

THE BROWSING VICTORIAN READER

By Christie Allen

JOHN STUART MILL FAMOUSLY WRITES in his *Autobiography* (1873) that reading William Wordsworth's poetry brought him relief when he was depressed. Exhausted by the "habit of analysis" instilled in him through his father's rigorous educational program, Mill recalls that "the state of my thoughts and feelings made the fact of my reading Wordsworth for the first time . . . an important event in my life" (137, 146; ch. 5). He describes how he "took up the collection of [Wordsworth's] poems from curiosity, with no expectation of mental relief from it," but fortuitously found "the precise thing for [his] mental wants at that particular juncture," the delightful "states of feeling" the poems conjure in their renderings of beauty (146-48; ch. 5).

Although Mill most overtly attributes his salvation to the feelings evoked by Wordsworth's writing, other details in his account suggest that Wordsworth's poetry becomes deeply meaningful to Mill not just because of its content, but also because of the situatedness of the reading experience, the "thoughts and feelings" that initially lead him to "take up" Wordsworth out of "curiosity." Perhaps inconsequential when considered on its own, this description of the casual way Mill selects Wordsworth stands out in the context of the *Autobiography* as a whole. Mill's depictions of his childhood and adolescent reading material are peppered with references to the heavy hand of his father, who "made" him read Latin treatises, "made" him study Aristotle, "took" him "through a complete course of political economy," "put" many books "into [his] hands," and so forth, for the explicit purpose of sharpening his critical skills, (incidentally) at the expense of his feelings (18, 11, 27, 16; ch. 1). By contrast, Mill's epiphany with Wordsworth occurs in an inverse reading situation to that typical of his early education: selecting his reading with no thought to its purpose and with no regard for an authority figure's opinion, his unpremeditated choice results in emotional catharsis, in which he finally enjoys "passive susceptibilities" of feeling while reading (143; ch. 5). The felicity of the experience forever shapes how Mill reads Wordsworth, whom, Mill explains, he "long continued to value . . . less according to his intrinsic merits, than by the measure of what he had done" for him in a moment of need (149; ch. 5).

An in some ways uncannily similar, though in other ways nearly entirely opposite, experience with "taking up" a book is depicted in another Victorian text, Olive Schreiner's novel *The Story of an African Farm*, published in 1883, ten years after Mill's *Autobiography*. Among other plotlines, the novel tells the story of Waldo, a bright, but lonely and mistreated orphan living on a farm in South Africa, who is as starved for books as Mill is for reading material that produces feeling. Thrilled one day to discover a box of books tucked away in

an attic loft, Waldo at first leafs through them in a frenzy, thrusting “his hand in among the books,” pulling a few out, handling the pages, “gloat[ing] over his treasure,” and finally, for reasons apparent only to Waldo or perhaps for no conscious reason at all, narrowing in on “a dull brown volume,” which he opens at random and begins to read (113–14; bk. 1, ch. 11). The book is none other than John Stuart Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy* (1848).

Mill’s treatise is nothing like poetry – it is in fact a superb example of Mill’s “analytic” writing – but Waldo has an affective response to it that echoes Mill’s response to Wordsworth. Waldo immediately identifies with Mill’s ideas and registers that identification not only intellectually, but physically and emotionally: “This was the fellow’s startled joy in the book – the thoughts were his, they belonged to him. He had never thought them before, but they were his. . . . The boy’s heavy body quivered with excitement. So he was not alone, not alone” (114–15; bk. 1, ch. 11). Fascinated, Waldo reads “down one page and . . . over to the next,” “without changing his posture by an inch; he read the next, and the next, kneeling up all the while with the book in his hand, and his lips parted” (114; bk. 1, ch. 11).

Certainly Waldo’s absorption in the discourse on property in *Principles of Political Economy* is a function of the specific content of the book, which relates closely to Waldo’s own life and philosophical leanings. But to conclude that Mill’s ideas alone generate Waldo’s response is to ignore Schreiner’s extensive detailing of the means through which Waldo initially *encounters* Mill’s work: if Waldo is transfixed by his sense of kinship with Mill as he reads *Principles of Political Economy*, he is first transfixed by finding and freely sifting through the books and selecting one. Schreiner implies that Waldo’s unexpected, independent “meeting” with the box of books, and his presciently selecting Mill’s work from among them, amplify his perception of the aptness of Mill’s theories for his own needs at the moment and, as a consequence, his emotional response to the text. Despite his craving for the formal education that suffocates the adult Mill, this emotionally pivotal moment in Waldo’s life is the result of a decidedly unassisted, informal, haphazard engagement with books.

Neither writer explicitly addresses the connection between the isolated, half-intentional method that Mill the historical figure and Waldo the fictional character use to select reading and the bond that results between reader and book. But the correlation in both texts links these scenes of reading with a broader Victorian interest in the effects of “browsing” – a form of independently “taking up” books out of “curiosity,” to use Mill’s terminology – on how readers experience texts, or again in Mill’s rendering, on what books do for readers. Although critical histories of nineteenth-century reading and recent theories of reading have generally focused on what readers read and how they read it, many Victorians viewed reading in a longer temporal arc, suggesting that what happens in order to get a book in a reader’s hands has an effect not only on the reader’s choice, but also on how the chosen book is read.

As the examples of J.S. Mill and Waldo attest, in the case of browsing, Victorians were particularly attentive to how the mental and physical processes involved might foster emotional attachment to books and facilitate absorbed, consuming modes of reading, rather than detached, analytical approaches to texts. As I will discuss further, absorbed readers then, as now, were criticized as intellectually lazy or overly susceptible. Indeed, while Waldo’s excitement leads him to believe that Mill’s “thoughts were his, they belonged to him,” Schreiner notes that still he “[does] not fully understand” what he reads without instruction or context to help him make sense of it (114; bk. 1, ch. 11); Mill himself assesses Wordsworth more through Wordsworth’s effect on him than through his “intrinsic merits.” However, I argue that works like these – in a strand of Victorian representations of browsing that includes

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856), George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), and Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (1868–69) – offer a more generous view of absorbed reading than do its critics, and a differently inflected way of understanding it than do many of its defenders. These works challenge the prevalent assumption that readers must be emotionally detached from texts in order to exercise agency, showing instead how browsing can engender readers' ownership of books and their reading experiences *through* the unique kinds of emotional attachment browsing fosters. Suggesting that readers may come to own their reading experiences and define themselves as subjects precisely because they browse and read absorbedly, these writers indicate what can be gained even when, or perhaps precisely when, "full understanding" is precluded by the circumstances of the reader's encounter with a book.

Browsing "among," browsing "upon": Victorian browsing and absorbed reading

BROWSING BOOKS WAS A CONTINUATION of a practice that long predated (and outlasted) the Victorian era, but browsing was also in some ways a specifically Victorian phenomenon. Undoubtedly people have browsed books since books have existed to be browsed, and examples of browsing appear in pre-Victorian literature. In keeping with the apparently indulgent educative methods of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for example, Walter Scott's Edward Waverley is "permitted to roam at large" in the family library and, in a "desultory habit of reading," to read each volume only until "it cease[s] to excite his curiosity or interest" (36–38; ch. 3). It was on the cusp of the Victorian period, however, that browsing was first named as such, applying the pastoral term "browsing," which once referred more exclusively to the grazing behaviors of livestock, to readers' unsystematic, half-intentional engagement with books. In his 1823 *Essays of Elia*, Charles Lamb first used the term to describe Cousin Bridget's reading as being driven, like Mill's experience with Wordsworth and Waldo's with Mill, almost entirely by instinct: she "was tumbled early, by accident or design, into a spacious closet of good old English reading, without much selection or prohibition, and browsed at will upon that fair and wholesome pasturage" (99–100).¹ From this point, similar uses of "browsing," in addition to representations of the practice, crop up frequently in the Victorian press and in literature, particularly in the later nineteenth century.

