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Introduction

PRINCIPLES OF POPULAR CRITICISM

ANALYZING TONAL shifts. Parsing mixed metaphors. Tracing metrical irregularities. Identifying ambiguity or paradox. All are classic examples of the techniques of close reading taught by I. A. Richards to Cambridge University students in the 1920s: the moment when, the story goes, the discipline of literary studies was born in its modern form. All continue to epitomize close reading as most literature professors teach it today. All are also inheritances of an earlier era of literary-critical methodology whose existence and significance have yet to be recognized. In nineteenth-century Britain, close reading techniques not only cohered and spread but were newly understood to advance the broader development of critical thought. Moreover, and for the first time, the methods were promoted on a mass scale and framed as the tools of a democratizing citizenry rather than markers of the ingenuity of scholars and specialists. This book recovers a lapsed tradition that I call “Popular Criticism.” The term is inspired by Richards’s “Practical Criticism,” an approach that drew on but occluded its debts to earlier populist practices by reinventing close reading as “a *new* and powerful educational instrument.”¹ A movement that spanned the long nineteenth century but peaked between the 1840s and 1890s, Popular Criticism was claimed as a common enterprise by a significant cadre of social critics, novelists, journalists, educators, and ordinary citizens. These figures shared the premise that critical thinking was best cultivated through inquisitive, form-attuned engagement with texts—through, in other words, acts of close reading that they used to link literary criticism to critical literacy. All concurred that if the endeavor required individual introspection, it was fundamentally social in purpose—for some, even best conducted collaboratively. As this book shows, the advent of mass-scale close reading and critical thinking was primarily a fantasy upheld by a wide, ideologically diverse range of cultural elites, but also by many common readers who provided little-known influences on this history. The fantasy flourished to the point of producing a

previously unparalleled and henceforth unreplicated public culture of critical reading, which formed a grassroots counterpart to “the social mission of English criticism” and the goal of “democratising beauty” that animated professional critics like Matthew Arnold, Walter Pater, and William Morris.² Accounts of the formation of literary studies typically center the institutional history of a discipline grounded in the close examination of texts. But its extra-institutional advent occurred in the preceding generations: Our main method filtered into the ivory tower from without rather than emanating from within. *Critical Masses* offers a genealogy of the rise, proliferation, and decline, over a long century, of the ideals of democratized close reading and critical thinking. It further locates the origins of the belief—now common among literature scholars—that the skills of textual analysis might seamlessly and limitlessly transfer to the world beyond the page.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the campaign to popularize literary criticism was targeted most prominently to audiences in the process of becoming both newly literate and newly enfranchised. Centered mainly on workers and women, the efforts united two populations that, long denied formal educations, were widely seen as both requiring elevation and—more surprisingly—ideally suited to the work. Promoters of Popular Criticism regularly drew on perceived strengths of both groups and identified experiences of social marginalization as generative of productively nonconformist thinking. In his penny weekly *The Working Man's Friend and Family Instructor* (1850–1853), editor and publisher John Cassell frames critical thinking as common—universal, but also elemental—work:

Some tell us that the Greek word “*Krinein*” “to judge,” whence we obtain our terms, “discern,” “discreet,” “discretion,” “discrimination,” “crime,” “crisis,” &c., &c., originally meant, “to sift,” or “to use a sieve.” In reviewing the history of our country, we perceive that John Bull has for ages been in possession of a good *mental sieve*, and has employed it very freely and extensively; and hence it is that we have so much of what is really true, just, and right among us, and therefore our empire is built on immutable and, we had almost said, omnipotent foundations.³

Here Cassell claims criticism as the forte of “John Bull” (a symbolic personification of the ordinary Briton) and locates the empire’s “almost . . . omnipotent foundations”—a qualification that troubles his otherwise confident jingoism, inviting readers’ examination—in an unexpected source: its citizens’ purported propensity for “discrimination.” The etymological root of both “criticism” and “critique,” *Krinein*, is reclaimed not as the purview of scholar or sage but as a collective inheritance. Yet, if innate, the faculty also requires work to educe. To develop this “*mental sieve*,” Cassell writes, one must read

widely, closely, and regularly: “It is of vast importance to call ourselves to book, and especially concerning our books,” for “knowledge is one of the most fugitive things in the world, and is sure to fly away unless we use means to retain it, and one of the best chains we can form for this purpose is frequent *reflection*.”⁴ Cassell’s oft-used collective pronouns establish text-mediated “reflection” as a communal project. As chapter 2 argues, this usage is not perfunctory, performative, or nosistic, but reflects the genuine commitment to mass uplift that he reinforced by giving laboring authors a public platform for their thoughts. In his own editorials, Cassell suggests that close reading advances the development of critical faculties, and that those same analytic skills enable readers to hold both themselves and the world accountable for actions, beliefs, and crises. For his critical campaign came at a time of widely perceived crisis (a word likewise etymologically derived from *Krinein*, as he notes) for Britain’s citizenry. Although a series of Chartist petitions to Parliament had just failed to achieve mass franchise, that prospect remained, depending on one’s perspective, either a tantalizing possibility or a looming threat.

A peer working-class periodical, *The British Controversialist* (1850–1872), elaborated this link between textual criticism and critical scrutiny of the wider world and sought explicitly to cultivate dialectical thought in working readers. Like Cassell, editors Samuel Neil and J. A. Cooper encouraged readers to clarify and challenge their thinking in dialogue with texts, primarily by drawing on *Krinein*’s capacity to “discern” by separating and sifting: “Books ought not to think for us; we should think in company with . . . them,” and “we should” do so by “learn[ing] to read . . . for ourselves, and [to] form in our own mind some conception of their contents and meaning—endeavouring always clearly to separate in our thoughts, our opinions of them, and the verities they assuredly teach.”⁵ In a surfeited landscape of midcentury periodicals, Neil and Cooper distinguished *The British Controversialist* by deriving its main content (opinion essays) from a unique source: laboring readers invited to weigh in on the most pressing issues of the day. They thus pronounced the journal a true gauge of the vox populi, insisting: “Public opinion is a power. It is critical, active, influential.”⁶ Rather than seeking common ground or reconciliation among the divergent views they solicited, Neil and Cooper framed public opinion as “critical” in a dual sense: as both essential to public life and grounded in dissent from consensus. To this end, they shaped each issue around the publication of dialectically opposed opinions on provocative topical questions, categorized by “affirmative” and “negative” replies.⁷ The editors, wagering that the “controversial” form would prompt corresponding critical activity in readers, presented reading as the vehicle for “exercise[ing] . . . judicial faculties” and “habituat[ing]” oneself to “critical reflectiveness”: “The main design of the *British Controversialist* . . . has been to *educate* public

opinion; to excite, interest, employ, and culture the powers of the intellect in the examination of the various questions which afford occasion for the exercise of the judicial faculties of the mind, and to habituate its readers to the constant exertion of critical reflectiveness.”⁸ *The British Controversialist’s* laboring readers demonstrated their commitment to the principle by forming arguments based in close scrutiny of their interlocutors’ words. The phrase “critical thinking” had not yet gained common use, although the bigram can be traced to the early nineteenth century.⁹ But as this book shows, many expressed the concept in strikingly similar terms, from *The British Controversialist’s* “critical reflectiveness” to the language of “awaken[ed]” thinking that links Cassell, John Ruskin, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot—or what Ruskin imagined as a “sharper discipline” that was crucially enhanced by close reading but also separable from it.¹⁰

