which we have studied as they were manifested in the nineteenth century, have been maintained to the present, uncritically accepted, for the most part, and constantly promulgated. These assumptions, tied to modern social thought and theories of society, of social change, and of social development, form the basis of the "literacy myth." The paradigms of progressive, evolutionary social thought have outlived their usefulness and are in a state of crisis, as more and more critics and commentators illustrate. This does not mean of course that literacy has not had its uses, whether socially, culturally, economically, or individually—or that it has not been important or can not be potentially more important.⁶³

If we are to understand the meanings of literacy and its different values, past and present, these assumptions must be criticized, the needs reexamined, the demands reevaluated. The variable and differential contributions of literacy to different levels of society and different individuals must be confronted. Demands, abilities, and uses must be matched in more flexible and realistic ways, and the uses of literacy seen for their worth, historically and at present. Literacy, finally, can

⁶² See, for example, Robert Disch, ed., *The Future of Literacy* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1973); Joseph Gold, ed., *In the Name of Language!* (Toronto: Macmillan-Maclean-Hunter, 1976); U.S. Department of Commerce, *Social Indicators, 1976*; Robert Escarpit, *The Book Revolution* (Paris: UNESCO, 1965); Mary Johnson, *Programmed Illiteracy in the Schools* (Winnipeg: Clarity Books, 1970); Chall and Carroll, *Toward A Literate Society*.

⁶³ See, for example, Kozol, "New Look," Freire, *Pedagogy*; Bataille, *A Turning Point*.

no longer be seen as a universalistic quantity or quality to be possessed however unequally by all in theory. Needs, aspirations, and expectations must be best met for all members of society. And literacy must be accorded a new understanding—in historical context. If its social meanings are to be understood and its value best utilized, the “myth of literacy” must be exploded.