

## Reading, incorporated

‘Gracious child, how you gobble.’

A young girl stands before a bearded man, a book in her hands. She has climbed three storeys to the smoke-filled room. It’s where the old man works – he works at reading. And the girl wants to do the same. In the pause that follows, she stares at the ash on her father’s sleeves. She cannot see his mouth: his beard rubs it out. The gap between the two of them expands until she fancies that she can hear her mother ordering dinner, her sister sketching on the floor below. Meanwhile London is growing all around them. Beyond the cul-de-sac in which they live, horses pull omnibuses, their excrement steaming in the middle of the road. The girl is nine years old and she wants another book. She is nine years old and it will soon be the twentieth century.

Cut to 1914. The girl is now thirty-two. Like her father, she has become a reader and a writer. Her first novel is about to be published. But she is getting sicker and sicker. Tongues and mouths revolt her. She will not eat. A doctor recommends force-feeding. It’s as if she were a suffragette. The war is going badly – for everyone. In lucid moments the woman recalls her father and her mother. The way her mother used to tell her to remove the crumbs of food from her father’s beard. The way her father lent her books from his library.

Time passes.

The doctors know nothing. Her only hope is rest. Against the expectation of her husband and her family, the woman’s condition improves. Her husband makes a pact with her. She must eat her meals and drink a full glass of milk every day. She must live quietly. She must recognise that he means her no harm. Soon she begins another novel. Its plot feels

compromised. Perhaps it, too, is part of her rest cure. Then one day – in one fraction of a second – she glimpses a new way of writing. Suddenly her page is full of words and she has put them there herself. She flushes with excitement and a touch of fear.

Her husband enters. She conceals her emotion. She takes up her tired novel. She writes a quiet page. And she drinks her glass of milk.<sup>1</sup>

‘Gracious child, how you gobble’ (Woolf 1978: 27).

Leslie Stephen’s words to his daughter, the future Virginia Woolf, are crammed with implication. Books as food, reading as sustenance. But reading, also, as a form of bad manners. The OED tells us that to gobble is ‘to swallow hurriedly in large mouthfuls, especially in a noisy fashion’. The related word ‘gob’ means ‘a lump [...] of food, especially of raw, coarse, or fat meat’; it can also mean the mouth, or a mass of saliva. Gobbling implies greed; it’s incompatible with savouring fine cuisine. But gobbling also springs from hunger. It indicates a more visceral need than the pleasures of the table or the prescriptions of a doctor. Virginia Woolf’s medicinal glass of milk is dreary because it’s undesired; it’s like a set text that fails to excite the appetite. However, the books that she fed upon as a child – and that she turned against during her periods of madness – are another matter. Like Oliver Twist asking for more food, she is seeking primal nourishment when she stands before her father with her hands held out for yet another volume from his book-lined study.

Words and food go back a long way together: think of the Garden of Eden. When Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge they learn the meaning of good and evil; it is, among other things, a fall into linguistic understanding. This may be one reason why so many writers link reading, language, and food. At the end of the sixteenth century, Francis Bacon comments that ‘Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested: that is, some books are only to be read in parts; others to be read, but not curiously [carefully]; and some few to be read wholly and with diligence and attention’ (Bacon 1985: 209–10). This – from Bacon’s essay ‘Of Studies’ (1597) – imagines the most attentive form of reading as an oral exploration followed by ingestion; the book and its reader become one. A hundred and fifty years later, *Tom Jones* (1749) begins with an ‘Introduction to the Work, or Bill of Fare to the Feast’, in which Henry Fielding remarks that if you go to someone’s house for dinner you have to be polite even if the food is ‘utterly disagreeable’. However, ‘Men who pay for what they eat’ in a public house will be forthright in their condemnation ‘if every Thing is not agreeable to their Taste’. To

head off such unpleasantness, Fielding provides a menu ‘which all Persons may peruse at their first Entrance’ so that they can either stay and enjoy ‘what is provided for them’ or else depart to an inn ‘better accommodated to their Taste’. The sole provision of Fielding’s public house is ‘HUMAN NATURE’, a dish which he says is ‘as difficult to be met with in Authors, as the *Bayonne* Ham or *Bologna* Sausage is to be found in the Shops’ (Fielding 1973: 25–6; emphasis in the original).

I will provide my own ‘Bill of Fare’ towards the end of this introductory chapter: my book will offer religious icons, computer gaming, and post-modern embroidery, if not Bayonne ham. First, though, I want to explore what it means to equate reading words with eating food. By tracing how the metaphor is used by a diverse group of authors, this chapter will argue for reading’s physicality, its relation both to our bodies and to the material world of which we are a part. This is not a rejection of reading’s imaginative and intellectual functions or its role in shaping interiority. Instead, I want to think about how reading, by its nature, can mobilise the entire being. Crossing between the boundaries and splits that characterise both the individual and society, reading has much to tell us about our imagined relation to the outer world, and the outer world’s impact on our inner selves. It is a forcefield in which numerous domains overlap and are altered by each other; these include the linguistic, the bodily, the intellectual, the social, the psychological, the technological, and the emotional. I will revisit many of these areas in the course of this book but it feels appropriate to start in the mouth, a place where words and food meet.

In ‘Of Studies’ Bacon claims that there is no ‘impediment in the wit’ that may not be ‘wrought out by fit [suitable] studies, like as diseases of the body may have appropriate exercises’. As a result, ‘every defect of the mind may have a special receipt’ (Bacon 1985: 210); in other words, every mental deficiency can be addressed by a particular course of reading. In Bacon’s time ‘receipt’ could indicate either a medical prescription or a culinary concoction; indeed the two meanings blur into each other and the latter usage survives, residually, as an upper-class alternative to ‘recipe’. So reading is a medical intervention, a cure for whatever the mind is lacking, but it can also be part of one’s everyday diet. Bacon’s usage is newly apposite given twenty-first-century medicine’s attention to books as a cure for psychological distress. In truth, though, writers have never stopped linking reading to various forms of oral consumption, whether these be witches’ brews, health-giving salads, or decadent blow-outs.

As with eating, however, there are protocols to be observed. Having been a youthful gobbler, Virginia Woolf turns in adulthood to a more

contemplative savouring of words. In ‘How Should One Read a Book?’ (1932) she writes that although we ‘learn through feeling’ we should ‘train our taste’ in reading until we can ‘make it submit to some control’. Then, when our taste has ‘fed greedily and lavishly upon books of all sorts’, we shall find that it is ‘not so greedy, it is more reflective’ (Woolf 1986: 268).<sup>2</sup> This is a recurring theme in commentaries on reading. For Woolf, as for many other critics, initial tastes have to be refined; excessive feeding is encouraged only so that you can mortify the very urges that you have previously been indulging. Woolf’s need to make her taste ‘submit’ to ‘control’ reveals nervousness about the strange alliances which reading can produce and an anxiety, too, about the bodily dimensions of reading. Woolf’s refusal, when insane, to ingest either food or words suggests a wish to discipline the body by depriving it of the sustenance it craves.