This book aims to help develop a better understanding of the entwined derivation of two skills often touted as central contributions of humanist practice and rationales for its perpetuation: close reading and critical thinking. As it shows, the uniquely democratized literary culture of the nineteenth century was shaped by widespread belief that close reading could spark and nourish portable forms of critical thought. The hypothesis was transformative and its lineage lasting, but the details of the connection quickly blurred. Helen Small observes that “though critical self-reflection is not unique to the humanities, and not all they do, it is indispensable” to humanists, and so “more prominent in their self-descriptions than in an equivalently general account of the sciences or social sciences.”¹¹ But while humanists widely cite critical thinking as a defining disciplinary skill, its meaning is commonly held to be transparent, its merits self-evident, its methods straightforward. As Michael Warner recognized over two decades ago, we have “no history of the protocols and norms for a discipline of critical reading.”¹² We further lack an account of what unites or divides critical *reading* and critical *thinking*, and what distinguishes either across the diverse fields in which they are taught. This is partly because, as this book demonstrates, our existing genealogy of close reading remains historically and institutionally constricted, despite the work of scholars like Andrew Elfenbein, who shows that Victorian ideals of “hard reading” morphed into New Critical close reading, and Annette Federico, who has raised the question of the relationship of “close reading” to “critical reading.”¹³

In recent decades, professional philosophers have amplified their efforts to define (and lay disciplinary claims to defining) critical thinking. To this end, oft-reprinted handbooks like *Critical Thinking: An Introduction to the Basic Skills*, *Becoming a Critical Thinker: A User Friendly Manual*, *Critical Thinking: Tools for Taking Charge of Your Learning and Your Life*, and *How to Think Critically: A Concise Guide* distill portable guidelines for identifying fallacies and

assessing and formulating logical arguments. Such books draw on while reducing the range of philosopher Susan Stebbing's prescient, democratizing *Thinking to Some Purpose* (1939), which taught mass audiences the value of "thinking clearly" while retaining a Popular Critical receptivity—signaled by her speculative title—to varied practices, objects, and objectives.¹⁴ While philosophical-critical thinking commonly involves an attentiveness to word choice that allies it with literary-critical reading, the modern manuals' constriction of critical thought to principles of argumentation makes them less relevant or applicable to imaginative writing. The typical absence of this purview from philosophical accounts reveals a healthy disciplinary diversity. Nevertheless, *Critical Masses* argues, critical thinking is more complex and multifaceted than modern working definitions suggest, and the concept requires further examination and a wider genealogy if it is to remain a core source of humanist value. Lingered irresolution within the nonphilosophical humanist disciplines about our own means and ends inhibits our capacity to defend what both creators and critics of literature arguably do best: transform thinking through the creative manipulation of language. Thus, one object of this book is to better understand the diverse array of practices that cultivate what we might call "literary-critical thinking" as it both aligns with and departs from other disciplinary modes of thought.

Unlike contemporary philosophers, contemporary literature scholars are largely hesitant to define critical thinking, mirroring an analogous collective disinclination to define close reading or the relationships between them. This book reveals that both tendencies bear a long provenance and are, to a degree, rightly irremediable. As John Guillory has recently shown, close reading has always been a "minimally formalized technique" that resists "consensus definition": claims that (this book shows) hold true both in and well before the era in which existing histories of the method traditionally begin.¹⁵ Because the Practical and New Critics purportedly invented but rarely employed the term, the phrase "close reading" itself did not gain traction until the 1960s, as Scott Newstok has extensively traced.¹⁶ It is additionally difficult to define the technique because the history of close reading evolved out of the vast history of "reading closely."¹⁷ The subtitle of the present book is thus deliberately polemical, for close reading no more originated as a *potential* mode of textual engagement in this era than in earlier ones, particularly those in which practices of legal exegesis, scriptural commentary, and philology flourished.¹⁸ Still, the modestly systematized principles and loosely coherent focus on the formal properties of language that are employed today and almost pervasively attributed to Richards and his New Critical inheritors were alive and well as principles of Popular Criticism. This suggests that modern versions of close reading emerged in the nineteenth century, particularly as a popular phenomenon

linked to broader critical skills. Indeed, the enduring shorthand for close reading as “attention to the words on the page” rose and spread as the Popular Critics repurposed a common eighteenth-century dictum—to “read with attention”—as the rallying cry of a populist movement built on the commitment of close reading to broadly social, explicitly critical ends. This widened and lengthened history may appear to alleviate the discipline’s increasingly vexed relationship to the ostensible progenitors of close reading, enabling us to avoid the ideological baggage of twentieth-century critics who did not invent close reading but only formalized its institutional practice. Yet *Critical Masses* does not aim to reproduce a genetic fallacy whereby methods are assumed tainted or exonerated by the politics of their creators.¹⁹ For the techniques themselves are theoretically value-neutral and thus applicable—for good or ill—to any and every ideological end.

This historical claim for the nineteenth-century origins of our core critical techniques may seem counterintuitive not least because it is the bookending centuries that are normally credited with the respective inventions of critique and close reading. The apparent absence of any distinctive nineteenth-century conception of the critical reflects the derivation of its critical practices (primarily from outside of academic institutions rather than from within them, making them harder to document) and their vast, sometimes contradictory influences. Unsurprisingly, the movement inherited key aspects of oft-opposed earlier evaluative conceptions of criticism as either condemnation or appreciation. Less expectedly, it forecast the reworking of criticism as an aspirationally neutral analytic enterprise by twentieth-century formalists who strove to examine how texts work rather than critiquing their flaws or praising their merits. But the movement also regularly assumed the consciously political functions now associated with critique. Thus, many Popular Critics saw texts as training grounds for the “ruthless criticism of everything existing” that Karl Marx encouraged in 1844.²⁰ Like Marx, one laboring *British Controversialist* contributor argues for the necessity of a pervasively skeptical disposition: “Among the Greeks a ‘skeptikos,’ sceptic, was originally only a thoughtful person,” he writes, and: “In this sense every man must be a sceptic before he can say, I know; and this with *every subject* he handles.”²¹ The still widely read Aristotle was an explicit influence on some Popular Critics, who similarly sought to use alternative modes of thinking to unsettle *endoxa* (commonly accepted assumptions), as were more proximate practitioners of critique like Immanuel Kant and G.W.F. Hegel. Yet amid this proto-hermeneutics of suspicion, others explored eudaimonic modes for scouting new possibilities in dissected norms. Here Popular Critics included dimensions of reading championed by modern critics of critique, but saw enthusiasm, immersion, and absorption as vital mechanisms for getting close to texts and so enabling

their minute scrutiny. Unlike the more familiar critical praxes that preceded and succeeded them, Victorian variants made a virtue of this methodological pluralism.

Indeed, the informal, improvisational nature of the enterprise led many Popular Critics to frame their theories of reading as a protest against the formation of rules and to identify both close reading and critical thinking as resistant to formula. In this respect, they again anticipated by decades a central tension of Practical Criticism, which was, Guillory observes, “conflicted about technique, desiring at once to produce it, and yet to transcend it”—a constitutive paradox addressed most fully in the first chapter and coda of *Critical Masses*.²² Still, at least some sought to develop coherent (if intentionally open-ended) guidelines for critical practice, like pausing for reflection, annotating with substantive marginalia, and reading first for plot, then for form. As this book shows, all practitioners of Popular Criticism believed to some degree in the need to offer readers concrete tools and techniques for textual analysis, from the journalists and editors who printed dictionaries filled with literary-critical jargon (Cassell) or taught readers to organize their thinking along dialectical lines (Neil and Cooper) to the novelists and cultural critics who directed specific attention to “figures” of speech (John Ruskin), paratext and intertext (Elizabeth Gaskell), and paradox (Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot). Unable and unwilling to systematize the analysis of prose analogously to the promises of nineteenth-century poetics, Popular Criticism worked to spread *tools* rather than *rules* for reading. But while the culturally elite Popular Critics and creative writers often emphasized the irreducibility of close reading and critical thinking to predetermined programs, many working-class Popular Critics saw a distinct value in being more rather than less deliberate in formalizing tools for mass uptake. In this respect, they concurred with Edgar Allan Poe’s 1841 account of “analysis” as a “power” that “may be described, although not defined,” and foresaw what New Critic John Crowe Ransom would diagnose a century later as the need for the tools and techniques of literary criticism to be identified sufficiently distinctly to be “consolidated and kept going,” a point to which the coda returns.²³ If they took care to leave wide leeway for readerly subjectivity and interpretive pluralism, they worked equally to craft maximally accessible, maximally portable critical reading pedagogies designed to teach textual criticism and highlight its applicability to social critique. Here they intervened in what Elfenbein has diagnosed as “a long-running debate in Britain about whether reading should be hard or easy.”²⁴ For the Popular Critics strove to counter what one working reader rejected as a condescending tendency to offer uneducated audiences “reading-made-easy,” casting close reading as an act of arduous labor while simultaneously devising tools for lightening the load.²⁵