The Victorians' preoccupation with browsing may have resulted from a number of historical changes in the nineteenth century. For one, the proliferation and increasing availability of books, as well as expanding literacy, democratized the opportunities for browsing that had previously been available only to wealthy persons like Edward Waverley (Rose 31–32). Reflecting this democratization, among the Victorian browsers most often discussed in the period are women and/or members of the working class, who browse books to which they have access but who have little formal education to guide their reading. Perhaps corresponding with the Victorian focus on education reform, children and young adults were also the focus of discussions about the merits of browsing. Additionally, browsing was often linked to the increasingly prominent habit of novel reading, indicating a perceived relationship between leisure reading and informal approaches to choosing reading material. But as my examples will suggest, the Victorian trope of browsing also transcends these specific kinds of readers and types of books. Browsing was thought to shape readers of all stripes – from John Stuart Mill to Waldo – and with all kinds of texts, from novels to poetry to *Principles of Political Economy* to obscure historical documents.

Nineteenth-century commentators seemed to feel compelled to talk about book browsing not only because it was common, but also because of the association they perceived between the selection method of browsing and modes of reading generally, and of readers' self-definition as readers. This connection is perhaps not immediately obvious to us now, because in twentieth and twenty-first century usage "browsing" books (at least in the United States) most overtly refers almost exclusively to a process of physically sampling and selecting among and within books. The nineteenth-century use of the term, by contrast, draws on the word's organic roots to reference both a way of sampling to select, or choosing a little here and there the way livestock selects food in scattered, irregular patterns in a geographical space, and a way of reading, understanding, or interpreting that evokes the actual act of eating, a "consuming" of a book's ideas or narrative.

At times, "browsing" refers clearly to one process or the other. Andrew Seth uses the term in an 1896 article in *The Scotsman* to indicate sampling, lauding how American libraries allow a scholar to "browse among the volumes" to "discover not only the books he is hunting for, but others" previously unknown. In other cases, rather than browsing "among" books as in our common usage now, browsers are depicted as browsing *on* books, as though munching on or inhaling what they read: novel readers "browsing on romance," "bookworms" who "browse most gratefully" on especially interesting passages of a work, readers of "lower intelligence . . . brows[ing] contentedly upon the printed page" or "brows[ing] with ever-increasing appetite on" poorly written novels ("Last year"; "Fynes Moryson's 'Itinerary'"; "Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine"; qtd. in Brantlinger 23–24). Still others, like Lamb, use the term ambiguously to refer to either selection modes, reading modes, or both: it is clear that Bridget makes choices in the library in a haphazard way, "without much selection or prohibition," but when Lamb describes Bridget "brows[ing] at will upon [the] pasturage," it is quite plausible, given the preposition "upon" rather than "among," that he also uses "browsing" to indicate a mode of reading-as-consuming.

As these examples suggest, references to "browsing" to describe selection and reading could allude to a range of activities: to scholars doing research, to lay readers seeking entertainment, to students being educated. Browsing to select books might be leisurely, as in Mill's idle "taking up," or it might be intense, as in Waldo's feverish exploration of the books in the attic. Reflecting this variety, commentators paired the term "browsing" with references to readers "running wild" on the one hand, and to readers being "assiduous" in their sampling on the other hand, "painfully culling" gems of knowledge (Hale; Lowell 9–10). Browsing as a form of reading was likewise diverse in style. Browsing could indicate both a kind of dullness – as in supposedly stupid readers "browsing contentedly upon the page" – as well as a more benign, readerly sensibility, as in readers who "browse most gratefully." However, whether fast or slow, stupid or smart, whether ranging through a collection of books or reading just one, the imagined browsers in these descriptions are united by an open orientation toward books. They "take up" or they "take in" books, receptive to what a collection or a book may present to them.

These uses of "browsing" in the discourse indicate the relationship the Victorians perceived between browsing to select and browsing to read. Processes of browsing-as-sampling and browsing-as-reading are distinct and do not always coincide. Open-minded browsing could presumably lead to analytical readings, for example. Yet, the slipperiness of the term in the nineteenth century is telling, hinting that for the Victorians, browsing *among* texts to select one might well set up readers to browse *on* texts, or that both activities define the

same kind of reader. Discussions of browsing in the nineteenth century frequently correlate browsing as a selection method with subsequent, consuming reading, characterized more by feelings of pleasure and interest, by a state of acceptance or of enrapture, or by a sense of direct connection than by detached analysis.

Its association with emotionally driven reading made browsing a polarizing topic, its value dependent on one's philosophies about reading. For Waverley, for example, browsing is part of a "desultory habit of reading," but when Elia's Cousin Bridget browses, she is beneficially partaking of a "fair and wholesome pasturage." The Victorians and their American counterparts who celebrated browsing did so in part because they prioritized the connection that browsers, bringing a specific kind of context to their reading, could experience with books.

Browsing among books is of course connective because of the way it positions the body toward books, involving many of the senses in a physically immersive process. In a twentieth-century description of browsing, scholar Marilyn M. Levine explains that a browser attends to "not only the words, but also the texture of the paper, the material of the binding, the color of the ink, the smell of paste, and whatever else he associates with the particular materials at hand" (35–36). Browsers might in fact be first "absorbed" in books as objects with little regard to their textual qualities. As Leah Price points out in her study of the Victorians' use of books generally, despite the prevalent scholarly interest in the relationship between the material and textual elements of books, for Victorian readers books and texts were often diametrically opposed: "any turn toward material media [meant] a swerve away from both the text and the mind," while "to take in a text [was] to tune out its raw materials" ("Reader's Block" 64; *How to Do Things with Books* 5). In nineteenth-century descriptions of browsing, browsers' initial approaches to books do involve more "holding, turning, handling" – behaviors Price catalogues in her account of Victorian book history – than actual reading (*How to Do Things with Books* 7). However, because they show reading as a temporal sequence, the scenes of browsing I examine in this essay nuance the dichotomy Price establishes between books as objects and books as texts. While browsers often view books as objects in one moment and, as Price argues, are as much turned away from the text as they are turned toward it in that moment, their thoroughly "material" engagement with a book can directly affect their *later* absorbed reading of the text in specific ways. Much as Waldo has a strong response to Mill's words in part because of the strong response he has to the books he first physically handles, in the examples that follow, browsers' experience of discovering a book's outsides – what a book looks like and feels like, or where it is positioned in a box or on a shelf in relation to other books when the reader comes upon it – shapes their eventual reading of the book's insides. Working together over time, absorbed handling and absorbed reading set up a mutually constitutive relationship between books as only objects and as texts.²