The US poet Frank Bidart explores this territory in two extraordinary works inspired by Ellen West, a woman with a severe eating disorder, who was treated in the early 1920s by the psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger. (The name ‘Ellen West’ is Binswanger’s invention but the case study is genuine.)<sup>3</sup> In ‘Ellen West’ (1977) Bidart alternates Ellen’s re-constructed voice with that of her doctor. Bidart shows Ellen as an attentive reader who also writes poetry but whose engagement with language is compromised by her troubled relationship to food. At one point Ellen considers the rumour that Maria Callas had eaten a tapeworm in order to transform her body shape; Ellen identifies with the singer’s metamorphosis even though Callas’s dramatic weight loss was widely believed to have caused the premature decline of her voice, a deterioration that Ellen vividly describes.<sup>4</sup> Another section of the poem follows Ellen’s response to a beautiful couple whom she watches while she is reading alone in a restaurant. Initially drawn to them, she is disgusted when they start putting forkfuls of food into each other’s mouth, a gesture that she equates with having sex. (‘I knew what they were. I knew they slept together.’)

Ellen does not deprive herself of food; rather, she combines compulsive eating with an excessive use of laxatives. Bidart juxtaposes these habits with her immersion in language: she reads Goethe’s *Faust*, noting in her diary that ‘art is the “mutual permeation” of the “world of the body” and the “world of the spirit”’ (Bidart 1977: 34). She comes to believe, however, that her own poems are ‘weak – without skill or perseverance; only managing to beat their wings softly’. Shortly after this, Ellen’s doctor reports that she has ‘for the first time in years, stopped writing poetry’; a month later she is released from hospital, her team having decided there is nothing more that they can do for her. Three days after coming home she eats so much

at lunchtime that ‘for the first time in thirteen years’ she ‘is satisfied by her food’; she has ‘chocolate creams and Easter eggs’ with her afternoon coffee, takes a walk with her husband, ‘reads poems, listens to recordings’ and ‘is in a positively festive mood’. Then, having written farewell letters in the evening, she takes a fatal dose of poison. Bidart implies that Ellen might not have killed herself if she had felt that her poetry was strong enough to produce the ‘mutual permeation’ of ‘the body’ and ‘the spirit’ that she looks for in high culture. Without the power to make her own art, she takes a cue from her reading of Goethe, whose Faust is saved because he manages to find enough joy in a single moment to redeem his soul. Ellen pursues an earthbound version of this resolution by finally allowing herself to embrace the rapture of having a body, knowing that she will end her life at the close of the day.

‘Mutual permeation’ is a curious term. It suggests a coming together of mind and body in which both are transformed but neither is obliterated. This seems to echo Ellen’s wish to gratify bodily sensations while simultaneously seeking the body’s dissolution. There are various ways in which these paradoxical wishes might be achieved, notably through sex and religion, but Bidart’s solution is linguistic. Metaphor offers a transcendence that the flesh cannot achieve, and reading is a way of engaging creatively with lives other than one’s own – and thus of losing one’s selfhood in someone else’s being. Revisiting the case in his 2013 poem ‘Writing “Ellen West”’, Bidart reveals that identifying with Ellen’s voice was an ‘exorcism’ in which he, by taking on her mental and physical identity, could ‘survive her’. In articulating Ellen’s attraction to/repulsion from her physicality, Bidart is able to come to his own accommodation with what he calls ‘the war between the mind and the body’. Writing of himself in the third person, Bidart describes how he needed to ‘enter her skin’ so that he could ‘make her other and expel her’. In doing so – and this is crucial to my point about language and food – Bidart sees himself ‘eating the ground of Western thought, the “mind-body” problem’ (Bidart 2013: 4, 7–8). When Bidart reads Ellen’s words, he is able to imagine himself as her. But more than that, his reading of her lets him use her as a proxy through which he can ‘eat’ up the philosophical issue that defines Western culture and of which Ellen is both a product and a symbol. As ‘Writing “Ellen West”’ makes clear, ‘Ellen West’ was a crucial stage in clarifying Bidart’s own take on the “mind-body” problem’, including his conflicted relation to gay desire. (Significantly, Bidart uses ‘Ellen West’ as the final piece in a volume that he titles *The Book of the Body*.)

These two poems, written almost forty years apart, cry out to be read

in corporeal terms, and not only because they are thematically concerned with physicality. They represent an allegory of verbal incorporation – a story of what can happen when language is taken *into* the body.<sup>5</sup> But although Bidart's poems explore this territory with a rare degree of philosophical toughness, metaphors of linguistic incorporation abound in literary and popular culture. If 'Ellen West' charts an embrace of, and a recoil from, the interwoven sensualities of words, voice, and food, then Isabel Allende's *Aphrodite: A Memoir of the Senses* (1998) provides a more easily assimilated mixture of autobiography, recipes, and erotic story-telling. As its title implies, Allende's memoir explores the very thing that drives Ellen West to suicide: the polymorphous perversity of mouths that are capable of forming and savouring words, tongues, gobbets of food, and other people's bodies. In one anecdote, Allende describes going to a 'celebrated guru' who tells her to chew a 'large rosy grape' for twenty minutes so that she can learn to respect what she is eating. At the end of the exercise Allende finds that she knows the fruit intimately even though she normally cannot bear to have anything in her mouth for more than a few moments. Or rather, as she explains somewhat archly, she doesn't like keeping *food* in her mouth but has 'more patience with other things' (Allende 1998: 68). The anecdote is typical of a book that requires its reader to taste all sorts of fruits, especially forbidden ones; indeed Allende includes a section with that very name.<sup>6</sup>

Allende is far from being the only internationally renowned literary artist to have written a cookbook. Maya Angelou's *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table: A Lifetime of Memories with Recipes* (2004) provides a compelling mix of autobiography, social history, and instruction. In a pattern that is beginning to seem familiar, however, Angelou followed this exuberant publication with a diet book that counselled portion control as the key to weight loss (Angelou 2010). In a different vein, Len Deighton, author of the Harry Palmer spy series, created a series of cookstrips for *The Observer* in the 1960s; one of these is pinned up in the hero's kitchen in the 1965 film of *The IPCRESS File* when Harry (played by Michael Caine) seduces a fellow spy over a tin of champignons. Different again is Molly Keane's *Nursery Cooking* (1985) which conjures the lost world of the Anglo-Irish gentry through their eating preferences. The book echoes Keane's fiction, which often uses food to reveal the cruelty and wilful blindness of the landed classes. The elderly hero of *Time after Time* (1983) is one of the dying breed who insist on saying 'receipt' for 'recipe' while the heroine of *Good Behaviour* (1981) manages to kill her mother by force-feeding her rabbit mousse.

I could go on. But rather than multiplying examples of food in books (a subject that is all but inexhaustible) I want to press further at the notion of linguistic incorporation, the taking of words into the body. One of the reasons that food analogies abound in poetry and fiction is that words can be construed as a form of nutrition. Clearly, this frequently happens at the level of metaphor. But language and food are also mixed up, literally, in the mouth. Words are formed by the same parts of the body that begin the process of digestion, which may be why etiquette rulebooks require us to separate these activities. ('Don't eat with your mouth full.' 'Don't read at the table.') Such diktats can be compared to Woolf's wish to discipline her native greed for reading, or to Ellen West's revulsion at forks entering mouths in unsanctioned ways. Appetite, the craving that spurs the consumption of books, turns some people into such gluttons that they recoil from their voracity and decide that reading must be rationed and anatomised. But appetite is also a condition of life; it drives us to ingest the sustenance that we need to thrive. Isabel Allende breaks off from her aphrodisiac recipes to comment that 'The poet and the baker are brothers in the essential task of nourishing the world' (Allende 1998: 127). In a different register, Adrienne Rich's essay collection *Blood, Bread and Poetry* (1987) argues that a healthy body politic needs art as well as food, and food as well as art. Moving outwards from the 'fragmentations [that] I suffer in myself', Rich notes that 'the majority of the world's illiterates are woman' and that she lives 'in a technologically advanced country where forty per cent of the people can barely read and twenty per cent are functionally illiterate'. Even so, because of language or its lack, 'we are all in this together', our world diminished by collective deprivations (Rich 1987: 186).