Marx's quotable quip signals the dawn of the belief that the criticism of literature facilitates the criticism of all things, an elision encouraged by many of the figures who populate this book and many literature scholars today. *Critical Masses* shows how this expansive ambit activated what Guillory has termed the discipline's chronic "overestimation of aim" and served as a key catalyst of a shift in which "far from being the proper object of criticism, literature came to be regarded as constraining the scope of critical assertion, its mission as the criticism of society."²⁶ This set the conditions for Isobel Armstrong's recent diagnosis that literature scholars still lack a persuasive account of what distinguishes *aesthetic* objects from any other objects that might be closely examined (a point to which this book's coda returns).²⁷ For, presciently anticipating the deconstructivist tenet that there is no "hors-texte," many Popular Critics envisioned literary objects as vehicles for analyzing the entire world, as well as for actively reshaping it. As Ruskin proclaims to his late-life audience of "workmen and laborers," "the teaching of Art, as I understand it, is the teaching of all things."²⁸ Similarly, Eliot attests: "Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot."²⁹ Many saw texts as mediums for examining and interpreting all known phenomena: "The right reading of books," writes Henry Morley, is "an index and a running aid to the right reading of life."³⁰ Cyrus Hamlin's assertion that books "cannot take the place of actual experience, but they prepare for it [and] interpret it to us," is echoed by Cassell: "Books are indeed precious, for they qualify men for close observation, and extracting the largest amount of truth from experience."³¹ Those who agreed that aesthetic encounters cultivate infinitely portable critical skills often correspondingly saw the endeavor as endless. Thus, Frederic Harrison warns: "The art of right reading is as long and difficult to learn as the art of right living."³²

The Cassellian idea that "books . . . qualify men for close observation" of the world helps explain why the Popular Critics consistently directed their efforts to two groups—workers and women—united by political disenfranchisement and a lack of formal education. Many optimistically contended that a defining work ethic made laborers uniquely amenable to onerous reading. More pragmatically, others sensed the dawn of mass franchise and deemed critical skills requisite for prospective voters. In 1850, the founders of *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* opined that "in a country where supreme political power has, after many struggles, come into the hands of the citizen, he would show himself insensible to the importance and responsibility of such a possession if he did not take some pains to educate himself for its proper administration."³³ Though that prospect alarmed some and thrilled others, the politics of Popular Criticism were sweepingly multipartisan, uniting radicals, liberals,

conservatives, and proto-libertarians around the civic necessity of mass education (a tradition that continued as close reading made strange bedfellows of twentieth-century formalists as politically disparate as F. R. Leavis, William Empson, and neo-Confederate Southern Agrarian Donald Grady Davidson). As the second half of *Critical Masses* shows, the fictional-generic incarnation of Popular Criticism that this book calls “critical realism” was arguably inaugurated by a little-known conservative industrial novel before being repurposed for a diverse range of ideological ends by better-known figures. This broad political appeal was initially instrumental to the movement’s success, and all major figures in this book concurred that a critical education was requisite at least *alongside*, if not *prior to*, the political enfranchisement of the masses. Yet this widely co-optable potential in Popular Criticism always also contained the radical seeds of its own demise. For however easily its ideals aligned with bourgeois self-help culture and conservative bids to “reform, that you may preserve,” the most central mission was to equip ordinary citizens with skills readily repurposed to critique any and every element of any status quo they might face.³⁴

While this book traces the brief consensus of a wide range of cultural elites on the value of Popular Criticism, it also discovers that the work often began with the grassroots contributions of laborers keenly cognizant of the difference between an education that would “enable [the people] to resist their oppressors” and “one that would teach them to be ‘content with their station’”—the critique levied by Chartist leader and radical journalist James Bronterre O’Brien in 1841 against the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK).³⁵ As Gregory Vargo finds, radical movements shaped debates over the role of education in social life that long outlasted Chartism’s failure to achieve universal suffrage, abiding as “working-class activists. . . defined education as inherently political, true education the movement toward liberation.”³⁶ Among the unsung architects of Popular Criticism, then, were cabinetmaker William Lovett and toolmaker John Collins. In their pamphlet *Chartism; a New Organization of the People* (1840), Lovett and Collins insist that a true education consists of expanding existing capacities rather than instilling new content, for “nature has given to most of her children a *faculty* for acquiring knowledge, which, once *quickened and directed by education*, is continually gratified with its acquisitions, and ever deriving fresh pleasures in new pursuits and accumulation of knowledge.”³⁷ From the start, they propose, “in *intellectual education* no *real* knowledge can be acquired but by *the exercise* of the perceptive, comparative, and reflective powers”; these faculties are juxtaposed to “this word-teaching, rote-learning, memory-loading system [that] is still dignified with the name of ‘education.’”³⁸ Foreseeing that “in teaching children a knowledge of *things*, a knowledge of *words* must not be neglected,”

Lovett and Collins advocate the word-attentive “art of reading” as requisite to knowing and examining the world.³⁹ Their exuberant account frames learning as a “great[] delight” filled with “wonders” and “beauties” whose “powers” first “cast a continual sunshine over the mind” and only secondarily “render . . . life useful.”⁴⁰ But they also shrewdly wed “imaginative powers” to use-value: preceding one of Marx’s most famous lines by decades, they stress that as “*all* are benefitted by [labor],” “*all ought to labour and be industrious, according to their abilities.*”⁴¹ The pamphlet exemplifies the propensity of working-class contributors to the radical press to present themselves as the analytic avant-garde needed to lead the nation in creative and critical practice, while often offering more concrete tools than comparatively abstract elite peers.

In turn, Popular Criticism increasingly distinguished women as practitioners of constructive critique, particularly as many undertook new involvement in political debates and activism around issues like abolitionism and poverty reform. Some saw the causes of women and workers as united, like feminist educator Emily Shirreff, who countered Samuel Smiles’s individualist self-help discourse with ideals of collective uplift and linked “the peculiar need of [knowledge] for the children of the working classes” to the “especial value of education to girls.”⁴² In a famed passage from Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) that illustrates how some feminists analogized the subjection of women and workers, Jane imports the language of the “millions” and “masses” from radical discourse (where the terms alluded to franchise-seekers) to invite expanded sympathies toward both groups:

Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.⁴³

Chapter 4 shows that the passage exhibits a defining technique of Brontë’s style—one that Eliot would, this book posits, find deeply generative—by rebuking convention while opening questions for consideration. For as the excerpt anaphorically insists that “it is narrow-minded” and “it is thoughtless” to condemn without seeking to understand, readers are pressed to ponder *how*

to expand their minds and undertake action in response to the “many rebellions . . . [that] ferment in the masses of life which people earth”—a sentence that concludes by fittingly tripping readers over the repurposing of the nominal “people” into its verbal form. Victorian female readers and critics have already received significant attention, dating back to early works like Kate Flint’s *The Woman Reader* (1993) and through more recent ones like Kimberly Stern’s *The Social Life of Criticism* (2016) and Marisa Palacios Knox’s *Victorian Women and Wayward Reading* (2020).⁴⁴ Yet further research remains to be done on how women of the era were regarded as distinctively possessed of minds both critical and creative. This vision was, perhaps surprisingly, as dominant in the work of Ruskin as in the theories of novel critic Anne Mozley, who developed her own forms of close reading through attempts to detect gendered style among female novelists who used masculine pseudonyms.⁴⁵ As I have shown elsewhere, Mozley—who was regarded as a top critical mind by many cultural elites of her day, including Brontë and Eliot—defied binaries between analytic and emotional reading in her own prescient diagnoses of “uncritical readers” and associated women with the intuition that “where the heart is concerned, the perception is immediately quickened.”⁴⁶