The individualized nature of browsers' meeting with books promotes their physical and mental engagement with them. Levine notes that browsing allows readers to bring "whatever [they] associate with the particular materials at hand" to bear on their experience of selecting books (35–36). Her words frame browsing as a process through which browsers respond to books with all of the past experiences and current predilections, needs, and desires that their bodies carry. Reflecting the personal quality of such an encounter, in some Victorian descriptions, even browsing in public could lead to a very private, consuming reading experience, in which the browser has a sense of total separateness from those around him

or her. Consider, for example, how Charles Dickens describes Mr. Brownlow browsing and then reading at a bookstall in *Oliver Twist* (1838):

[He] had taken up a book from the stall, and . . . stood, reading away, as hard as if he were in his elbow-chair, in his own study, [seeing] not the book-stall, nor the street, nor the boys, nor, in short, anything but the book itself: which he was reading straight through: turning over the leaf when he got to the bottom of a page, beginning at the top line of the next one, and going regularly on, with the greatest interest and eagerness. (67; ch. 10)

By including the detail that Brownlow had “taken up” the book in question, Dickens suggests that Brownlow’s private and absorbing connection to his book is the natural outcome of whatever prompted that personal act of selection, whatever made Brownlow choose it rather than the other possible choices, and in contrast to those around him who did *not* choose that book.

This connectivity nurtured by browsing led to both productive reading choices and a productive attitude toward reading, from the point of view of some Victorian commentators. In imagery that resonates with book browsing’s association with the pastoral, for example, John Ruskin declares in *Sesame and Lilies* that for their education, young women are best “let loose in the library,” like “a fawn in a field”: “It knows the bad weeds twenty times better than you; and the good ones too, and will eat some bitter and prickly ones, good for it, which you had not the slightest thought would have been so” (75–76).³ In arguing for instinctual choices, unfettered by the domineering “you” who might otherwise dictate girls’ reading, Ruskin trusts that there is some kind of logic behind the indescribable, highly individualized pull that female readers feel to pick up or pass over a particular book. Other educators focus less on the quality of browsers’ choices and more on the pedagogical value of browsers following their interests and becoming lifetime readers. As literature professor Henry Morley put it in 1889, children, and really all readers, should be allowed to “browse among [books] at their own sweet will” (“Professor Henry Morley”). When readers choose books according to their available time, their “degree of culture” and the “turn of [their] individuality,” rather than through an imposed “systematic selection of books,” Morley suggests, they are more accepting of reading as a practice and are more intellectually stimulated.⁴

On the other hand, browsing made skeptics of instinctually driven, highly receptive reading only more doubtful. Absorption has traditionally played the villain in analyses of reading, up to and including our own time. As Michael Warner suggests, literary scholars have long opposed “critical reading” to reading practices considered uncritical and therefore inferior, including practices that embrace rather than question texts, such as those exhibited by readers like Mr. Brownlow: “identification, self-forgetfulness, reverie, sentimentality, enthusiasm, literalism” (15). Rita Felski explains traditional critical detachment as a way of “‘standing back’ – keeping one’s distance from a work of art in order to place it in an explanatory frame” (56). As Warner argues, in privileging reading that approaches texts with detachment and often with outright suspicion in order to avoid being “taken in,” academia invests not only in an interpretive method but also in a method of subject-formation, favoring subjects “oriented to freedom and autonomous agency,” who are self-reflexive and rational when engaging with ideas (19). While they may not have been pervasively suspicious toward texts in the sense of twentieth-century literary criticism, the Victorians were predecessors to the contemporary academic preference for “detachment,” for reading that

avoids excessive emotional receptivity to texts and privileges analysis instead (Anderson 3, 6–7). The Victorians' discomfort with absorbed reading was particularly striking, as Kate Flint's research shows, in their attitudes toward women's reading. Many feared that women would become morally corrupted by reading in a state of "self-absorption," vulnerable "to textual influence, deaf and blind to all other stimuli in [their] immediate environment," "mentally passive and accepting of what [they] consume," and emotional rather than "rational" (4, 22, 15); Patrick Brantlinger and others have documented how the same fears about the ill effects of "consuming" modes of reading applied to the masses of novel readers generally (11). The Victorian Oxford rector Mark Pattison summed up such "uncritical" reading as a process wherein "images" flow in "a continuous douche of tepid water" over readers' minds, leaving them "pleased but passive" (673–78).⁵

Victorians' distrust of absorbed reading has an additional layer, however. Victorian critics of absorbed reading (of novels and of literature in general) often predicate "good," analytical reading not only on readers' wise choice of text and seriousness of mind, but also on their *not* browsing to make selections. Where Ruskin, for example, trusts young women's instincts to help them find good books and read them well, he prescribes the opposite method for young men: accurate reading can occur only when the male reader deliberately, consciously selects those books that have been widely recognized as "true" books and reads them with the express purpose of understanding what has been collectively valued about them. In order to transcend "the vain, the false, the treacherous" passions of instinctual reading, he asserts, male readers must put distance between themselves and the text by reading and rereading books "letter by letter," "annihilating [their] own personality" as they attempt to access the books' truths (22, 31–35). While for Ruskin the male reader may be receptive to a "true" book's ideas – indeed, *should* be receptive to them – the reader must come to that appreciation through deliberation and study, rather than through unbridled emotional response. Ruskin's theory of good reading depends upon male readers being pre-aware of texts' importance to the larger culture, implying that from the very moment of selecting a "true" book, readers' *intent* to align themselves with the authorized view of the text saves them from misreading and from becoming victims of their own emotions.

A similar sense that readers' mastery of texts derives from their awareness of a book's place in literary culture underlies many critiques of browsing. One commentator noted, for example, that while "brows[ing] at large over the literary common" may be "agreeable" – registering the pleasurable emotions of browsing that educators like Henry Morley accentuate – it is not very "profitable" as a mode of learning, since browsers cannot "take possession of [literature] by an orderly survey, to find that its growth and its features are not haphazard accidents, but closely connected with each other and with general laws" ("Books and Bookmen"). Another argued that only readers who read intentionally, rather than "browsing among books," are capable of "exercising the larger power" of piecing together what they read into a coherent whole, of "standing back," in Felski's terms, to see what is before them ("Encyclopedia Britannica").⁶ These comments resonate with Scott's description of *Waverley's* desultory reading: through his browsing, the narrator notes, he gathers "much curious, though ill-arranged and miscellaneous information" that feeds a dangerous romantic tendency (38; ch. 3). In this line of thinking, only choosing texts based on authorized discursive or historical information, and beginning to read with a defined purpose formed by this background knowledge, bakes detachment into readers' experience from the start, empowering readers with self-control, analytical prowess, and a widened view of literature.

But is it true, as these critiques suggest, that a reader who is unqualifiedly receptive to a text is inevitably misled by his or her reading, or is no longer even a subject in his or her own right, unable to “take possession” of what he or she has read? In literary criticism, the tide has turned somewhat toward increased receptivity in general, with some scholars chafing against the dominance of suspicious affects and symptomatic analysis, the tendency of critics to take a detached position by looking for what texts repress or omit, at the expense of other approaches to reading. Warner cites Eve Sedgwick as one scholar in this countermovement: in advocating “reparative reading,” Sedgwick asserts that there is much to gain from assuming a generous attitude toward texts and looking for the ways they might instruct or sustain readers. Readers in this framework become subject to a text by being emotionally as well as cognitively open to what it offers. More recently, Sharon Marcus’s theory of “just reading” – or in another iteration, Marcus and Stephen Best’s “surface reading” (Best and Marcus 12) – similarly advocates a certain kind of subjection to texts, by viewing texts on their own terms and “account[ing] more fully for what [they] present on their surface,” rather than accounting only for what is hidden or unconsciously referenced below the surface (Marcus 75).