In 2013, almost thirty years after Rich wrote these words, statistics produced by the US Department of Education showed that 21 per cent of adults in the US had poor reading skills and 14 per cent were illiterate; meanwhile 70 per cent of the country's prison population were judged to have the reading skills of a ten-year-old, and 85 per cent of those passing through the juvenile court system were functionally illiterate. Black citizens were almost three times more likely to be illiterate than white citizens.<sup>7</sup> As every dictator knows, a population that cannot read or write, or whose access to language is controlled through censorship and surveillance, is a population with fewer choices, less representation in public discourse, and lower earning power. (By no coincidence, these circumstances also allow national resources to be concentrated in the hands of an elite few.) The 17 per cent of the world's population who, in 2016, were judged by UNESCO to be illiterate will have a lower life expectancy and a considerably lower

standard of living than their literate peers. These disadvantages are also experienced on a national level. High-earning and wealth-creating jobs require advanced reading and writing skills, and societies that lack a large concentration of literate citizens are disadvantaged within the global economy. Meanwhile, as Rich indicates, women remain especially vulnerable to educational deprivation. According to UNESCO, of the 775 million people without basic literacy, two-thirds are women (UNESCO 2017). When the Taliban shot Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani advocate for female learning (who was fifteen at the time of the attack), they were trying to destroy the very idea that women could be educated. Brutal though their message was, their target survived, and two years later Ms Yousafzai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. It is an inspiring and emblematic story that gives hope for the future. As with so many ills, however, the greatest threats to equality are ones that have been internalised by the very people who suffer most from them. More women have been rendered illiterate by socialisation and ideological conditioning than by Taliban marksmen, abhorrent though the latter are.

There is more at stake here than the earning power of a given individual or the viability of our globalised economy. Reading is also a gateway to pleasures, dreams, and ambitions; it sustains life by adding texture to it. These less tangible benefits cannot be measured via the reductive tests used to determine basic literacy but they are undoubtedly a spur to living. Just as palatable food tempts the sickly, so does reading feed the mind. Putting this into the language of Bidart's 'Ellen West', one could say that reading produces an everyday 'mutual permeation' of 'body' and 'spirit'. And it does so, not for complex metaphysical reasons (or not *only* for such reasons), but because it demonstrates that the physical and the mental are aspects of each other: neither can exist on its own.

It should be clear, from all this talk of food, that reading is bound up with the body, and with the body's interactions with the material world, including our fundamental need for nourishment. The title of this introduction – 'Reading, incorporated' – registers my belief that reading is a sensory experience as well as an analytic activity. This is borne out in multiple ways, even though many of them are too naturalised for us to be aware of them. Blinking eyes scan printed letters. A thumb holds open a place in a book. Pages are turned and lines murmured under the breath. A fingertip scrolls up and down a computer touchscreen. An adult leaps around a bedroom, acting out the words they are reading to a child. A commuter listens to a talking book. Fast-moving digits sweep across cells of braille. A singer



converts words into melody. A hospital visitor reads the newspaper to a sick friend.

Each of these activities engages one or more senses, and the brain that processes the resultant messages is itself a physical organ. Furthermore, our emotional and psychic responses are played out upon the skin, the stomach, the mouth, and the genitals. Reading has numerous physical manifestations, including grumbling stomachs and salivating mouths, blushes, laughter, headaches, moving lips, clenched fists, and sexual arousal. An extreme instance would be Emily Dickinson's definition of poetry: 'If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry' (Dickinson 1971: 208; italics in the original). Then there is the test traditionally applied to Gothic novels: when reading it, did your hair stand on end? Or, in a more everyday context, consider the sick dread in the stomach produced by reading bills or certain kinds of work-related email.

If we acknowledge that reading has a somatic dimension, we can trace how bodily responses might inform our emotional and intellectual responses to written language. You do not have to be the archivist of a manuscript library to know that words affect us differently according to the physical form in which they are presented to us. A photocopy of a treasured love-letter will not have the same impact as the letter itself even though they bear the same words; the original includes information that the copy lacks, not least the lover's DNA. One document will be more visibly aged than the other. There will be storage folds, dust particles, perhaps a residue of perfume or aftershave. My point is not that the original is 'better' than the copy; it is that we cannot help experiencing the two documents in contrasting ways. Before our eyes focus on the words, we are already making buried or half-conscious judgements about the thickness of the paper, the crackle of the pages, the strength of the ink; and all these things will feed into our response to the words themselves. Or rather, there is no such thing as 'the words themselves'. Writing is always mediated by the physical and technological forms through which we encounter it, whether these be computer print-outs, vellum manuscripts, laptop screens, or the back of the envelope on which you scribbled your shopping list.

Another way of putting this would be to say that I conceive of reading in broadly phenomenological terms. That is, I am just as interested in how a text 'feels' to a reader as I am in what that reader believes the text to 'mean'. Interpretation is a key component of reading and I do not want to abandon it. However, interpretation is only one of the means by which we process texts, and it is probably not the dominant one, especially outside of specialised contexts such as a courtroom or a university seminar. The

fruits of reading are often presented in discrete forms – a legal report that synthesises previous judgements on a difficult case, a comment on an online forum, a scholarly monograph – but these ‘outputs’ (to use a particularly inadequate piece of jargon) are backed by the unconfessed or unperceived circumstances in which they were executed. In other words, the ‘output’ is a tangible product of the otherwise unremarked activity going on within the brain and the rest of the body. By extension, reading (and the thoughts we have about reading) are embedded within the larger material structures of our lives. These physical contexts include the spaces in which we read (bedrooms, libraries, cafes, pubs) and the people who impinge on us while we are doing so. The eyes that scan a government bill in a parliamentary office might be blindfolded a few hours later by a dominatrix in a dungeon. The hands that hold open a rare first edition could be the same hands that stroke a baby goat in a petting zoo or that chop up limes while making margaritas for a friend.

The moral of this particular story is that reading mobilises an intensely symbiotic relationship between eyes, hands, brain, nose, ears, skin, blood, sex organs, lips, and tongue. But while the workings of our senses have remained fairly stable over the last twenty thousand years, the same is not true of the technologies through which we process written language. Reading a paperback novel, reading a computer screen, reading music, reading a roll of parchment, reading braille, reading layers of graffiti on a public monument, reading hieroglyphics on a tomb: although we use the same verb to describe these pastimes, they engage different senses and require mental processes that are adapted to particular physical circumstances. Inevitably, the technologies that govern these different forms of reading are themselves bound into social, material, and intellectual history. The martial carvings on Trajan’s Column are not the same as the print marks in a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*; the texts serve different cultural functions and make contrasting assumptions about their readerships. This in turn reveals that the history of reading is also, and inescapably, a history of how bodies occupy space. A victory column is a singular object that announces its message in a specific public location while the novel is a reproducible form that can be carried by a multitude of readers wherever they wish.