This twin popularizing and gendering of criticism helps explain why the periodical journal and novel—both seen as massified and feminized genres throughout the century—ascended as early objects of close reading and critical thought. This represents a surprising twist in an academic discipline that has otherwise naturalized the Practical and New Critical privileging of lyric as the archetypal medium of close reading. The mediums functioned symbiotically in many ways. As realist novels documented ordinary life with a journalistic ethos, periodicals facilitated the rise of fiction through its serialization and review, and these short-form genres gained popularity in an age of exploding print and constricting time. Mike Sanders has found that many working-class and radical journals reprinted excerpts, reviews, and installments of the same prose and poetry circulated in elite and bourgeois counterparts, enabling “the autodidact [to] complete a course of reading which would stand comparison with many a contemporary undergraduate syllabus.”⁴⁷ As this book’s chapter on Cassell shows, these readers were simultaneously being offered a technical vocabulary now too rarified for common circulation in literary doctoral programs. Moreover, autodidacts could sometimes undertake modes of reading in these journals that were not encouraged formally to the same degree in the mainstream press. Nicholas Dames has drawn attention to middle-class periodicals’ common practice of reprinting protracted extracts from the literary works they reviewed and treating them as “self-evident, requiring little or no work from the critic to demonstrate significance.”⁴⁸ By contrast, Vargo shows that Chartist periodicals were more likely to provide “interpolating

commentary,” “disrupting the experience of reading and modeling the kind of scrutiny its readers should bring to literature.”⁴⁹ The periodical’s defining pace also provided a model for the “periodic[] examination” of prose, establishing it as a formidable competitor to the novel as a medium for Popular Critical pedagogies.⁵⁰ For the novel’s unidirectional address from authors to readers made it, for many laboring audiences and editors, a less desirable forum for dialogic enterprises than periodicals that authorized readers as authors, like *The British Controversialist* and *The Working Man’s Friend and Family Instructor*. Thus, one *Controversialist* laborer-contributor argued, the expansion of “cheap periodical literature” had “produced a silent, sweeping, but permanent *mind-revolution*, of which the effects will last through all time,” “for no other educative machinery can be found equally efficacious.”⁵¹

Still, many Popular Critics speculated that fiction might constitute “machinery” that was equally “efficacious” for fostering inquiry, interpretive license, and, above all, critical thinking—not least through its formal confluence with the periodical. Nearly all major figures who appear in this book were closely connected to the world of journalism, and nearly all also wrote or reworked novels to manifest formal signatures of that world, like the interanimation of text and paratext or the thematization of section breaks as spaces for reflection. (For a representative example, see chapter 4, fig. 4.2.) Although the age is commonly associated with the rise of the cliffhanger, concluding critical provocations represented another shared novelistic-journalistic tactic. For instance, the shoemaker, schoolteacher, and Chartist activist Thomas Cooper concludes “‘Merrie England’—No More!” (1845), a tale of working-class destitution originally published in the radical *Northern Star* newspaper, with the question: “What are your thoughts, reader?”⁵² Both authors who serialized and those who didn’t also embedded points of pause *within* volumes or chapters, installing moments for rumination that, Caroline Levine argues, offered readers a “political and epistemological training, a way to foster energetic skepticism and uncertainty rather than closure and complacency.”⁵³ The novelists featured in this book punctuated their prose comprehensively with formal devices—strategic paradoxes, intrusive apostrophe, pointed questions, demanding paratexts, and moments “in which the story pauses a little”—designed to pause, challenge, and elicit close reading, which in turn was seen as key to the analysis of both literature and life.⁵⁴ Such devices all aspire to activate foundational Popular Critical advice: to pause, while reading, to think. My reading of these textual features departs from their common critical interpretation as byways for micromanagement or invitations to abstracted reverie.⁵⁵ While some authorial cues functioned thus, a strong, remarkably underanalyzed counter-strain instead offered readers tools for analyzing both the work and the world around it. For nineteenth-century novels, Elaine Freedgood

reveals, were far less structurally cohesive, predictably plotted, or neatly moralizing than reputation holds, and authors often intentionally filled them with formal fractures and disruptions, diegetic oddities, and mechanisms for inciting debate.⁵⁶ Indeed, many that arose from or originally served distinctive aesthetic or sociopolitical agendas have now been naturalized as staples of the medium, as Dames has shown of the oft-ignored chapter itself.⁵⁷

But if Popular Critical novelists used form to demand readers' work, they also worked to entertain them, believing that art provokes thought best when it engages first. Elements like the familiar settings, relatable characters, and dynamic plots that typify the novel's golden age helped supply what Mozley identifies as fiction's distinctive source of "pleasure," but also, less predictably, its capacity to serve as a "starting-point of thought."⁵⁸ Mozley's association of the novel with "thought" may have drawn on one of Ruskin's first principles, in *Modern Painters* (1843), that art of any kind (including visual) shapes thinking in essentially linguistic ways: "Painting, or art generally, as such, with all its technicalities, difficulties, and particular ends, is nothing but a noble and expressive *language*, invaluable as *the vehicle of thought*, but by itself, nothing."⁵⁹ The second half of this book highlights novelists who strategically structured their famously pliable medium to entwine absorptive reading with spurs to critical thinking. As Debra Gettelman has demonstrated, many both "implied" and "left room for" readers to develop forms of "imagination . . . independent of the author's control," inviting the types of reading against the grain that Knox has categorized as "wayward."⁶⁰ For one *British Controversialist* contributor, this quality rendered novels peerless educators: "The novel reader" who learns from "passion-teaching pages" is guided "out of the realm of facts, and . . . [into] that highest of educative and stimulating influences—the influences of imagination."⁶¹ Framing novels as dual vehicles of entertainment and education, Popular Criticism elaborated the paradigm of the novel of education (a tradition that, I argue elsewhere, both includes and exceeds that of the *bildungsroman*), which centrally wed plot-based depictions of a protagonist's development to mechanisms designed to effect readers' education.⁶² And it saw that education was often most effective when it invited novel readers to be dialectically "entranced" and "edified"—David Kurnick's terms for the poles that he posits between "erotic" captivation and "intellectual" elevation in Eliot's *Romola* (1862).⁶³

Distinguishing between "the influences of imagination" and "the realm of facts" helps clarify the consistent tendency of Popular Critical novelists to stress that fiction is a forum for thinking *alternately* rather than *factually* or *logically*. These competing possibilities—the former of which underwrote use of the novel as a vehicle of "alternative imagining," Gettelman argues—provide clues for distinguishing literary-critical and philosophical modes of critical

thinking.⁶⁴ Indeed, this conception was essential to the Popular Critical sub-genre that *Critical Masses* terms “critical realism,” which was driven by a desire to spark “starting-point[s] of thought.” For Mozley’s insight may have been guided by a work she studied closely: Brontë’s 1849 novel *Shirley*, which raises a meta-reflective distinction between “queer thoughts” and “right thoughts.”⁶⁵ The critical realists concur that novels—unlike sermons, activism, philosophy, or legislation (all raised variously as foil-fields or -genres)—are unsuited to advancing normative programs. The British novelist and playwright Israel Zangwill agreed, writing, “A novel, like a metaphor, proves nothing.”⁶⁶ Instead, he suggested, both (novel and metaphor) may illuminate processes of thinking and teach readers to see differently. Reviewing *Jane Eyre* with this alternative education in mind, Mozley identifies Brontë as “the novelist of the school-room,” for

as the scholastic world would seem to have been the main theatre of her experience . . . she chooses that others shall enter it with her. She will not condescend to shift the scene; she will not stoop to her reader’s prejudices—they must overcome them: nor are we losers by the obligation. It cannot be denied that hitherto the art of teaching has cast a suspicion of coldness and dryness over its professors: it should not be so; it is unfair to an honourable profession, which should at least be cheered by sympathy in its irksome labours. In these days of educational enthusiasm the prejudice ought to be done away. Currer Bell seems to regard it as the mission of her genius to effect this: her clear, forcible, picturesque style gives life to what our fancies thought but a vegetating existence.⁶⁷