Of course, “reparative reading,” “just reading” and “surface reading” do not necessarily imply a reader’s engrossment in a book – a reader might be unsuspecting and open while still remaining outside a book’s complete pull. Both Victorian and more recent commentators have also validated receptivity in the form of a more complete subjection to texts, outlining the appeal and the benefits of absorbed reading. Rachel Ablow explains that during the nineteenth century, “reading was commonly regarded at least as valuable as an affective experience as it was a way to convey information or increase understanding,” such that “Victorians did not just interpret but also ‘felt’ the texts they consumed” (2-4). This valuable “feeling” of texts is reflected in Ruskin’s, Dickens’s, Morley’s, and others’ positive depictions of browsers’ more purely emotional connectedness to books. Scholars of Victorian literature and of reading have identified various virtues of consuming and feeling texts as well. As Victor Nell notes in his psychological study of absorbed reading, though academics have routinely suppressed the fact, even sophisticated readers read for pleasure and share the same “drives and gratifications” that supposedly only “lowbrow” readers indulge (5). Academics tend to ignore, Nell observes, that the need to fully participate imaginatively and emotionally in other lives and worlds through reading stories appears to be deeply rooted and universal in the human psyche, including in academics’ own psyches. Recuperations of absorbed reading by scholars like Felski and others have registered a number of reasons that absorbed reading is so fulfilling: it offers, for example, emotional rather than purely intellectual knowledge of the world, an escape from daily life, fantasy fulfillment, a feeling of connection to other readers who share a similar passion for reading, a way of modulating reading habits to the rhythms of modern life, and the ability to express pent-up emotion.⁷

In addition to recovering the beneficial effects that happen *to* the receptive reader, and particularly the receptive reader who becomes entirely absorbed in books, it is important to explicate the ways in which, as Warner suggests, traditionally “uncritical” reading characterized by absorption and identification might be subject-building – reflective, deliberate, reasoned, coherent – in its own way (16). Much as Sedgwick, Marcus, and others refute the notion that unsuspecting readers are merely being duped, Nell comments that far from being docile and facile, absorbed readers are “skilled,” able to allow their consciousness to be heightened by an involved engagement with books and in so doing, exhibiting traits of psychologically healthy people, including “self-acceptance, openness to

experience, spontaneity and creativity, and a generous capacity for interpersonal warmth and intimacy” (229). Absorbed readers in his study report that their reading “enlarges [their] experience, allows them to live more intensely, [and helps them] to solve problems” more effectively. From this perspective, absorbed reading can take its place alongside detached reading as a means of sharpening a person’s sense of agency and subjecthood.

In temporally expanding absorbed reading to include the mental processes of readers’ selection of books, I suggest, tropes of browsing in Victorian literature contribute significantly to both Victorian and contemporary understandings of how receptive, absorbed reading can be a self-defining choice that empowers readers as subjects, in some of the ways Nell describes. Examining the Victorian trope of “love at first sight,” Christopher Matthews shows that the ability to fall instantly in love was part of a process of self-fashioning for male, heterosexual men, whose sexuality was not only a “biological impulse” or custom, but also “a stance, a way of being and self-styling as well as of producing narrative” (426–27). Although the notion of love at first sight was criticized by some Victorians, who doubted whether another’s character could be known by instinct alone, Matthews argues that acting on instinctual knowledge was also valorized as a “performed vulnerability,” a moral act of recognizing another’s goodness that reflects positively on the man in love (438). In this sense, “love at first sight” has a corollary in some representations of Victorian browsing, in which readers falling for *books* at first sight become subject to “passive susceptibilities” of feeling, in Mill’s words, that paradoxically make them agents of their own reading experiences. In these instances, absorbed readers, drawing on the context of their unguided, individual discovery of a book to make their reading meaningful, stake a clear *claim* on the experience of being carried away, “owning” not only the books they browse for but also their entire experience of being taken in by them. Ownership may take a variety of forms: legal or literal ownership of a book, an emotional connection with a book that a reader views as exclusive, a reader’s sense of being uniquely able to discern the meaning in a book or uniquely able to render it for others, or a reader’s belief that a text resonates powerfully with, and was even prepared for, his or her own life, for example. Whatever the variation, when browsers “own” a book, as I use the term in this essay, they are both empowered to change their lives in some way based on their absorbing experience with a text and, in reflecting on their browsing process, empowered in their view of themselves as readers. They come to “possess” texts by creating a narrative around the ways that texts possess them.

“I fused my soul and that inert stuff”: browsing and textual ownership

THE EPONYMOUS CHARACTER IN Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s verse novel *Aurora Leigh* (1856) is a consummate example of a reader asserting control over her life through books. When Aurora, oppressed by the imposed, traditionally feminine education of her aunt, which she describes as being “prick[ed] to a pattern with a pin,” discovers a private stash of books once belonging to her father in her aunt’s garret, she breaks free of her metaphorical prison (Barrett Browning 1.378–83, 1.427). In Ruskinian fashion, she samples the literary fare in the attic following her instincts: “creeping in and out/ Among the giant fossils of my past, / Like some nimble mouse between the ribs / Of a mastadon, I nibbled here and there / At this or that box, pulling through the gap, / In heats of terror, haste, victorious joy, / The first book first. . . / My books!” (1.835–43). She hides the books under her pillow and reads them secretly in the early morning light.

Aurora's browsing and clandestine reading are one of her first independent acts, an early assertion of her self-governing that foreshadows her liberation as an adult and her arduous journey to become an economically self-sufficient, respected female poet. In critical terms, Aurora's insistent non-conformity – toward Victorian gender roles as well as toward literary conventions – and her relentless efforts to remain in control of her life are defining features of the verse novel.⁸ Aurora's book selection process makes her, in her own eyes, an agent of her education. No longer "lying quiet" and suffering her aunt's molding, she actively chooses the materials of her learning, as she will attempt to actively choose the course of her adult life. However, if Aurora's method of obtaining reading material is rebellious, in other ways Barrett Browning's depictions of Aurora's browsing and subsequent reading illustrate as much a young woman being controlled *by* books as a young woman taking control of her life *through* books.

Aurora's newfound control over her education is offset by the heady exhilaration that she experiences as a browser, which, if it marks her sense of freedom, also registers her vulnerability to making poor choices. She is so excited by the books' presence that at first she nibbles not at individual books, but at "this or that box" of books, suggesting her inattention to each book's content or context. She proudly asserts, in fact, that she chooses books "Without considering" first "whether they were fit / To do me good," reading "books bad and good," including "moral books," "genial books," "merry books," and "melancholy books" (1.701–2, 1.779–91). Her initially physical, rather than intellectual, orientation toward the collection she browses transfers to her relationship with the individual books she chooses: she *feels* the books acting on her body, "beat[ing]/ Under [her] pillow, in the morning's dark" as she waits to read, the presumable quickening of her heartbeat from the "heats of terror, haste, [and] victorious joy" of browsing now attributed to the book itself, agency shifting from reader to book (1.840–42).