Construing reading as a set of socio-historical practices helps us recognise that our own reading rituals are located in a particular time and place. The final sections of this book will explore how new technologies are transforming the reading experience; I argue, throughout the book, that the way we read is itself a force for change: if reading habits alter decisively,

other social and educational formations may also shift, for better or worse. For this reason, it is important to stress that although the history of reading overlaps with the history of the book, these things are not coterminous. Reading existed for hundreds of thousands of years before humans started folding and binding sheets of writing into books, and reading would continue even if everyone in the world suddenly and irrevocably switched to using electronic screens. Indeed the tendency for affluent users to have multiple phones and computers means that there is more reading in the world now than at any point in the past. And although our forebears would struggle to recognise some of the writing genres of the twenty-first century, there are surprising continuities between modern screens and ancient manuscripts, not least in the ways in which they use images.

Given its mutability, I prefer to view the thing that we call ‘reading’ as a set of activities, some of which overlap and others of which run parallel. It is not just that reading alters over time, although that is certainly so. Within any given historical moment, habits and expectations will also vary according to who is reading, what they are reading, and why they are reading it. In other words reading is contextual: its purposes (and the meanings that it produces) change according to the cultural, historical, and ideological frameworks within which it takes place. A devout Christian is likely to respond differently to the Bible and to a copy of Barbra Streisand’s memoirs; after all, only one of them is the word of God. But if the Christian sat down to read scripture with a Jewish friend, would they see the same text when they looked at the Book of Genesis? Although they start at the same place, the Jewish and Christian scriptures name and understand their contents in divergent ways. Since Judaism does not recognise Jesus as divine, there is no Jewish concept of ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Testaments – there is simply the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible), which has around forty fewer books than the Christian Bible. Given this – and factoring in questions of translation and of authorised versus non-authorised texts – can my Jewish and Christian friends be said to be reading the same words when they open their respective holy books?

This brings me to the second reason why I have called this introduction ‘Reading, incorporated’. In the language of governance, a ‘corporation’ is a group of people who have been granted the right to be recognised as a single entity under the law; the process by which they are brought into being is called ‘incorporation’. Deriving from ‘corparare’ (the Latin for ‘to embody’) corporations can be religious organisations, charities, municipal groups, government agencies, QUANGOs, think tanks, and so on; a

corporation is not necessarily a for-profit business, although many are. Then there are ‘corporate interests’ and a ‘corporate mentality’, phrases that we use to describe financial protectionism and economically motivated groupthink. In one way or another, all these usages exploit the fact that in Latin ‘corpus’ indicates both an individual body and a mass of people who are recognised as having a collective identity. (Compare the English term ‘body politic’.) But ‘corpus’ is also a synonym for a writer’s works: it denotes the linguistic remains that survive after the authorial flesh-and-blood has been buried or burnt.

If we put these bodily terms into dialogue with each other (or rather, if we attend to the ways in which they are already implicated in each other) certain patterns become observable. Specifically, we begin to see that readership is bound up in both literal and institutional forms of incorporation. Take literary estates. A financially successful writer leaves a tangle of intellectual property that will go on benefitting the author’s heirs for as long as the work is in copyright. This authorial corpus has to be protected, usually by the dead writer’s agents and publishers, who will have their own incentives for guarding the writer’s posthumous earning power. These days the agents and publishers will probably be part of a larger business that can market lucrative writers across a variety of countries and media, sometimes even commissioning ‘official’ spin-offs and sequels. Other estates make a priority of safeguarding the artistic integrity of the literary remains, and some are parsimonious in granting reproduction rights. Samuel Beckett’s representatives are famously rigorous in holding directors to the playwright’s original vision: Deborah Warner’s 1994 production of *Footfalls* was forbidden from fulfilling a scheduled engagement in Paris after its initial London run deviated from the stage directions specified in Beckett’s text (Gussow 1994).

This last example has a resonance that goes beyond its immediate context. It constitutes a parable in which one body (the author’s) posthumously controls the workings of another body (the actor’s) through the operations of a third body (the estate, with its legal authority to interpret and enforce Beckett’s perceived wishes). Whatever you think of the decision, the chain of command is *almost* as literal as the one that Lucky and Pozzo demonstrate in *Waiting for Godot*: when Pozzo says dance, Lucky dances. Happily, the relations between readers, authors, and texts are a good deal looser than this. Unlike stage directors working with copyright texts, readers have the power to throw books away, to disagree with them, to deface them, to talk back to them, to cherish them until their covers fall off, to denounce them in a public place, to laugh and cry in unexpected

places, and to read them against the grain. If I am lying on my bed perusing a copy of *Footfalls*, the Beckett estate cannot stop me from picturing the lead character taking twenty steps rather than the nine stipulated in the script.<sup>8</sup> That said, I may feel self-conscious about transgressing Beckett's wishes, and even though literary estates have no direct control over a reader's imagination, some exert such a high degree of vigilance that their operations begin to resemble a vanguard action against the very idea of readerly autonomy.

With their mixture of linguistic, legal, and financial imperatives, literary estates offer an especially vivid instance of literary incorporation. But this is just a small part of what the term can denote. However culturally or economically successful a given writer might be, their work depends on platforms that are larger than they are. This is true both for authors in the conventional sense and for anyone who has ever written an email, contributed to an online discussion, or sent a letter in the post. As media conglomerates buy up smaller-scale publishing houses, multinational technology companies such as Microsoft, Google, Facebook, and Apple exert an almost unimaginable level of control over written language. They do this, not through censorship, but by providing the platforms on which innumerable acts of reading and writing take place. The genres of the early twenty-first century (tweets, status updates, blog posts) are only possible because of the technologies that produced them, and the resulting writing templates are themselves corporate products. This has major implications for how we conduct journalism, artistic creation, and political activism. Is it possible to think beyond the forms that corporate technology has created? Are communications that occur within those forms necessarily constrained by their origins? But although the scale and ubiquity of these platforms is new, the underlying structural issues are as old as writing itself. One could make comparable comments about how journalese emerged as a by-product of mass circulation newspapers, about the editorial habits of old-style publishing houses, or about the effect on the book trade of government restrictions on paper use during the Second World War; indeed it is a pretty safe bet that the quality of the clay tablet supply was an issue in ancient Babylon.

Reading has always been subject to state censorship and to blasphemy and heresy laws; my point is that these targeted controls exist alongside more amorphous cultural and commercial factors. The latter are so naturalised that we are barely aware of them but their impact may be all the greater for this reason. Just as we cannot read a love letter without registering its physical presence, it is impossible to buy a new novel without being

affected by the way in which it has been framed by its publisher. The cover image, the colour of the packaging, the advance praise (preferably from established writers occupying the same market niche), the author photo (including the fact that there almost always *is* such a photograph), even the precise location of the book within the store: all of these material factors will have been determined, at least in part, by the publicity department and by the size of the advertising budget that the publisher has allocated to the book.