Here Mozley lights upon key strategies of the critical realists—to “choose[] that others shall enter” into an “educational enthusiasm” with them, to force readers to “overcome” preconceptions and “prejudices” through a novelistic activation of self-critical faculties, and to use narrative “style” to “give life” to what seemed “but a vegetating existence.” Reviewing Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Mozley praises the recently deceased Brontë as the consummate free-thinker, partly owing to the “freedom, independence, and wild self-culture” with which she and her sisters began “thinking their own thoughts, forming their own theories, constructing their own creeds,” but also to how assiduously Brontë worked to craft fiction that denaturalizes the world to others.⁶⁸

Yet even as early as Brontë’s first novel, Mozley could detect a central paradox: The honing of critical faculties that stand to improve society may also alienate the critic from it. In *Jane Eyre*, she finds, “a feeling is always conveyed . . . implying rather a kind of yearning, a sense of isolation, which . . . perhaps is inseparable from keen penetration.”⁶⁹ As chapter 4 shows, Brontë’s novels were dedicated to cultivating “keen penetration,” even as she was the

Popular Critic most pessimistic about its capacity to exert change in social life or to shape collective action. This reveals one of the chief, and finally self-defeating, difficulties underwriting the movement: the deep tension in communities that seek to maintain solidarity or embark on common projects while enabling critical perspectives to thrive. Influenced explicitly by John Stuart Mill, the Popular Critics regularly debated whether critical faculties operate foremost to better individuals or improve collective life, and whether those aims were mutually compatible. The major figures featured herein all sought variously to remediate the problem by convening communities in person—as in Ruskin’s utopian Guild of St. George (a template briefly instantiated in multiple locations)—or in print, as in Cassell’s *Working Man’s Friend and Family Instructor* (which he presciently described as a facilitator of imagined communities) or Ruskin’s *Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain*. Perhaps the chief Millian “experiments of living” took place in the realm of the imagination, as the critical realists crafted novels that diversely thematize or attempt to reconcile the individual and collective.⁷⁰ While Brontë found the project impossible and undesirable, Gaskell would propose using shared language and common reading to mediate what she saw as inevitably and irreparably fraught dialogue across social divides. Having carefully read both Gaskell and Brontë when she began her own fiction career, Eliot would come to conclude that Gaskell’s solution was so unlikely to succeed under present conditions that only a “root-and-branch” operation—as in her final novel, which ends with the protagonists uprooting to found a new, utopian community (a proto-kibbutz, in the vein of Ruskin’s guild)—could achieve these nigh-impossible ends.⁷¹ For while the critical realists all offer readers guidance on how to disagree, only Gaskell and Eliot aspire to bolster common projects. Where they seek models of solidarity or community, Brontë advocates a sharper self-defense. When Eliot then experiments in her final novel with how a “yearning disembodied spirit” like the critic might also form “an organic part of social life,” she is perhaps responding to Brontë’s relegation of her protagonists to what Mozley identifies as the “yearning . . . isolation” that may “inseparabl[y]” attend “keen penetration.”⁷²

To invest readers in these social difficulties, realism was a crucial and inextricable dimension of the Popular Critical project, if not in the neutrally mimetic way in which the genre is still often conceived. Adela Pinch has recently shown that Victorian women novelists (including the three centered in this book’s second half) understood and chronicled experience in ways that rivaled, while strategically deviating from, then-dominant British philosophical empiricism and idealism, building a form of realism that conveys the “affective, psychological structures for the feeling of living” in alternate keys and to alternate ends.⁷³ This was central to the genre of critical realism, which sought to

immerse readers in relatable, recognizable realities before working equally to estrange them. For despite lingering scholarly belief in the disciplinary ambitions of Victorian fiction, Popular Critical novelists typically eschewed clear moral lessons while portraying reality more faithfully in order to unsettle and defamiliarize it. Crafting story worlds rife with provoking questions and moral gray areas, these authors disabused readerly biases, radically extended sympathy to marginalized subjects, celebrated hermeneutic equivocation, and encouraged readers to dwell in interpretive uncertainties rather than (like philosophers) issuing or inviting well-reasoned answers. Many realist novelists saw their medium as unusually well suited to introducing competing critical scales of proximity and distance, and so it came to serve as a central vehicle through which ideals and techniques of defamiliarization were activated long before they were named by twentieth-century formalists like Bertolt Brecht and Viktor Shklovsky. Critics like Amanda Anderson and John Plotz have demonstrated the complex interplay of distance and proximity, immersion and detachment, that characterize the era.⁷⁴ To this end, Henry James would elaborate Mozley's recognition that perceptive capacities can be clarified rather than clouded by investment. Defining the "programme" of the critic, he advocates "steep[ing]" oneself deeply in a text in order to turn known principles or held beliefs "inside out": "to lend himself, to project himself and to steep himself, to feel and feel until he understands, and to understand so well that he can say, to have perceptions at the pitch of passion and expression in the form of talent, to be infinitely curious and incorrigibly patient, with the intensely fixed idea of turning character and history and genius inside out."⁷⁵

While realist novels of education are, for these reasons, the special focus of this book, it is not only true that many popular Victorian novels (realist and otherwise) did not align themselves with the principles of Popular Criticism but also that many poetic works of the era (realist and otherwise) did. Indeed, as Naomi Levine has recently demonstrated, Victorian poets, readers, and critics "were passionately curious about how poetry works" and "tried to satisfy their curiosity . . . by turning their questions about the effects of aesthetic forms into questions about the genesis of aesthetic forms."⁷⁶ The diverse ways in which major and minor poets of the day worked to embed verse with invitations to reflect or analyze cannot be fully outlined here. But the trend reverberated among poets of the day, from Alfred Tennyson's prompts to readers to ponder how words both "half reveal" and "half conceal" meaning to Robert Browning's deputization of readers as adjudicators of motive and ethos in *The Ring and the Book* (1868–1869) and in dramatic monologues whose interpretation turns on readers' judgment.⁷⁷ Throughout her verse novel *Aurora Leigh* (1856), Elizabeth Barrett Browning, proposing a periodic, methodical "pause / Of finer meditation," invokes pause-taking thirty-three times and provokes

it still more often.⁷⁸ The belief that pause-filled reading productively analogizes stock-taking pauses in a duly reflective life was likewise thematized by the nineteenth-century Guyanese poet Egbert Martin, who advises readers:

It is good, on gaining every station
In life's progressive day,
To pause a little while in contemplation,
And mark the travelled way;
Look backward o'er the pathway in the distance,
And view each stumbling stone;
To gather fresh experience for resistance
Of griefs we knew alone.⁷⁹

Martin's lines clarify that a personal "pause," if a vital tool, is not an end goal. Rather, "contemplation" affords a view both comprehensive and focused, surveying, at once, "the pathway in the distance" and "each stumbling stone" upon it, and regenerating capacities to act together (not "alone") to "gather fresh experience for resistance."