Rather than staying confined to the material realm, Aurora's initial interaction with books as objects informs how she reads them. Reflecting the sometimes-double meaning of browsing as a "consuming" form of selecting and of reading, Aurora's descriptions of her reading are in keeping with her description of her avid consumption of the book boxes, having all the signs of a reader "taking in" – or in other words, being taken over by – texts. Much as she indiscriminately chooses books of every kind, Aurora takes an unstructured, incautious approach to each book, believing that it facilitates good reading: "when / We gloriously forget ourselves and plunge / Soul-forward, headlong, into [each] book's profound, / Impassioned for its beauty and salt of truth – 'Tis then we get the right good from a book" (1.705–9). Far from the ideal critical reader, "in those days" of passionate reading, Aurora remembers, "I never analyzed, / Not even myself" (1.954–55). As a reader of the books she browses for, Aurora is acted upon much in the way she is acted upon when she plays the part of a dutiful student "lying quiet" under her aunt's tutelage, simply under the influence of a different force. Boldly conducting her own private education by browsing around the books in the attic, but surrendering to the books themselves both in her manner of actually choosing them and in her way of reading, Aurora's control over her reading experience appears to be conflicted.

And yet, taking into account Aurora's own reflections, her "surrender" is more accurately figured as part of a sophisticated, self-reflexive theory and practice of reading that begins with, and centers upon, her choice to browse *unself*-reflexively to find her reading material. Aurora is not merely an absorbed reader but an advocate of absorbed reading, dismissive of detachment as a source of knowledge; she argues that good reading, for understanding as well

as for connection, stems first from a reader's being enveloped in her emotions and impressions. Claiming that she gains "the right good" from a book by being "impassioned for *its* beauty and salt of truth," Aurora suggests that she must take the cue for her passion from the beauty and truth already in the text. Yet, rather than the readerly annihilation Ruskin recommends for male readers, Aurora's version of self-forgetting is "glorious," paradoxically making the self more prominent: in also describing this reading as "soul-forward," she indicates that when she reads, her "soul" is already in a sense deliberately oriented to *be* impassioned, put "forward" into the text to feel something. The reader's soul activates books' truth and beauty; her willingness to connect totally and purely with a book makes the book come alive.

As Aurora's narrative of her reading process suggests, however, a reader cannot "Plunge / Soul-forward, headlong" into a book to find its "right good" after accessing the book through just any method. This is evident when, prior to her defense of "soul-forward, headlong" reading, Aurora discourses on the importance of what might be called "soul-forward" book *selection*, claiming, as I mention above, that she finds truth and beauty in books only when she begins to read them "without considering whether they were fit / To do me good," without "calculating profits," without "being ungenerous, even to a book" (1.701–4). The wording implies that careful selection of books is antithetical to truly understanding texts, calling out what may be missed when readers informed by critics or other authorities prematurely judge books and choose not to read them, or read books with others' readings of them in mind, thereby potentially diminishing their faith in a book's potential. Aurora puts the method of careless selection into practice by ignoring the ways in which the cases of books she browses have in fact been put together by an authoritative source, her deceased father, and instead viewing the collection as though each volume is there randomly.

The passage identifies the openness of the browser's mind and his or her relatively unmediated engagement with books as a prerequisite to productive absorbed reading: choosing to pick up any book without a purpose ensures her receptivity to whatever the book has to offer. The total context of Aurora's reading experience suggests that Aurora's reckless, haphazard "nibbling" among the books is less a process of being carried away than a mindful cultivation of receptiveness to all books, that – however uncalculating Aurora wishes to be in her reading – gives her access to "the right good from a book." From this view, it seems especially fitting that the description of Aurora's browsing in the attic, which begins with her noting that the books are packed in cases labeled with her father's name, concludes with her exultant exclamation that they are "My books!" (1.843). She has been taken in by the books, but in the process of arranging to be taken in and reflecting on the experience, she also comes to access the books' meaning for herself, figuratively (and literally) coming to own them.

Further, from Aurora's perspective, browsing and absorbed reading not only enable her understanding of books, they shape how she thinks of herself as a reader and a writer, making her the owner of her reading experience in another sense. Self-guided reading is the "Sublimest danger, / over which none weeps": dangerous because the isolated reader gets lost in "the thick / Of men's [conflicting] opinions," but sublime because the confusion "throws you back upon a noble trust / And use of your own instinct," a superior method of understanding, she suggests, to traditional, formal, and masculine "school logic" (1.739, 1.801–9). Positioning herself to rely on only her instinct to find meaning in books, browsing defines for Aurora her own capacities and builds her trust in them, leading her to confidently declare herself a good, absorbed reader.

Placed as it is in the first book of Barrett Browning's *Kunstlerroman*, the browsing that Aurora engages in prepares the way for her to become a poet as well as a reader. As part of her description of her browsing among her father's collection, Aurora writes, "At last because the time was ripe, / I chanced upon the poets" (1.843–44). As with all of her reading, her reading of the poetry she "chance[s] upon" is soul-forward, though in this case, she imitates rather than merely plunges into the texts: "in a flush / Of individual life," she explains, "I poured myself / Along the veins of others, and achieved / Mere lifeless imitations of live verse" (1.971–74). While Aurora considers her early imitative poetry itself to be "lifeless," it is the seed of the original writing she later produces, her indiscriminate reading and regurgitation serving as an intellectual playground for her maturation. In this sense, as well, Aurora owns her chance browsing experiences, as she frames her close identification with the browsed-for, chanced-upon books as the foundation and catalyst of her fledgling writing career.

Aurora generally frames her relationship with the material she browses as one between browser and books, plural – "My books!" The browsing experience of figures like Mill and Waldo take a different form: a connection with one special book occurs when a general attitude of receptivity hardens into a clear "recognition" of a book apparently meant just for them. Mill's thoughts in *Principles of Political Economy* seem to "belong" to Waldo and await his discovery; Mill values Wordsworth as a poet less because of "intrinsic merits" than because of what his words do for Mill at a crucial moment. In this alternative version of the trope of browsing, readerly ownership is defined by browsers' ability to discern and act upon very particular signs of fate, Providence, or even mere felicity that are encoded in the encounter with a chanced-upon book, to determine the books' meaning and absorb its message primarily through the immediate, personal circumstances of their discovery. Aurora's "chancing" upon poetry among her father's books at just the right time in her intellectual development, in contrast to the less defined and individually notable instances of reading that emerge from her browsing generally, is an example of this kind of serendipitous browsing. Suggesting that her encounter with poetry occurs "because the time was ripe" – attributing the cause to apparently unknown universal forces that are "in the know" – Aurora implies that this browsing experience is meaningful both because it is pre-arranged and because she must recognize and claim those signs in order to transform herself from a reader of poetry into a writer of poetry. As is suggested by Schreiner's attention to Waldo's solipsism and his only partial understanding of *Principles of Political Economy*, which conflicts with his identification with the book, literary scenes of more narrowly focused browsing may complicate the idealized image of browsing in texts like *Aurora Leigh*. But they also preserve a respect for browsing and absorption not afforded by figures who staunchly advocate informed, purposeful book selection, demonstrating that browsers can productively claim ownership over a book even as, or even because, browsing limits what they know of books' more widely accepted meaning.