There is a coming together, here, between the two kinds of incorporation that I have been discussing. When we start reading a book we are not only taking in the writer's words, we are also being touched by a set of narratives that have been calibrated by a publisher or by an online writing platform. Reading can never be a wholly individual act; it always takes place within institutional and ideological frameworks. Although these contexts are not necessarily malign, they undermine the widespread and understandable assumption that reading is private simply because we often do it behind closed doors. ('Privacy' is itself an ideological concept, of course.) Many of us will have learnt to read in schools that display national flags or religious symbols; our education will have been shaped by government-regulated exams or a national curriculum; and the place where literacy is most likely to be stalled or promoted, the family, is one of the most monitored, politicised, and over-determined units in society. In each of these instances we are imbibing more than just words on a page; we are also being exposed to worldviews, to ways of being, to cultural and political stories. When our bodies process written language, and when that language makes us laugh, cry, or blush, we are also encountering the history of how language has been used – and continues to be used – as a way of influencing people. There is nothing inherently sinister about this dynamic; after all, books have to persuade their readers to go on reading, and a book that does not want to influence the reader in this most basic of regards is a book that has no reason to exist. But, just as education can be a force for ill as well as good, language's power is not always benign.

In analysing the institutional and ideological factors that impact on reading, we have to consider words as part of a larger frameworks of signs, not all of which are verbal. These ideological frames are not deterministic: they cannot make us dance, as if at Pozzo's command. But nor are they neutral. They are part of the information that texts contain, and they are related, in turn, to larger political and cultural narratives. An obvious example would be the gender stereotyping that leads certain kinds of fiction to be marketed with pink covers and sparkly cupcakes, or to be labelled as

‘chick lit’, ‘mum’s lit’ or ‘clit lit’. In such cases, advertising does not merely draw on particular constructions of femininity, it helps to form them. Individual citizens may or may not embrace these versions of themselves, but whatever their stance, they are being addressed as if they were a particular kind of person. In Louis Althusser’s terms, book covers interpellate us as prospective readers and, in doing so, they position us within ideology whether we like it or not.

Ideology is the ultimate instance of incorporation because, as Althusser shows, we are formed as ideological beings even before we are born. From their conception onwards, children are ‘expected’ in ways that extend far beyond their due date; for example their parents will have sets of wishes and assumptions on the basis of the possible gender of the infant, their place in the larger family structure, and so on (Althusser 1971: 164–5). Like the simulated reality that gives its name to the Wachowskis’ 1999 film *The Matrix*, ideology is everywhere even if we cannot see it. As a result, it affects both the shape of what we read and the ways in which we read it. I remember being disconcerted, as a first-year undergraduate, when I learnt that the Protestant Bible excludes several books that are included in the Catholic Bible. Having been educated in Northern Ireland’s religiously segregated school system during the Troubles, I was hyper-aware of differences over doctrine and the sacraments but I genuinely did not know that the Christian churches also diverged over the Bible’s composition. Even more shocking was the realisation that the Bible was an unstable text and not the revealed truth that I had always taken it to be. I now know that Christian scholars have been arguing about the integrity of scriptural sources for two thousand years, and that Jewish theologians were engaged in the same activity hundreds of years before the birth of Christ.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, theological enquiry has repercussions for lived identities. As sectarian cultures such as Northern Ireland demonstrate, one person’s religious truth is another person’s dangerous heresy. Throughout our world, hate crimes, war, and state violence continue to be pursued with reference to particular interpretations of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic holy texts. Meanwhile, there are controversies within individual Christian churches about what the Bible can or cannot tell us about issues such as the legitimacy of gay relationships and women priests.

With their different lengths and interpretive traditions, the Catholic and Protestant Bibles represent a graphic instance of ideology’s relationship to reading. Moreover, literary criticism’s development into an academic discipline is bound up with the history of Biblical studies. For centuries, hermeneutics primarily meant *scriptural* hermeneutics and the practice

was pursued with intensity (as you would expect, given that a heretical interpretation might doom you to hellfire). The fundamental purpose was to uncover how God's intentions were manifested in holy writings; it was only in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that scholars began to treat scriptural texts as historically bounded works rather than as timeless emanations of truth. (Study of the Greek and Latin classics was a useful precedent here.) Significantly, this was also the period when modern literary criticism started to take shape, with many commentators using techniques drawn from Biblical exegesis. For example, although Bishop Thomas Percy is best known for the ballad collection *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) – a work of historical reconstruction that hugely influenced English Romanticism – he also translated and wrote commentaries on Biblical texts.<sup>10</sup> Over time, increasingly probing forms of scriptural analysis led to doubts about Christianity itself, and – in a striking turnabout – secular forms of writing (especially the novel) began to assume a moral force of their own. Literary criticism's recurring search for the 'intentions' of an author can be seen, therefore, as a throwback to an earlier structure of analysis in which God was the author of us all and *his* book was the only one that counted.

But I am getting ahead of myself: I will have more to say about the history and protocols of literary criticism in chapters 3 to 5. For now, though, I just want to reiterate that Biblical analysis is an extreme instance of the more general premise that reading is inescapably ideological. My subsequent chapters will argue that academic criticism is tied up in assumptions about 'correct' and 'incorrect' reading habits, and that these assumptions are themselves located in particular social and historical circumstances. Staying with the development of literary criticism in the eighteenth century, and going back to my earlier comments on food, I want to bring these threads together with a case study in how institutional forms of literary incorporation deal, or fail to deal, with the body of the reader. To do this, I want to focus on the thing that we call 'taste'. Or rather the *things* that we call taste, given that the word denotes both our cultural preferences and one of our five senses.

Over the course of a lifetime we amass complex bundles of likes and dislikes that help make us who we are. We think of these preferences as highly individual and it is true that they are often contradictory and unconscious. But however idiosyncratic our predilections may be, we form them in the context of the tastes that prevail in the groups to which we belong. This is not deterministic: if you grow up in a family of opera buffs you do not



automatically love Wagner any more than a chiropodist's child becomes a foot fetishist. However, you *will* have a response to opera, whether positive or negative, simply because that is what you have been exposed to. In other words, taste is relational; it depends on what we encounter, what we are told about it, and whether or not it is valued by other people. An obvious instance is the way that accusations of 'good' or 'bad' taste involve projections about social class and artistic value. This tendency is already present in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when taste became a dominant aesthetic category; indeed if we look at some foundational texts, we find that class differentiations are integral to notions of taste.<sup>11</sup>

A prime example is Joseph Addison's 1712 essay on taste in *The Spectator*. Although Addison shifts quickly towards the 'mental taste, which is the subject of this paper', he starts by illustrating bodily taste via reference to an acquaintance whose palate was so subtle that he could distinguish between different blends of tea without seeing what they looked like. This immediately assumes an affluent sphere because, in Addison's time, tea was so expensive that it was kept under lock and key. Addison then provides a rather intimidating account of literary discrimination. Like his tea-drinking friend, a 'man of a fine taste in writing' will 'discern ... not only the general beauties and imperfections of an author' but will also discover 'the several ways of thinking and expressing himself' that distinguish that writer 'from all other authors'; this will include the ability to spot 'foreign infusions of thought and language, and the particular authors from whom they were borrowed'. Having moved from the physical palate to aesthetics, Addison now makes a further leap, this time from the aesthetic to the spiritual. A 'fine taste in writing' may be defined, he says, as '*that faculty of the soul, which discerns the beauties of an author with pleasure, and the imperfections with dislike*' (Addison 1970: 172–3; emphasis in the original).