Because the Popular Critics drew close connections between realist depictions of ordinary life, methods adapted to navigating lengthy texts, and literary-critical skills idealized as portable sociopolitical tools, novels remain the primary focus herein. Yet not all Victorian novels followed Popular Critical principles. In a pioneering account of the reader-oriented nature of the genre, Janice Carlisle argues that novelists as diverse as Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, Anthony Trollope, Charles Kingsley, Gaskell, Brontë, and Eliot "adopted [a] focus on the reader as an essential aesthetic principle."⁸⁰ While she rightly diagnoses these novelists' unprecedented "sense of an audience," the generalization collapses meaningful distinctions between the ways in which they approached or addressed readers. Some—like Dickens, Thackeray, and Trollope—often prioritized authorial performance over the shaping of readers' skills. Noting Thackeray's and Dickens's shared focus on authorial mastery, Nancy Armstrong thus links the overarching "Puppet Master" conceit of *Vanity Fair* (1847) to the "story-weaver at his loom" metaphorized in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865).⁸¹ Dickens especially prized theatricality in both his syntax (as Sarah Allison shows) and his famed public readings of his own novels.⁸² In these performances, Alberto Manguel argues, Dickens showcased "his version of the text," using "the tone, the emphasis, even the deletions and amendments to make the story better suited to an oral delivery," but also to "ma[ke] it clear to everyone that there was to be one and only one interpretation" of the works.⁸³ Perhaps reflecting Carlisle's broad-brushstroke contention that "Victorian fiction emerges as an art of mediation; its form is literally a *via media* whose goal is reconciliation," a lasting critical tradition has

associated Brontë with a propitiating style (as in the conciliatory voice that addresses “dear reader”), Gaskell with “mollification,” and Eliot with an attempt to be “comforting” or “consoling” to readers.⁸⁴ This book departs from this self-evidently gendered tradition to argue that far from inviting reconciliation or consensus, all three worked conversely to highlight the sense of mediation as an arduous, ongoing, dialectical process that resists final synthesis or resolution.⁸⁵

For as the next chapter shows, Popular Criticism was characterized perhaps foremost by its vernacularization and popularization of dialectical thought. Proponents and practitioners thus regularly utilized diverse, explicit, and typically negative dialectics to characterize literary-critical reading and thinking as both inward- and outward-facing, habit-forming and habit-breaking, spontaneous and iterative, analytic and creative, intuitive and in need of educating. “Men have not only to learn, but to unlearn,” argue the *British Controversialist’s* editors: “To do either aright, the critical faculties must be trained.”⁸⁶ Recalling Mozley’s embrace of enthusiasm as an analytic stimulant, Ruskin likewise frames delight not as antithetical to critical engagement but as an active facilitator of it, for “there is no chance of our getting good Art unless we delight in it: next I say, and just as positively, that there is no chance of our getting good Art unless we resist our delight in it. We must love it first, and restrain our love for it afterwards.”⁸⁷ Elsewhere, he likewise suggests that both close reading and the critical thought it enables demand the taking of both “pains” and “care.” This rhetorical dialectic echoed throughout the movement of Popular Criticism, where it often metonymized negative and reparative aspects of critical labor. Yet pain and care also sometimes converged, as in Ruskin’s charge to his readers to “take careful pains” with interpretation.⁸⁸ As Talia Schaffer shows, nineteenth-century concepts of care must therefore be understood not according to contemporary platitudes, but as “a *practice*—a difficult, often unpleasant, almost always underpaid, sometimes ineffective practice” underwriting real and imagined communities built around the objective of an often painfully won “critical care.”⁸⁹

While Ruskin’s theory of “getting good Art” frames the process of delighting and resisting as sequential and conceivably conclusive (culminating in the “restrain[t]” of earlier “love”), his praxis favors alternations more resistant to synthesis. In 1849, the Transcendentalist Samuel Grey Ward envisioned a more simultaneous mutuality. Mapping a negative-reparative divide onto competing national traditions, Ward praises an Anglo-Germanic tradition of “self-restoring” or “reconstructive criticism,” in which, “while the critical spirit is always pulling to pieces, the ulterior purpose of reconstruction is never absent for a moment.”⁹⁰ Ward juxtaposes this “*creative* criticism” with a purely “destructive criticism”: a predisposition to “criticise[] . . . without dreaming of

creating any thing new to supply its place” that he associates with the French Revolution, which “could find no reconstructive element on which to pause, and rebuild a political fabric.”⁹¹ Rita Felski and other proponents of postcritique have more recently reprised this notional gulf separating creative and destructive critical proclivities, but they tend to ignore the possibility of a Wardian “reconstructive criticism” that might do both. Indeed, often by explicitly drawing on their field of study, nineteenth-centuryists like Gettelman, Schaffer, Kurnick, Deidre Lynch, and Elaine Auyoung have illustrated that postcritique’s false dichotomies often elide the extent to which literary love, care, and absorption can reciprocally interanimate more conventional forms of critique or reveal, per Kurnick, “more than one way to love.”⁹² Embracing the principle of a productively irresolvable dialectic allowed Popular Criticism anticipatorily to bridge now widely binarized reading methods (critical or uncritical, suspicious or reparative, close or distanced) and to reveal them as false antinomies. Here practitioners drew closely on the properties of aesthetic objects themselves. For as Namwali Serpell notes, criticism, from time immemorial, “is always erecting opposed poles to describe art” but also “to describe itself,” endlessly rediscovering and renaming the dialectic as a chief way to capture both art’s “exposure of incommensurable values” and criticism’s similarly polaric “oscillation.”⁹³

To sketch the rise and fall of Popular Criticism, the first chapter of this book reconstructs the shared strategies of journalists, editors, and educators who sought to democratize close reading and critical thinking. At its peak, it shows, Popular Criticism was imagined to be (dialectically) intuitive and the product of a laborious education, an act of work and an art of play, and an individual and social enterprise defined alike by generative creativity and incisive critique. In a seismic shift in the history of art, the vocabulary of the aesthetic rapidly vernacularized and diffused through mass culture, which the Popular Critics oriented around efforts to make reading effortful rather than effortless. The movement’s ideals spread far, but they also contained the germs of their own obsolescence. As professional critics worked to institutionalize literary study, they redefined criticism “*univocally*” in a backlash against decades of methodological pluralism.⁹⁴ Under this aegis, diverse reading practices were standardized into a program that was both more homogeneous and less accessible. For while all major versions of literary formalism—Practical Criticism, New Criticism, and Russian Formalism—experimented with a range of analytic approaches, all also aspired to codify literary criticism into a science rather than a methodologically multitudinous art or craft. As the schools of

literary formalism and critical literacy diverged in their motivations and audiences, paradigms with entwined origins were increasingly deployed toward disparate cultural-political ends.

Chapter 2 highlights the championing of critical reading by one of Victorian Britain's most influential public pedagogues: John Cassell, a working-class editor who promoted Popular Criticism to laborers and provided a platform for their original contributions to the movement. In his penny weekly *The Working Man's Friend and Family Instructor*, Cassell touts "reading with attention" as an invaluable instrument of political self-fashioning, useful for exposing ideology, holding leaders accountable, and parsing deceptive rhetoric. Framing "grumbling, or . . . criticism," as a skill "practised by everyone," he positions laborers as vanguard critics in need only of modest guidance in how to subject words, punctuational devices, and figures of speech to scrutiny.⁹⁵ But he also distinguishes close reading as a tool of self-culture, furnishes workers with expansive technical vocabularies for literary criticism, introduces them to major aesthetic theories, and draws "continued attention to the aesthetics of daily life." Cassell's work to convene a textual public sphere was wildly successful: When laborers submitted essays, in droves, on the necessity of humanist education to mass elevation, he published them in monthly supplements that regularly challenged and guided his own thinking on a range of topics. Among these, working readers helped prompt Cassell's revaluation of the novel, as did Harriet Beecher Stowe. Launching Cassell and Co. as one of London's top publishers of affordable fiction, Cassell produced an early British edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852 and distinguished it by commissioning and manipulating the placement of illustrations in an apparent bid to provoke readers' critical reflection on issues of race and sympathy.