Like Aurora Leigh and Waldo, George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver (the heroine of *The Mill on the Floss* [1860]) browses in part because she lacks the opportunity for formal education. Comparing Maggie's self-guided education with her brother Tom's more structured education, Eliot emphasizes Maggie's longing for the kind of supervised reading that Mill experienced in childhood and that Victorian advocates of guided selection declare to be essential to good reading. Without an education to help her understand texts and compare them to one another, to view them historically, or to read them in context of others' commentary, Maggie feels unable to make sense of what she reads. Her readings

of Tom's copies of Euclid and Virgil, and her ventures into "peculiarly masculine studies," leave her with little more than "futile information" and a "sinking" feeling, Eliot writes, that she "had set out towards the Promised Land" and gotten lost (287–88; bk. 4, ch. 3). Left with whatever "shreds and patches of feeble literature and false history" she can find, and especially desperate when her access to books is further limited by her family's financial ruin, Maggie somewhat naively wishes for "that knowledge which made men contented," "some key that would enable her to understand" those "irreversible laws within and without her" and to navigate a morally fraught, lonely life (286–88; bk. 4, ch. 3).

Yet, though during her youth Maggie laments her "shreds and patches" reading experiences and longs for authoritative guides, like Waldo her most transformative, cherished reading experience – her reading from Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* after her family life has fallen into social and financial shambles – occurs after she browses, alone, for and within the book. Eliot gives careful attention to the particular way in which Maggie encounters *The Imitation of Christ*. Although Maggie is certainly carried away by what she imagines to be à Kempis's ideas (to somewhat dangerous ends, as I will discuss), as a frame that structures her absorbed reading and wholehearted embrace of the book, Maggie's browsing enhances her sense of ownership over her experience and makes her more than a mere victim of emotion. Maggie gets her hands on *The Imitation of Christ* through a repeated sequence of browsing. When her friend Bob Jakin, an illiterate packman in the business of buying and selling odds-and-ends, finds an appealing set of books while browsing at a book-stall, he decides to buy them because "they're cram-full o'print, an' [he] thought they'd do no harm comin' along wi' these bettermost books," the books he gives her that have pictures (283; bk. 4, ch. 3). Resembling the demoralized John Stuart Mill in her idleness and weariness, Maggie leisurely begins to look over the set and eventually chooses *The Imitation of Christ* from among the others:

At last Maggie's eyes glanced down on the books that lay on the window-shelf, and she half forsook her reverie to turn over listlessly the leaves of the 'Portrait Gallery,' but she soon pushed this aside to examine the little row of books tied together with string. 'Beauties of the Spectator,' 'Rasselas,' 'Economy of Human Life,' 'Gregory's Letters' – she knew the sort of matter that was inside all these: the 'Christian Year' – that seemed to be a hymn-book, and she laid it down again; but *Thomas à Kempis?* – the name had come across her in her reading, and she felt the satisfaction, which everyone knows, of getting some ideas to attach to a name that strays solitary in the memory. She took up the little, old, clumsy book with some curiosity. (288–89; bk. 4, ch. 3)

As with the unassuming volume that Waldo picks up, Maggie's selection of "the little, old, clumsy book" is described as a somewhat mystical meeting between book and browser, drawing attention to both Maggie's sensitivity to the book and the universe's machinations to bring it forth fortuitously for her at a particular time and place. Although Maggie is guided to choose *The Imitation of Christ* by information about the text she has "come across" in other reading, rather than purely from instinct, Eliot indicates that Maggie's interest in the book is less prompted by a thorough prior knowledge of à Kempis than by what her basic recognition of him, "stray[ing]" in her mind, "does for her," in Mill's terms – here, by giving her personal "satisfaction" in her vague recognition of his name. And like Aurora with her father's books, Maggie disregards the book's relation to the other books in the bundle Bob "curates" for her, putting her own rather than Bob's significance on the volume.

Maggie's initial pass through *The Imitation of Christ* is hasty and patchy, as she follows "strong pen-and-ink marks, long since browned by time," made by "some hand, now for ever quiet" to denote "certain passages" (289; bk. 4, ch. 3). The cryptic "hand" appears to Maggie to be guiding her to passages relevant to her situation: "She went on from one brown mark to another, where the quiet hand seemed to point, hardly conscious that she was reading – seeming rather to listen" (289–90; bk. 4, ch. 3). Seeing à Kempis's philosophy of renunciation as her new pathway to happiness, Maggie absorbs everything she can from the text and immediately begins to live its philosophy in her life. As Eliot writes, though Maggie "knew nothing of doctrines or systems – of mysticism or quietism," "this voice out of the far-off middle ages was the direct communication of a human soul's belief and experience, and came to Maggie as an unquestioned message" (291; bk. 4, ch. 3).

While there is much in this passage to suggest Maggie's passive surrender to the book, as with Aurora Leigh, the "surrender" gives Maggie a sense of empowerment and distinction as a reader. Even though she is "hardly conscious" of her reading, "devouring eagerly the dialogues with the invisible Teacher" (Eliot's use of the term "devouring" resonating with metaphorical renderings of reading and browsing as eating) (289–90; bk. 4, ch. 3), Maggie's eager acceptance of the book's message is generated by her sense that the book is *hers* to claim. Her connection to *The Imitation of Christ* gives her license to read the text through the lens of her life and needs: freed from a perceived obligation to fit her reading into the traditionally "masculine" forms she tries to pursue in childhood, Maggie makes use of the reading she browses for herself in a way that reading Tom's textbooks never enables. Eliot notes that in *The Imitation of Christ*, Maggie finds "an effort and a hope that helped her through years of loneliness, making out a faith for herself without the aid of established authorities and appointed guides – for they were not at hand, and her need was pressing" (292; bk. 4, ch. 3). Emphasizing that Maggie has made "a faith *for herself*" without guides, Eliot suggests that browsing has enabled Maggie to become her own guide, to take control over her interpretation and application of the text, her active "recognition" of *The Imitation of Christ* giving her a certain ownership of her experience.⁹

As some critics have noted, Maggie's enthusiasm for and application of the book to her life measurably improves her situation in a number of ways, if only temporarily.¹⁰ Maggie just before reading Thomas à Kempis is idle, miserable, and confused; Maggie just after Thomas à Kempis is overly ascetic, but is also industrious, purposeful, and at least temporarily, relatively content. Whereas before she alternates between staring "blankly" out the window instead of reading, day-dreaming about running away, and feeling so angry toward her family that she believed "it was not difficult for her to become a demon," afterward she rereads à Kempis and a few other texts "eagerly and constantly," sews diligently to stay occupied, and brings peace to her troubled home (287, 293–94; bk. 4, ch. 3). As Waldo's interpretation of Mill inspires him with hope for his future, Maggie's understanding of à Kempis emboldens her to take some positive actions in her life. Much as Waldo's reading of Mill is somewhat superficial, though, Maggie does not grasp the "inmost truth" of the text, which is, Eliot clarifies, "that renunciation remains sorrow," rather than eliminating sorrow (291; bk. 4, ch. 3). In the remainder of the novel, in part through her eventual exhaustion with self-repression and in part through her friend Philip Wakem's prodding, Maggie is forced to question the sacredness and authority of her reading of à Kempis. As other critics point out, Maggie's desire to see relevance to her personal life in *The Imitation of Christ* – an attitude, as I have discussed, reflected in and fostered by her browsing – leads her to misread it.¹¹ If her

“unquestioning” belief in her understanding of the book’s teachings promotes her happiness in some ways, it endangers it in the long term.