Unlike later philosophical tradition (which tends to differentiate between moral and aesthetic judgements), eighteenth-century writers frequently use taste as an index of moral worth – hence Addison's 'faculty of the soul'. (We see the impact of this in Jane Austen's use of educated taste as a marker of civilised values and ethical integrity.) But the more it continues, the more rarefied and exclusionary Addison's essay becomes. If a man (and it always *is* a man) wants to know 'whether he is possessed of this faculty' Addison advises him to 'read over the celebrated works of antiquity, which have stood the test of so many different ages and countries, or those works among the moderns which have the sanction of the politer part of our contemporaries'. (Note the gate-keeping role played by the 'politer part'

of modern society.) When he reads these works, the would-be man of taste must ask himself if he is ‘delighted in an extraordinary manner’ – if he is, then he has taste. However, if ‘he finds a coldness and indifference in his thoughts, he ought to conclude, not (as is too usual among tasteless readers) that the author wants [lacks] those perfections which have been admired in him, but that he himself wants [lacks] the faculty of discovering them’ (Addison 1970: 173). In other words, you have either got it or you haven’t. And if you haven’t, then it is your fault and not the fault of the cultural sphere from which you have been excluded.

Having cast off anyone who fails to be thrilled by Livy, Sallust, and Tacitus, Addison concedes that there are ways of enlarging our taste providing that ‘the faculty’ has already, to some degree, been ‘born within us’. These methods include being ‘conversant among the writings of the most polite authors’ and conducting ‘conversations with men of a polite genius’ (Addison 1970: 173–4). In eighteenth-century discourse, ‘polite’ has aesthetic as well as social connotations: Johnson’s *Dictionary* defines it first as ‘glossy, smooth’ and then as ‘elegant of manners’. The same source describes ‘politeness’ as ‘elegance of manners; gentility; good breeding’ (Johnson 1755b: 388). These usages suggest a circular, mutually reinforcing relationship between ‘good taste’ and ‘polite society’. Good taste is exemplified by qualities of which the educated middle classes approve, and the middle classes are shown to have good taste by their approval of these qualities. Meanwhile, taste is ‘born within us’ and entry to ‘polite society’ is governed by ‘good breeding’. Faced with so much class-based gatekeeping, it is easy to suspect that polite society prefers ‘glossy, smooth’ art on the grounds that it is unlikely to scare the horses. (Or incite the servants.)

At this point, Addison makes a leap that is vital for my argument. Having used the vocabulary of politeness to secure cultural capital for an affluent elite, he introduces another category of gatekeepers: ‘It is likewise necessary for a man who would form to himself a finished taste of good writing, to be well versed in the works of the best critics both ancient and modern’. Unfortunately, some critics merely describe the formal attributes of literature, thus equipping tasteless people to pretend to be more cultured than they are, but the best critics ‘enter into the very spirit and soul of fine writing’ (Addison 1970: 174). Here we see the apparatus of the literary criticism beginning to form itself through organs such as the one in which Addison is writing. Exploiting the publishing boom of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Addison had co-founded *The Spectator* with his friend Richard Steele; Addison had already written for *The Tatler* and would later contribute to *The Guardian*, both of which were started by Steele. These

periodicals (which are not to be confused with their modern-day namesakes) were among the first literary-philosophical publications to appear in England; they were followed by Johnson's *The Rambler* and *The Idler*, by Eliza Haywood's *The Female Spectator*, and by general interest works, such as *The Gentleman's Magazine* and *The Lady's Magazine*, which often included conduct book-style advice about acceptable forms of social behaviour. The message of these publications is clear. The aristocracy, on their own, cannot be trusted to form taste, and the emerging middle classes require even more guidance if they are to avoid vulgarity. Hence the need for culture-defining commentators such as Addison, Steele, Johnson, and their successors.<sup>12</sup>

If I seem to be staking a lot on eighteenth-century theories of taste, it is worth remembering that Addison belonged to the Kit-Cat Club, a group of writers, wits, and politicians who, as Whigs, upheld the Protestant succession, the powers of parliament over the Crown, and (more amorphously) the values of trade and commerce over the landed interests of the Tory gentry. Other members of the group included the philosopher John Locke, the playwright and architect Sir John Vanbrugh, and the future Prime Minister Robert Walpole. Whig tendencies were expressed through culture as well as in public debate; one of the club's members, Richard Boyle, third Earl of Burlington, popularised neo-classical Palladian design as the default architecture of the new aristocracy. (It is mostly thanks to Burlington that so many eighteenth-century English country houses have symmetrical porticos, pillars, and pediments.) The Whig preference for neo-classicism achieved two things. First, it downgraded the Gothic and Jacobean styles associated with the Tory establishment; and second, it legitimated Whig property-owners by associating them with imperial Rome. Reading this context back onto Addison's essay on taste we find that of the seventeen writers mentioned, six are Roman, two are Greek, one is Spanish, and another eight are French neo-classicists; none are English. Through these choices, Addison announces where he stands in the culture wars of his time. And through his journalism, he disseminates the Whig worldview beyond his immediate coterie.

Considered more generally, the eighteenth-century preoccupation with taste also allows us to connect two themes that have run through this introduction – religion and the body. In a pre-Darwinian Christian context, the disastrous, defining moment of taste is when Eve eats the apple and persuades Adam to follow her into sin. Thereafter, greed is always suspect, as are signs that we might be over-relishing our sensory pleasures. Johnson's first definition for 'To Taste' is 'To try by the mouth to eat', which he

illustrates with a quote from *Paradise Lost*: ‘Of this tree we may not taste nor touch’. His fourth definition is ‘To relish intellectually; to approve’, which produces another Miltonic warning: ‘Thou, Adam, wilt taste no pleasure’ (Johnson 1755b: 907).<sup>13</sup> Although it is ironic that England’s most famous lexicographer should illustrate the verb ‘to taste’ with a warning *not* to taste, the usage neatly illustrates the post-Fall belief that linguistic and bodily pleasures will lead you into trouble. Viewed from this perspective, one can see a religious sub-text in the notion that citizens should attend thoughtfully to their tastes. The line that Johnson quotes also reminds the Christian reader that language and the body are implicated in each other. The punishments for eating the forbidden fruit (and thus gaining linguistic knowledge) include labour pains for Eve and death for both her and Adam. To over-indulge, or to taste the wrong things, is to doom oneself to mortality and pain.