Chapter 3 locates a novel genesis for John Ruskin's theories of reading and textual interpretation, stressing their similar debt to female and working-class interlocutors as well as to the rarely noted influence of prose fiction. In his later decades, Ruskin made two related shifts as an analyst of aesthetic culture. First, he turned his primary attention to verbal (not visual) media; second, he directly addressed working-class audiences as the critical avant-garde needed to fulfill a chief mission: to "provoke [the citizenry] to think" and to cultivate, within it, "some sharper discipline than that of reading"—an enigmatic activity that this chapter identifies as his prescient invocation of critical thinking. Believing this "sharper discipline" was crucially formed by "looking intensely at words," Ruskin used his *Fors Clavigera: Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain* (1871–1884) to teach readers to "decipher" texts.⁹⁶ Working readers, accepting the challenge, wrote to demonstrate the use they found for his methods, but also to advance their own critiques and proposals. These responses inspired Ruskin to expand his efforts to establish the Guild of

St. George, an experimental utopian community in which he aspired to furnish material conditions that would sustain creative labor and free thought. This chapter shows that Ruskin's thought was likewise indebted to female acquaintances and feminist critics, and that he valorized women and girls as superior readers, interpreters, and debaters well before he dreamed of extending a critical education to working men. Ruskin's aspirations were also shaped by a late-life change of heart regarding the merits of fiction that has been almost completely ignored in previous studies of his vast corpus. Though initially suspicious of the medium, he would finally publish a novel and novella that he elaborately edited to demonstrate that well-wrought prose could "provoke" critical reading.

Ruskin bore an unusually reciprocal relationship to the novelists featured in the second half of this book, who expanded the mission of Popular Criticism in the form of a critical realism that drew deeply upon his *Modern Painters*. This was the book that George Eliot credited with igniting her own aesthetic credo and that Elizabeth Gaskell named as the sole text she would need if "shut up in prison or on a desolate island," while Charlotte Brontë professed, on reading it, "Hitherto I have only had instinct to guide me in judging of art; I feel more as if I had been walking blindfold—this book seems to give me eyes."⁹⁷ For the misconception that Ruskin's pioneering work of art criticism launched a straightforwardly mimetic realism—one born of his oft-cited, insufficiently contextualized endorsement of an aesthetic "habit of representing faithfully all things"—undersells the complexity of the radical realism that all four figures helped craft.⁹⁸ The three novelists were also unusually tightly bonded by mutual reading, criticism, and community networks, so it is unsurprising that there are significant continuities (identified at the start of chapter 4) in their uses of genre, plot, techniques of narration, and modes of characterization.

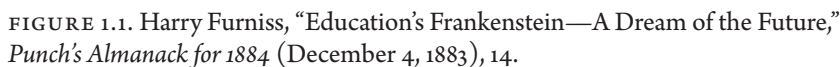
Chapter 4 juxtaposes two industrial novelists—Gaskell and Elizabeth Wheeler Stone—who used paratextual devices strategically to catalyze readerly education. Stone began the practice of politicizing epigraphs and footnotes, revealing a missing genealogical link in the history of the devices that helps explain their appropriation (from the Gothic and Romantic traditions) by realist writers.⁹⁹ When—in a little-known literary-historical scandal—Gaskell plagiarized the plot and form of Stone's *William Langshawe, the Cotton Lord* (1842) to produce her more famous *Mary Barton* (1848), she adapted those forms of paratext (which she featured exclusively in her industrial fiction) to opposed ideological ends. Although Stone primarily manipulated narrative form to impel agreement, her paratextual bids to elevate the lowly female reader and the marginalized region of Manchester arguably inaugurated the critical realist tradition. Yet with far greater nuance and

ambition, Gaskell sought to shape fiction as a comprehensive “spur to inactive thought, and languid conscience” and to this end required readers to navigate meaning for themselves rather than imposing clear morals (as many of her fellow industrial novelists did).¹⁰⁰ More closely connected than Brontë or Eliot to laboring life through her work with Manchester operatives, Gaskell celebrated working-class knowledge and skills in her industrial novels. As this chapter shows, she also followed her operative acquaintances and producers of working-class periodicals in positing shared language and collective debate as the only means to rebuilding common life, and interwove intertexts into her fiction as a narrative-formal manifestation of this belief. While *North and South* (1854–1855) is often regarded as *Mary Barton*’s conservative corrective, this chapter argues that Gaskell devised in her second industrial novel a programmatic solution to a problem that plagued the critical realists: how to sustain collective life and solidarity while preserving space for individual dissent.

As chapter 5 shows, Brontë’s greater concern was how to open society to true “originals”: independent, nonconformist “free-thinker[s]” like many of the characters who populate *Shirley* (1849), her aesthetically significant and widely disliked historical-industrial novel of ideas. As this chapter shows, the critical feedback that Brontë found most bracing aided the development of her unique form and style, and she returned that scrutinizing eye on readers of *Shirley*, which strives to combat acquiescence to convention by accusing them of unexamined, uncritical thinking. Employing hostile, suspicious apostrophe, *Shirley* teaches readers to distrust surface appearance, to deliberate over points of debate, and to confront unwelcome perspectives and uncomfortable truths. Her last novel, *Villette* (1853), removes the combative narratorial tone but amplifies sources of interpretive uncertainty through an intentionally vague, misleading, and inscrutable mode of narration. This novel explicitly teaches readers to “scout . . . paradox[es],” both in the text and in the world beyond its pages, but it also invites a new—and newly provocative—awareness that depth hermeneutics are no more reliable than deceptive facades.¹⁰¹ Ultimately, Brontë would devise powerful narrative techniques for eliciting readerly emotions—like the construction of narrative interiority for her famously captivating protagonists—while enjoining dispassionate analysis in the wide audiences she commanded. In these ways, she finally presents the novel as a superior medium for unsettling conformist thinking and sparking alternative thought, in contrast alike to activist agendas and to the normative labors of “philosophers and legislators” (both of which she explicitly rejects).¹⁰² Pessimistic about the capacity of either protagonists or readers to exert what minor agency they can muster in a world governed by homogeneity and groupthink, Brontë finally isolates the critical individual from social life.

Chapter 6 offers a new interpretation of George Eliot's signature style by highlighting one of her most distinctive, yet understudied, devices: the narrative questions that often undermine her better-known and apparently authoritative axioms. Previous scholars have argued that Eliot's narration style promotes readers' interpretive consensus, but this chapter proposes the opposite: Particularly as they build to their most unwieldy and existential form in her final novel, both the aphoristic and interrogative devices are designed to defy ready consensus formation. Pressing questions regularly intrude across the last three novels, *Felix Holt* (1866), *Middlemarch* (1871–1872), and *Daniel Deronda* (1876), to fracture the diegetic frame and foster hermeneutic uncertainty. As proposed in the seventeenth chapter of her first novel, *Adam Bede* (1859), the development of a critical eye requires the cultivation of skeptical inquiry in readers otherwise inclined to habitude and prejudice; this is a core aspect of critical realism that, as chapter 5 shows, Eliot borrowed from Charlotte Brontë, who in turn derived it from Emily Brontë. Eliot sought to foster this critical mindset through an elaborate use of interrogative devices, paratext, free indirect discourse, and axiomatic statements seeded with erosive qualifying clauses—which, rather than affording stable knowledge, serve to sketch “a definite outline for our ignorance.”¹⁰³ Hallmarks of her late style, the devices prompt the navigation of interpretive dilemmas by transferring epistemic burdens beyond the bounds of the text and into the hands of readers. This galvanizing process, Eliot argues, requires unending and taxing work; thus, *Daniel Deronda* relentlessly thematizes the anxieties of interpretation and the final necessity of making demands upon oneself and others. Following Gaskell's industrial fiction, the novel proposes that collective discussion vitally shapes critical thought, particularly through the painful prompts and interrogations of others. Deronda himself revives questions about how communities can achieve common projects as he strives to make himself “an organic part of social life” while retaining the critical spirit that inhibits the collapse of his beliefs with those predisposed to share his worldview. Ultimately, Eliot offers the novel as a vehicle of close reading that enables lives and ideals to be both shared and separate—the grounds of the utopian society she implies but intentionally declines to detail at *Daniel Deronda*'s end. Crafting a form of mimesis that concludes with a question mark, Eliot finally presses readers to consider how their world has been naturalized and to regard realism as a matter of collective deliberation and debate.