However empowering her reading is, Maggie in the moments of her reading remains ignorant of her limited comprehension of à Kempis’s philosophy and the pitfalls of trying to live out his teachings. Here, where the consequences of Maggie’s misreading are more explicitly detailed than are Waldo’s, transformative reading and a realistic view of one’s own transformative reading cannot coincide. Bridging both sides of the browsing debate, parsing the complex relationship between understanding a book’s ideas and the *feeling* of understanding a book, Eliot’s novel illuminates a potential trade-off between emotionally connecting with a book and mastering a book in the primarily intellectual, detached terms purposeful selection and formal guidance facilitate. In refusing to dismiss what browsing and absorbed reading do for Maggie’s subject formation, learning process, and empowerment, even as she does not idealize Maggie’s de-contextualized application of the text, Eliot demands attention to the many and sometimes-conflicting layers of active, agential reading.

The advantages and limitations of browsing in texts like *The Story of an African Farm*, *Aurora Leigh*, and *The Mill on the Floss* appear to be largely a function of the browsers’ characteristics: young, with limited resources for education, and in the case of Aurora and Maggie, further limited by the expectations and strictures placed on women. Even Mill, though an educated male, might be considered a sufficiently young enough adult – buckling under the weight of his father’s influence as he attempts to carve out an independent place in the world – to fit in this category of “Bildungsroman”-like browsers. I conclude, however, with a glimpse at a browser of a different sort, the presumably adult and educated poet-speaker of Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* (1868–69). Forming a powerful relationship with a browsed-for book not to develop himself (or, like Aurora Leigh, to develop the self-as-writer), but instead to develop only his art, the experience of Browning’s poet demonstrates the range of the browsing trope in Victorian literature. Browning’s work suggests that intense need of many sorts, beyond those deriving from the reader’s gender, age, or class status, may fuel the claims browsers make on books.

In *The Ring and the Book* (1868), the conflict explored in *The Mill on the Floss* – the extent to which browsers can claim to know and make use of books about which they know little – is placed in the context of artistic creation. Beginning with a scene of browsing, from which the browser finds a book that prompts him to write a poem, Browning interrogates the relationship between chance discovery, isolated reading, and inspiration. The narrative poem refashions the tale of a forgotten Renaissance-era Italian murder trial as it is recorded in an obscure “old yellow book” (Browning 1.677). Having discovered the yellow book while browsing at a book-stall in Florence, the poem’s speaker reads the entire volume in one day while wandering through the city. Realizing that a captivating story could emerge from the documents, the poet-speaker decides to use his imaginative powers to rewrite the dry factual record and make it “spark” to life for a modern British audience (1.458, 460, 755). Like an alloy added to a gold ring, which mixes with pure gold to form the shape of a ring and then dissolves away, the poet-speaker declares that he adds his poetic inspiration to the old record to shape a newly invigorated narrative. Having summarized the whole narrative of the old yellow book in Book One of *The Ring and the Book*, he then retells the story as a series of dramatic monologues from the point of view of each of the major actors involved in the trial.

The poet-speaker's right to retell the narrative of the old yellow book and his ability to tell it truthfully – his artistic ownership of the book, in a sense – is the central topic of Book One, the poet-speaker's own dramatic monologue. While readers of *The Ring and the Book* might justifiably take the poet-speaker's veracity at face value – and while the poem's original Victorian readers may have done so – many twentieth- and twenty-first century critics have viewed Browning's work as a statement about the unavoidable relativity of truth, evidenced in part through Browning's chosen form of monologues that differently describe the same events. These scholars have disagreed, however, about the degree to which the poet-speaker is self-aware and forthright about his own complicity in being a biased, limited story teller: is he serious when he claims that it is possible to artistically render the narrative without distorting its truthfulness? Some scholars argue that we should take the poet-speaker at his word, suggesting that his ecstatic reading of the book and his metaphor of the ring and the alloy reflect his intention to foreground his personality as an individual reader and artist with a point of view.¹² Others argue that Browning and his poet-speaker are at odds, and that where Browning is aware of the poet-speaker's biases and limitations, the speaker himself is not, or at least cheekily pretends not to be. As Herbert Tucker asserts, although the poet-speaker claims that his discovery of the yellow book is predestined and that his rewriting of it reveals “*the truth of the matter*,” in fact his entire construction of the fated finding of the yellow book demonstrates that the speaker is as delusional about his objectivity as are the other speakers of the poem (436–46).¹³

Notably, the criticism on both sides of the question makes much of the narrator's discovery of the yellow book and his absorbed reading of it as evidence of his earnestness or disingenuousness in representing himself as the teller of “*the truth of the matter*.” Setting aside for a moment the question of whether the poet-speaker tells the truth, distorts facts intentionally, or distorts them unintentionally, it is significant simply that the poet-speaker's claim to be able to insightfully read and truthfully re-craft the old yellow book is based on the nature of his initial encounter with the book – that, effectively or not, he employs a trope of serendipitous browsing to assert this right. Tucker points to the poet-speaker's emphasis on the providential nature of the discovery as a bogus claim to omniscience about the trial, as though the poet-speaker asserts his truthfulness because of his providentially appointed higher ground. Yet, the details of the poet-speaker's browsing for and selecting the old yellow book indicate a more nuanced combination of fate and choice involved in his selection. The poet-speaker's bold claim to identifying with the book and justifiably reworking it is bolstered not just by Providence recognizing him in sending him the book, but also, like Maggie Tulliver, by the skill he demonstrates in recognizing Providence, in being the kind of browser who can “activate” fate, so to speak, when it comes his way.

The poet-speaker notably abstains from claiming any of the typical sources of expertise a reader might expect. He makes no mention of traditional sources of information or knowledge that might have equipped him to tell the story, such as an extensive education, a familiarity with Italian history or law, or additional research on the murder trial. He also gives little attention to the material forces of the European book market that bring the old yellow book, in conjunction with the books around it, to the book stall. In fact, the narrator repeatedly draws attention to the *lack* of these sources of contextualizing knowledge in his interpretation of the tale, highlighting instead his simultaneously self-guided and fated discovery of the book, governed both by what he brings to the browsing scenario and what is there waiting for him. “I found this book,” he declares,

Gave a *lira* for it, eightpence English just
 (Mark the predestination!) when a Hand,
 Always above my shoulder, pushed me once
 One day still fierce 'mid many a day struck calm,
 Across a Square in Florence, crammed with booths. (1.38–43)

Beginning by asserting his role in obtaining the book through his use of “I” and the action verbs that describe what he did – “*I found this book,*” “*gave a lira for it*” – he then transfers the agency behind the discovery to the predestining “Hand,” reminiscent of the marginal “hand” guiding Maggie, that initially “pushed” him to the booth. He switches back once again as he details how, among the surrounding more “tempting” books he surveys, he latches on to the sight of his unassuming book with just “one glance of the lettered back” and immediately purchases it (1.75–83). The narrator implies that his ability to recognize the right book results from his capable glance. But in neglecting to explain what it is about the “lettered back” of the chosen book that makes it in any way stand out in his judgment from its “compeers,” he also suggests that something besides his skill – something instinctual or providential, like the “Hand” that first pushes him to the booth – compels his choice.