These religious narratives co-exist with other kinds of bodily anxiety and help to explain why the eighteenth-century discourse on taste tends towards metaphorical abstraction rather than physical analysis. Although the period saw major advances in science and medicine, commentators were more interested in exploring visual perception than in thinking about the bodily roots of taste.<sup>14</sup> This follows the conventional Western ranking of senses and body parts, in which the eyes are more privileged than the mouth or the nose. Licking, tasting, and sniffing put you alongside pigs and dogs whereas the eyes connect you to legendarily clear-sighted creatures such as St John the Evangelist and the eagles of classical mythology. (Not for nothing does the long eighteenth century get called ‘the Enlightenment’.) This adds a further layer to how we should understand the ‘refined’ taste of Addison’s ‘polite’ society. Untrammelled consumption is vulgar as well as sinful. It reminds onlookers that eating is not only about savouring fine tastes, it is also – more basely – about satisfying bodily hunger. The poor might wolf their food down but the upper orders shouldn’t be too obvious about doing the same. And nor, by extension, should they indulge in what Virginia Woolf would later call ‘rubbish-reading’ (Woolf 2009: 577). Indeed there is a striking correspondence between Woolf’s terminology and the rhetoric with which twenty-first-century journalists demonise the perceived eating habits of the poor.

Putting all this together, we find that although taste is experienced as a personal preference, it is also implicated in cultural politics. And the latter are related to money, class, and governance. Ideology does not vitiate our cultural preferences, or render them inauthentic, but it does complicate attempts to enshrine any one ‘taste’ as superior to any other.

This has obvious consequences for how we think about literary criticism and reading. Even though our tastes are heterogeneous, unpredictable, and changeable, accounts of reading often spring from generalisations based on individual preferences and experiences. By virtue of what they have chosen to do with their lives, literary commentators tend to have had more bookish childhoods than the average person, a circumstance that ought to make critics and academics wary of extrapolating too much from their own lives or background. (I include myself in this warning.) Apart from anything else, people who have benefitted from high culture are likely to privilege such texts over other kinds of writing; and they are correspondingly perplexed when readers with different interests prefer Dan Brown, Danielle Steele, or Jackie Collins.

Yet it is entirely possible to respond with rapture and intelligence to books that lack conventional prestige. The heroine of Barbara Pym's *Excellent Women* (1952) confesses that she is more likely, come the dark night of the soul, to reach for a volume on Chinese cookery than a seventeenth-century religious autobiography (Pym 1980: 21, 159). Such preferences say much about the creative power of readerly attention. Cook books – or books about DIY, fossils, or film stars – can become privileged texts if that is what their readers want them to be. The newly married Sylvia Plath worries that ‘instead of studying Locke’ for her English degree she is immersed in *The Joy of Cooking* (1931–51), ‘reading it like a rare novel’. Recoiling from Locke, Plath finds herself in danger of ‘falling headfirst into a bowl of cookie batter’ (Plath 2000: 269). This version of the mind-body problem is distinctly gendered: *The Joy of Cooking* epitomises 1950s domestic housewifery, while Locke represents the overwhelmingly male canon of Western philosophy. Plath finds one option rebarbative while the other is all-too-dangerously seductive.

On the face of it, Plath's fascination with *The Joy of Cooking* seems hard to square with the projections of violent femininity found in her later poetry. However, although it is true that she repudiates the model offered by cookery manuals, those templates return with sarcastic force in many of her most famous works. The 1950s housewife who nearly drowns in a bowl of cookie batter ends up writing of a dead woman who leaves a ‘Pitcher of milk, now empty’ for her children and of a ‘Lady Lazarus’ who rises from the grave to eat men ‘like air’ (Plath 1981: 272 and 247). Indeed Plath's 1960s poems are stuffed with knives, fridges and cookers, with devouring mouths, with raw and cooked meats, with poisonous or sustaining liquids, with disastrous attempts at domestic entertaining, and with words and food employed as synonyms for each other.<sup>15</sup> These usages are super-charged

by Plath's earlier internalisations of culinary femininity; the poetry's power comes from the tenseness of the poet's exchange with her own past. Reading *The Joy of Cooking* as if it were 'a rare novel' is not a generic mistake, therefore, but a preparation for the poet that Plath will become.

Plath's long-simmering use of *The Joy of Cooking* illustrates a larger point. For me, what matters is not the literary or generic status of a given book but the quality of attention – and of *desire* – that the reader brings to the act of reading. If there is enough at stake in the encounter just about any piece of writing can trigger an exchange of energies that is more conventionally associated with reading canonical literature. This leads to another axiomatic proposition, namely that we can learn as much from the *process* of reading as from the *content* of the books we read. For reading to give us access to new fields of thought, there must be an interchange in which the reader internalises written language and written language addresses the reader. Thus, our understanding of a book's content is formed through something that is larger than both the reader and the text. And, by extension, the *experience* of reading can be an end in itself; it need not be directed towards a particular 'learning outcome'.

The chapters that follow will have more to say about taste's role in literary commentary. They will also return to the 'something larger' of reading, its capacity to create a field of being that is bigger than any single reader or writer. But before I give a preview of those chapters, I want to acknowledge that my own tastes and habits of thought have shaped the writing of this book. Given the enormity of the topic, I have chosen to focus the discussion around representative issues in the history and theory of reading. These topics – the common reader, close reading, reading and technology, and so on – are ones that speak to me in particular ways. I have used my notes and bibliography to sketch out some of the roads not taken, and I try to be clear about my methodology. For instance, although I have followed neurological research on reading, my focus is on ideology not science. For related reasons I do not seek to 'perform' particular kinds of critical reading. Instead, I am interested in how reading practices arise and what they tell us about culture and society. This means that although my work is informed by critical theory, I am more likely to ask how deconstruction affects conceptions of written language than I am to offer a deconstructive reading of a given text. The same is true of the way I use psychoanalysis and philosophy. While gathering insights from a variety of disciplines, my analysis remains broadly historicist – and I recognise that this is itself an ideological choice.<sup>16</sup>

Chapter 2 develops an argument that I have already broached, namely that readers (and the readings that they produce) vary according to time, place, and social grouping; thus, there is no such thing as a single ‘reading public’. The analysis is organised around images of reading from the late Medieval period and the twentieth century. As well as emphasising the visual aspects of reading, the images allow me to trace how technological developments have changed the physical interaction between readers and text. The reading scenes in chapter 2 provoke questions about gender, class, and literacy, and these are developed further in my third chapter, which takes ‘the common reader’ as a microcosm of humanist criticism. Although the figure is mostly associated with Dr Johnson and Virginia Woolf, I demonstrate that notions of ‘common reading’ have a long and shifting history. The chapter uses these changing constructions to comment on the evolution of professional literary criticism from the publishing boom of the seventeenth century through to the emergence of academic English studies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Rather than being an end in itself, this historical analysis asks what ‘the common reader’ tells us about cultural constructions of readership. A central argument will be that the figure is created by specialist readers as a foil for their professional practices; it is a cultural fantasy, not a representation of what ‘real’ readers feel or believe.

Chapter 4 extends my exploration of critical practice by studying one of modern academia’s founding methods: close reading. Moving from I. A. Richards and New Criticism to the UK’s National Curriculum, the chapter argues that close reading has become a constituent element of ‘good’ citizenship, hence the political uses to which reading is put in secondary school syllabuses. This insight is further explored in chapter 5, which considers how postmodernism and critical theory have affected how academic conceptualisations of reading. Centring on queer theory, the chapter asks if marginalised citizens are well-served by disruptive reading strategies, or if there is still something to be said for respectful close readings. My final chapter speculates on how reading will change as a result of emerging technologies. Making a virtue out of open-endedness, I use debates about screens to examine the larger question of the relationship between textuality, history, and identity; I extend this discussion in an afterword that considers reading’s place in the evolution of our digital futures.

