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## Reading: The State of the Discipline

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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**Reading**

The State of the Discipline

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When William James wanted to explain "the stupidity and injustice of our opinions, so far as they deal with

the significance of alien lives," the example that he chose was reading:

Take our dogs and ourselves, connected as we are by a tie more intimate than most ties in this world; and yet ... how insensible, each of us, to all that makes life significant for the other!—we to the rapture of bones under hedges, or smells of trees and lamp-posts, they to the delights of literature and art. As you sit reading the most moving romance you ever fell upon, what sort of a judge is your fox-terrier of your behaviour? With all his good will toward you, the nature of your conduct is absolutely excluded from his comprehension. To sit there like a senseless statue when you might be taking him to walk and throwing sticks for him to catch! What queer disease is this that comes over you every day, of holding things and staring at them for hours together, paralyzed of motion and vacant of all conscious life?<sup>1</sup>

James's example points to one of the central difficulties of a history of reading: how to analyze an activity that's too close for critical distance, and **[End Page 303]** perhaps for comfort. What's "alien" here is not simply the relation of readers to illiterates (human or canine), but also one reader's relation to another. Writers on reading have lamented its unknowability or savored its ineffability as far back as Wilkie Collins's 1858 essay "The Unknown Public." This is the assumption that book historians have come to combat, either in practice (by uncovering the physical gestures and material artifacts that can make one reader knowable to another), or in theory (by tracing the origins of a Cartesian dualism that severs reading from the hand and the voice).<sup>2</sup> For all the polemics that have shaped the field—about extensive reading, about technological determinism, about whether to determine the texts read by a particular demographic group or to define the audience reached by an individual text—historians seem united in the urge to contest James's characterization of reading as a literally "senseless" act.

This doesn't, however, imply any agreement about what the history of reading is. As David Hall has pointed out, different scholars have understood the term to encompass enterprises as various as the social history of education, the quantitative study of the distribution of printed matter, and the reception of texts or diffusion of ideas.<sup>3</sup> Reading means something different to literary critics (for whom it tends to feed either into case studies focused on the reception of particular texts or into theories of hermeneutics) than to historians (for whom it can become a subset of social or intellectual history). Among the former, reader response is now a field established enough to have its classics (Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984]), its historians (Elizabeth Freund, *The Return of the Reader: Reader-Response Criticism* [London: Methuen, 1987]), its anthologies (*The Reader in the Text*, edited by Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman [Princeton University Press, 1980], and *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, edited by Jane Tompkins [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980]), even its anthology-pieces (Stanley Fish's "Is There a Text in this Class?" or Robert Darnton's "First Steps Toward a History of Reading," in *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1990]). Yet reader response still looks less like a field than a battleground: its manifestations range from structuralist neologism to folksy case studies to mad scientism. (This last culminates in Victor Nell's *Lost in a Book* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988], which marries pieties about readerly pleasure with a report on readers' salivation rates, cardiovascular responses, and distinctly unpleasant-sounding electrogastrograms). Nor is an interest in reading confined to historicist literary...

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