At later moments in Book One, the poet-speaker similarly describes his discovery of the book as a mixture of his own actions and those of fate. Being all that remains of a once well-known story, the old yellow book, he explains, had been “left / By the roadside ‘mid the ordure, shards and weeds” (1.672–73). He describes his entrance onto this scene of neglect as peculiarly relaxed: he “haply, wandering that lone way, / Kicked [up the book], turned it over, and recognized” a tale worth telling (1.674–75). As in his description of his literal browsing for the book, the narrator’s metaphorical actions – wandering, kicking up the book and turning it over, recognizing it – are “haply” individual choices, movements and thoughts less motivated from within than responsive to what he finds without, but nevertheless marking him as a special reader because of his sensitivity to the appeal of a book that has been ignored by previous passersby.

The mixture of decisiveness and submission involved in his discovery not only gives the poet-speaker a uniquely close relationship with the text but also a possession over the book that takes hold of him. His asserted ownership of the book is multi-layered, at once legal, physical, intellectual, and artistic. Reflecting his initial engagement with the book as an object – his selection of the book being based on nothing more than its unspecified “lettered back,” an at best indirect hint to its contents – the narrator continues to value the book’s thing-ness even after reading it. For example, he first offers to allow his readers to “Examine it yourselves!” and then anxiously takes possession again mainly on the grounds of the tangible pleasures the book offers, crying, “Give it me back! The thing’s restorative / I’ the sight and touch” (1.38, 89–90). The poet-speaker’s enraptured reading of the book follows this possessive pattern, apparent passivity in reading actually a mark of a different kind of readerly action at work. The poet-speaker refers to the book as his “prize” from which, while first reading it immediately after his purchase, none of the activity in the public square can distract him (1.109). In carving out a private space for himself as a transfixed reader surrounded by daily busyness, the narrator reinforces the ownership he first establishes in describing the “Hand” that guides him to a book that his quick glance then singles out, while everyone else is oblivious.

The poet-speaker emphasizes that his highly framed, “owned” absorbed reading of the source text is authoritative, that he “mastered the contents, knew the whole truth” of the described events not through detached analysis, but through his apparently unmediated connection with the book (1.117). It follows that his rewriting of the book, his use of it as source material for his own account of the murder and trial, is founded on this unmediated possession. Describing the next stage of his relationship with the book, his use of it as source material for his own account, he declares that to prepare to write, he “fused [his] live soul and that inert stuff” in the book, adding that “something of mine” to it (1.469, 462). This “fusion” in writing resembles the two previous points of intense connection between the narrator and the book, his recognizing the book at the stall and his absorbed reading. By first allowing the text to take him over, the narrator is then able to take over it: to (re)interpret the events of the crime through only his fancy, through that “something of *mine*” that he brings to it, unpolluted by the interference of others.

As the unresolved critical debate about the poet-speaker’s accuracy and forthrightness in claiming this mastery of the contents suggests, there is little to support the poet-speaker’s mastery beyond his elaborately constructed claims to it – the poet-speaker’s unmediated selection and reading of the old yellow book is both the source of the strong connection and the reason it is inscrutable to others. The ambiguity of the poet-speaker’s mastery of the book, combined with his unambiguously confident feeling about his reading and the concrete actions he takes from it, suggests a similar divide between forms of mastery over a book as that articulated by Eliot. As in *The Mill on the Floss*, the productivity of the browsers’ closeness with a book is upheld despite its potential problems: the poet-speaker’s browsing for and absorbed reading of the old yellow book is the foundation of *The Ring and the Book*, in the sense that without that feeling of ownership, the poem would never have been written.

Conclusion: browsing “as if for life”

IN A WELL-KNOWN PASSAGE in Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1849–50), David recalls himself as a young boy absorbedly reading from a collection of his deceased father’s books, finding company in “a glorious host” of characters, including “Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, Humphrey Clinker, Tom Jones, The Vicar of Wakefield, Don Quixote, Gil Blas, and Robinson Crusoe” (89; ch. 4). The young boy inhales the books with “greedy relish,” imagining himself as the characters within them and imagining the characters surrounding him at home, a safeguard from the abuse he receives in reality from his stepfather. As David puts it, he was “reading as if for life.” In a spin on this familiar idea, the Victorian browsers depicted in the above examples *browse* as if for life. Although their moments of absorbed reading following browsing may be just that – only moments in their much longer history with a book, perhaps a merely temporary suspension of other frameworks for knowing a text – they capture how browsers can fold a book into their lives through the fleeting circumstances of their initial encounter with it and be empowered by those circumstances. Whether by practicing an enduring habit of receptivity to books through browsing, or by reading serendipitously discovered books solely for their potential applicability to themselves, these readers begin to make books a part of their life narratives before they even crack the spine.

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NOTES

1. The *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that Lamb's use of "browsing" here was the first time the word was used to refer to the perusal of books.
2. Non-fiction, first-hand accounts of browsing from the nineteenth century also indicate how absorption with books as objects goes hand-in-hand with engagement with texts. The American Edna Harris, for instance, begins her 1899 analysis of the aesthetic qualities of books by emphasizing the joy of first seeing and touching a multitude of books in bookstalls, then of "browsing happily among the treasures" of knowledge "in one brown volume after another" (118).
3. Ruskin's confidence in the female reader's instincts represents a broader Victorian belief in, as Flint writes, a girl's "'natural' purity" or "some sense of innate propriety [that] will teach her what [books] to avoid" and prevent her from reading lightly, a belief that was in constant tension with educators' and moralists' fears about female susceptibility. See Flint 88–89.
4. See also Hale, "Habits of Reading." Like Morley, Hale argues for the beneficial emotional experiences children have when they browse instead of following a prescribed reading list.
5. On nineteenth-century perceptions of absorbed novel reading from an art history perspective, see also Stewart's *The Look of Reading*.
6. See also Sarah Grand's association of browsing with corruptive, aimless novel-reading: "Nothing could be more unwholesome than [the] degenerate browsing" that modern young people are allowed to participate in, she writes, as they "wander without a guide through mazes of modern fiction, crude stuff for the most part" (380–81).
7. For examples of the "recuperation" of the value of all-consuming reading modes, see Felski 58; Dames 36–68; and Flint 32–34.
8. For critical perspectives on Aurora's non-conformity, see, for example, Case, Chaney, Charlesworth Gelpi, Hoeckley, Houston, LaPorte, and Moore.
9. In her analysis of the scene, Birch briefly points out the importance of the way Maggie acquires books: "It is significant that these books did not enter Maggie's life through her own purposeful seeking. They arrive accidentally [and] she interprets them as a spiritual extension of the self-forgetfulness to which her nature already inclines" (xv). The relationship Birch identifies between Maggie's general self-forgetfulness and the accidental nature of her access to the books that become so important to her resembles the relationship between haphazard browsing and receptive readers, which I have identified in *The Mill on the Floss* and other Victorian scenes of browsing. My purpose in analyzing Maggie's browsing is to flesh out *why* the "accidental" access to a book facilitates Maggie's ability to interpret it as an extension of her existing nature and beliefs.
10. See Hagan 53 and Birch xv.
11. See Alley 193 and Kreisel 91, 99.
12. See Krishan 205–24 and Sullivan 231–41.
13. For another critique of the poet-speaker's trustworthiness, see Thompson 669–86.

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