Although the book as a whole covers a lot of historical and conceptual ground, it is not intended as a minute survey of literary-critical history. Instead it analyses the cultural work that certain reading formations perform. Why have they become prominent and what is at stake in the

ways that they construct readership? Inevitably, this means revisiting subjects that might be thought old-hat, but I have two reasons for going back to these earlier debates. First, the academic humanities are now so specialised that it is possible to be an expert in one area of study without having the slightest knowledge of what a colleague in one's own department is researching; increasingly, this is also true at undergraduate and postgraduate level because syllabuses can no longer offer a coherent version of what 'English' or 'Literary Studies' might consist of. In many ways this is a good thing – certainly in preference to a rigidly canonical approach – but it also means that it is often hard to see how we have got to where we are. Related to this, there is a pervasive sense, on both sides of the Atlantic, that the academic humanities are in a state of existential crisis, threatened not only by budgetary constraints, but also by a radical uncertainty about their social function. My book seeks to help the academy reflect on its own history, so that it might be better able to explain itself to the outside world. And, for me, the most important part of that history is the thing that stands at the heart of English: reading.

Of course, alongside these thematic preoccupations, this is also a book about the writers that I cite along the way, many of whom have forced their way into my text by virtue of their influence on my non-academic life. Virginia Woolf, Roland Barthes, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, and Charlotte Brontë are recurring presences and Jane Austen gets a chapter to herself. Then there are the paintings, films, internet sites, computer games, and art objects that are scattered throughout the analysis. It would be tempting to describe these as 'another story' except that they are *not* 'another story'. Rather, they contribute to the world in which 'literary' and 'popular' writing circulates, and they help to form the contexts in which reading occurs. As such, they have more relevance to contemporary reading habits than, say, Romantic poetry or Greek tragedy do. In any case, reading should not be contained by cultural gatekeeping. Tastes and manners vary and even in the most formal circles, a knife can be smeared with jam and a second scone bolted down when no one is looking. This is another way of saying that this book aims to be true to one of reading's greatest strengths, its openness to the excessive, the eclectic, and the unexpected.

Like the young Virginia Stephen, I intend to gobble.

### Notes

1 These scenes are reconstructed from Woolf 1985 and Bell 1976.

2 'How Should One Read a Book?' was originally published in 1926; I am



- quoting the revised version that appeared in *The Common Reader: Second Series* (1932).
- 3 An English translation of Binswanger's account of the case can be found in *Existence* (1958) edited by Rollo May et al.
  - 4 This is a deliberate anachronism: the historical Ellen West died when Callas was a toddler. As well as announcing the fictiveness of Bidart's reconstruction, the Callas passage encourages the reader to find an overlap between Ellen's voice and Bidart's, especially since Bidart's work often explores the techniques and emotional impact of singing.
  - 5 For a critical practice that goes further into questions of incorporation, see Abraham and Török 1986.
  - 6 The single most important predecessor of Allende's memoir is Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's *The Physiology of Taste* (1825), which invented the concept of gastronomic science. Brillat-Savarin lists six senses, the last one being 'the sense of *physical desire*' (Brillat-Savarin 1994: 29; emphasis in the original). Roland Barthes's 'Reading Brillat-Savarin' gives an account of the book's erotic physicality (Barthes 1986: 250–70).
  - 7 Hispanic citizens were judged even more likely to be illiterate but, insofar as the tests were conducted in English, the results only tell us about competence in the state's official language. Many of those tested will have been fully literate in Spanish. For up-to-date statistics on US education levels, see the National Center for Education Statistics website, which is supported by the US Department of Education: <https://nces.ed.gov/>.
  - 8 Beckett himself changed his mind: May originally took seven steps. By insisting on nine steps, the estate attempts to repress what the play's compositional history already admits: that words cannot be fixed in one spot.
  - 9 The word of God is surprisingly hard to pin down. The standard Protestant Bible has sixty-six books to the Roman Catholic version's seventy-three. The Eastern Orthodox churches add several more but differ between themselves as to which of the additions are authentic and which apocryphal.
  - 10 Other figures who combined theological and literary-historical interests include Thomas Gray and William Mason.
  - 11 As Fielding's introduction to *Tom Jones* shows, taste was a defining preoccupation for eighteenth-century commentators. As well as appearing in the philosophy of Shaftesbury, Hume, Burke, and others, it finds its way into some of the period's most famous poems, notably Alexander Pope's 'Essay on Criticism' (1711) and 'Epistle to Burlington' (1731). Then there are dramatic burlesques such as Samuel Foote's *Taste: A Comedy* (1720). All these use taste as a pivot for analysing culture and society. For an overview of the term's literary and philosophical uses, see Gigante 2005.
  - 12 *The Spectator* and its successors were the model for nineteenth-century journals such as *The Edinburgh Review*, *Blackwood's Magazine* and Dickens's *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*.

- 13 For the original context of these lines, see *Paradise Lost* 9:651 and 8:401–2. Noah Webster reproduces Johnson’s second citation (which is a misquotation) in his dictionary of American English.
- 14 Two days after his essay on taste, Addison published a piece about the imagination, the first line of which is ‘Our sight is the most perfect and most delightful of all of our senses’ (Addison 1970: 175). For a more visceral response to taste, we need to go to the society doctor, George Cheyne, who became a famous embodiment of what we would now call yo-yo dieting. As a young man, Cheyne grew ‘excessively *fat, short-breath’d, Lethargic and Listless*’ (Cheyne 1991: 326; emphasis in the original). Restricting himself to an intake of vegetables and milk, he regained his health, only to rise to thirty-two stone when he relaxed his regime. A re-application of his vegetarian intake led to renewed weight loss and, meantime, he produced books about diet and the nervous system. Cheyne’s autobiographical writings reveal a prodigious appetite yet even he has little to say about the processes by which we savour or desire food. Instead, he dwells compulsively on how he purged his body through emetics and laxatives. (His use of the latter anticipates Ellen West’s.) For more on Cheyne’s theories and life, see Roy Porter’s 1991 facsimile edition of *The English Malady* (1733).
- 15 See, for example, the sugar and honey in ‘Wintering’ (1962); the lamb roast in ‘Mary’s Song’ (1962); the stand-off between sweet tea and the blood jet of poetry in ‘Kindness’ (1963); the communion wafers in ‘Mystic’ (1963) and ‘Medusa’ (1962); the ghastly aphrodisiac foods of ‘Gigolo’ (1963); the golden apples of ‘Letter in November’ (1962); the parodic afternoon tea in ‘The Tour’ (1962); the kitchen hell of ‘Lesbos’ (1962); the refrigerator-smile in ‘An Appearance’ (1962); the mottled sausages that look like body parts in ‘Little Fugue’ (1962) – and, of course, the bloodsucking Germanic vampire in Plath’s most famous poem, ‘Daddy’ (1962).
- 16 The enormity of the topic also means that my work intersects with that of previous writers. Alongside the debts charted in my footnotes, I am conscious that there are also critics whom I do not discuss in detail but whose work has nonetheless influenced me; these include Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, and Mary Jacobus. Marcel Proust’s writings about reading are also an unseen presence throughout.