An 1883 *Punch* cartoon (figure 1.1) encapsulates the complex and often competing concerns that swirled around the mission of Popular Criticism and the wider fears and fantasies of mass culture that it raised. These concerns contextualize the limited number of normative suggestions that are detailed in this book's coda and outlined in the ensuing paragraphs. The cartoon was



published in response to an ongoing series of Education Acts. Begun in 1870 and revised (most proximately to the image) with Mundella's 1882 Acts, the reforms expanded the range of topics taught at elementary levels and made local school boards newly responsible for implementing increasingly standardized educational programs. The illustration critiques this bureaucratized, institutionalized education in a sardonic dedication to "The School-Board," whose name bedecks the graduation cap worn by a monster who darkly dominates the frame. A looming educational institution in the background ominously warns that, owing to reforms like Mundella's, the schools are "Still Growing," while the bottom half of the frame clarifies the consequences. Here the loosely affiliated educators of a fast-receding era, relegated to the outskirts of a "full" workhouse, plead "we are starving" and "have no work to do," as education has been centralized by the monstrous school board. But curiously (if in keeping with Mundella's Acts), that education is here depicted as not so much dreadfully homogenized as radically expanded. For atop the monster's mortarboard, children run gleefully roughshod toward liberation via education, not playing or causing mischief but embracing their newly expanded curricula and learning through unmediated direct encounters. Although one child peers through a telescope, another paints freely on an easel, and a third examines the formation of a skull, most begin their studies with a deep immersion in books, which offer direct access to parodically elevated variants on Mundella's diversified elementary subjects (such as surgery and the law). Of chief concern is the new instruction of the young masses in the arts: The children not only perform Wagner and *Hamlet* but study "Aesthetics" and read Ruskin (the only author named here). Below, a fair goddess of true "Education" vainly struggling to resist the monster can reach no higher than its knees while being forced back upon her own. She is surrounded, in turn, by a long line of unemployed professionals who despair that with this simultaneously expanded, unmediated, and institutionalized democratization of learning, "[e]veryone" can "now" undertake their formerly specialized practices: "Everyone can write now," "Everyone can teach now," "Everyone can paint now," "Everyone is a professor."

But *Punch* need not have worried. Far from replacing the scholars, teachers, engineers, and agriculturalists who sit unemployed at the bottom of the cartoon, the twentieth-century institutionalization of Popular Critical techniques only drove disciplinary consolidation and professionalization. Following the excavation in *Critical Masses* of a tradition of extra-institutional criticism, it may seem counterintuitive that it ends by stressing the necessity of higher education and the forms of expertise it enables. Yet expertise need neither threaten nor be displaced by mass reading, whose underexamined practice and history deserves the systematic chronicling and contextualizing that scholars are best

positioned to undertake. It may further seem odd that though most Popular Critics saw close reading and critical thinking as intrinsically and crucially resistant to definition, the coda posits that literary studies would benefit from another turn of the dialectic toward a modestly greater precision, exemplification, and systematicity about the core objects and methods of our studies. Tracing more closely, for instance, the diverse formalisms that emerged in the nineteenth century—such as the “hardly remember[ed]” “genetic formalism” that Naomi Levine has recently detected in and around Victorian poetics—will enable modern critics to gauge in superior detail the derivation of and future possibilities for their methods.¹⁰⁴ Such a shift is crucial for counteracting what Elaine Auyoung has recently condemned as the hidden curricula on which the discipline turns, which make an ineffable, unteachable aesthetic sensibility an implied prerequisite for critical engagement.

As the coda notes, the discipline’s tacit reliance on sensibility is most prominently countered today by critics who aim to create a science of literary criticism—another overcorrective pendulum swing that (like sensibility) returns us both to the age of Practical and New Criticism and to that of its unacknowledged nineteenth-century predecessors. After a discussion in chapter 1 of competing attempts by twentieth-century formalists to remake criticism as an experimental science or to frame it as inimitable, *Critical Masses* ultimately identifies science and sensibility as the Scylla and Charybdis of literary studies: dueling representatives of an excessive and insufficient formalization of critical tools. Yet, the coda conjectures, a middle path is possible: one drawn from Popular Critics who saw close reading and critical thinking as resistant to codification yet amenable to improved technique. That approach has been endorsed more recently by critics like Jonathan Kramnick and Guillory, who advocate for articulating what “makes [our] methods methodical” or enables them to be better “described if not prescribed.”¹⁰⁵ When Guillory contends, then, that close reading can be accorded sharper dimensions, if no “precise verbal formula,” he echoes Eliot’s similar proposition that there are “no formulas for thinking.”¹⁰⁶ The approach would be particularly beneficial in the case of the still shockingly underspecified techniques for the close reading of prose, which could be delineated more serviceably while remaining provisional in the face of inevitably resistant aesthetic objects. Finally, the coda hypothesizes that it may be time to reinvestigate the populist value of shared reading and common language, including—however improbably—a more comprehensive pedagogical promotion of technical terms, following on the practices of Popular Critics who saw them as key vehicles for drawing common readers into collective conversations and public debates.

This history matters because, as Jed Esty notes, literary critics “have absolutely failed to seize on an important public function for criticism and critical

thinking itself, even though we say those words all the time in our attempt to explain, justify, and describe what we do, and practice what we do.”¹⁰⁷ *Critical Masses* does not provide this function, but it takes steps in that direction by restoring a usable history of the origins of close reading and critical thinking as public-oriented enterprises. One of the more difficult objectives of *Critical Masses* is to show how and why the Popular Critics believed that close reading was a vital facilitator of the unprescribable practice of critical thinking: a link that the discipline still has not succeeded in fully clarifying. “At the least,” Guillery contends, “we might argue that better close reading serves the purpose of critique, and that it would be unwise to deprive critique of this tool.”¹⁰⁸ Developing longer and wider genealogies of both may further yield insights into honing pedagogical practices that enable democratic engagement. For perhaps the foremost question underwriting the movement of Popular Criticism was that of “how to teach thinking without teaching what to think,” as David Russell has glossed the ambitions of Matthew Arnold, the sage of Victorian criticism whose complex relationship to the movement is addressed in the next chapter.¹⁰⁹ The Popular Critics raise lingering questions about how specifically *literary*-critical thinking might bolster communities that retain a place for critical thinking without jeopardizing solidarity. This was a core concern for all of the major figures in this book and may remain a concern for anyone seeking insights from Ward’s search for a society in which critique thrives but does not destroy the potential for a “reconstructive element on which to pause, and rebuild a political fabric.”¹¹⁰ Yet it will be harder both to identify and to defend close reading and critical thinking today without a clearer picture of their scope and perceived utility in earlier historical eras, on a global scale, and outside traditional scholarly spaces. *Critical Masses* aspires to contribute to an ongoing, indispensable project that will continue to require the participation of scholars from all corners of the discipline, with all manner of skills, including but not limited to close reading. For whether we deem the aims of the Popular Critics valuable or not—and recuperable or not—one thing is clear: Their efforts must be located within duly expanded histories of close reading and critical thinking that have yet to emerge.

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