

1. WRITING THE READER

“All writers overrate the impact of writing, or else they would choose another line of work.”

(Adam Mars Jones)

“When you read a book, you’re totally lost in your own private world, and society says that’s a good and wonderful thing. But if you play a [computer] game by yourself, it’s this weird, fucked-up socially damaging activity.”

(Douglas Coupland)

Writing about reading in the year 2014 may appear to be old-fashioned, but is at the same time excitingly topical. Reading today is often represented as a disappearing habit – as an obsolete practice that is no longer a commonplace part of a lifestyle dominated by short-term activities. At the same time, there seems to be a tacit consensus that this development is deplorable, since reading is assumed to be an activity that is valuable in itself – more valuable than other kinds of media consumption. As Leo Babauta, author of one of the US’s most popular self-help blogs, puts it: “We have no time to read anymore, mostly because we work too much, we overschedule our time, we’re on the Internet all the time (which does have some good reading, but can also suck our attention endlessly), and we watch too much TV.”¹ ‘Reading’ here evokes specific associations: a longer period of sustained attention and concentration; an interaction with ‘old’ media, that is with books as material objects; the pursuit of a traditional and culturally valued activity.

In fact, the activity Babauta so enthusiastically advocates is, more specifically, novel reading, as he makes explicit in the next paragraph: “Reading a good book is one of my favorite things in the world. A novel is a time machine, a worm-hole to different dimensions, a special magic that puts you into the minds and bodies of fascinating people.” Babauta does not dwell on the irony inherent in the circumstance that he, one of the icons of the blogosphere, thus suggests a clear qualitative distinction between the kind of activity pursued by a user of new media – also, after all, often first and foremost a reader – and that of a fiction lover who picks up a book. Evidently he can rely on a consensus among his audience that there is a hierarchy of different types of reading, and that the perusal of novels deserves a

¹ Leo Babauta on *Zen Habits*, “How to Read More: A Lover’s Guide”, posted October 3, 2011. *Zen Habits*, according to Wikipedia, is “one of the most visited blogs on the internet,” with currently (January 2014) about 240,000 subscribers and many more visitors. *Time Magazine* named it one of the world’s best blogs in both 2009 and 2010.

special status – even if the members of this audience themselves, possibly, never actually get around to engaging in it.

Seen from a diachronic perspective, such an evaluation of novel reading is anything but a matter of course. As any historian of the novel will readily point out, the novel as a genre was for a long time in the bull's eye of criticism on media consumption and triggered anxieties very similar to those that today centre on the use of TV, the internet or computer games. Its detractors attacked it for fostering “reading fever”,² for encouraging idleness, for inciting violent behaviour,³ for draining its recipients' ability to concentrate,⁴ and of course for stimulating sexual desire.⁵ At the same time, critics in the eighteenth century laid the foundations for an understanding of fictional literature as having the potential for exerting a beneficial influence on the development of the individual. If viewed mainly as continuing a religious tradition of edification through moral examples, or in the wake of Enlightenment thought as an integral part of a humanist education, novel reading was intimately tied to larger discourses on psycho-social development.⁶

One cultural arena where differing views on the dangers and benefits of novel reading were and still are negotiated in particularly visible ways is the novel itself. It is hardly a coincidence that the protagonist of a work that has often been regarded as a prototype of the European novel is himself a reader: Don Quijote, the Spanish gentleman who has read so many books about chivalry and romance that he perceives himself as a knight.⁷ The history of the novel contains many examples of Quijote's heirs, characters whose reading changes their lives in more or less fatal ways. Such a choice of subject matter might seem like a self-defeating strategy – Patrick Brantlinger, for example, has seen the recurring interest in the theme as a sign that the novel as a genre is “born with an inferiority complex” (1998: 3):

[T]he condemnation of novels by novelists characterizes the genre throughout its history. The inscription of anti-novel attitudes within novels is so common that it can be understood as a defining feature of the genre; accordingly, any fictional narrative

² For a discussion of the “Lesefieber” debates, see Schenda (1977: 507-66); Littau (2006: 39-45).

³ See e.g. Stang (1959: 75-6); Brantlinger (1998: 142-3).

⁴ See e.g. Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help*, 1897 [1859].

⁵ See e.g. John Paul Hunter (1977: 466-68).

⁶ An exemplary discussion of discourses on the benefits of early eighteenth-century leisure reading – of which the novel became an important staple in the course of the eighteenth century – can be found in Blaicher (1994). He discusses the development of ideas on reading as a means of personal improvement in the work of John Locke, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele.

⁷ Michail Bakhtin and George Lukacs, to name two of the most prominent voices in novel theory, have both regarded Don Quijote as an influential model for the novel as a genre (see Finch/Allen 1999: 771). See also e.g. Lionel Trilling's proclamation that “all prose fiction is a variation on the theme of *Don Quijote*”, quoted in Armas Wilson (1999: ix), or Daniel Burt's characterization of Cervantes' novel as “the originator of the novel's hybrid form” (2004: 10).

which does not somehow criticize, parody, belittle, or otherwise deconstruct itself is probably not a novel. (Brantlinger 1998: 2)

However, the interest in the dangers of reading is, as I argue in this study, only one side of the coin; its reverse is the hope invested in the benefits of good reading. What the representation of fiction's life-changing impact suggests is, first and foremost, the central cultural importance of what could also be regarded as a pleasant, but marginal pastime. With *Don Quijote* the novel has started to represent itself as a considerable influence on European cultural history. The figure of the obsessive reader and his heirs serves to participate in the conversation about the hopes and fears connected with fictional writing, but it is also an instrument of self-promotion.

In the following chapters, I present case studies of English novels which focus on fictional readers in order to reflect on the status and evaluation of the novel as a genre at different points in its development. More specifically, they focus on readers whose sense of reality, like Don Quijote's, is dramatically changed – one might even say, warped – by their avid interest in fictional narrative. I call these texts 'quixotic novels' (see section 1.2), in order to highlight their self-conscious participation in a genre-specific tradition of reflections about reading.⁸ Quixotic novels 'write readers' in several senses. They present extraordinary reading experiences at the level of the story. They pick up, take sides in, complicate or modify ongoing contemporary debates about media consumption. Moreover, I also treat these as paradigmatic cases of how novels write a readership on the level of the discourse, or, more specifically, at the level of *narration* (in Gérard Genette's sense).⁹ The story is related in a certain way; readers may be addressed, certain information on the part of the audience may be presupposed, characters' actions may be framed in evaluative terms and so on. In such ways, a novel projects more or less specific notions of an audience. For example, when a passage gives a detailed commentary on the moral failings of a protagonist who reads a book, this can be interpreted not only as a direct commentary on reading practices at the level of the story. It

⁸ In English, two alternate spellings can be found for Cervantes' novel and protagonist: 'Quixote' and 'Quijote'. 'Quixote' is the variant that has been used most widely through the last centuries, though the recent trend is to restore the original Spanish spelling 'Quijote' (as in the translation by Burton Raffel from 1995 which is reproduced in the Norton Critical edition used in this study). In my own study, I employ the Spanish spelling 'Quijote' when referring to Cervantes' work or original character, and the English variant 'Quixote' – which, according to the OED, has found its way into the English language in coinages such as 'quixotic', 'quixotish', 'quixotism' and 'quixotry' – when referring to the later tradition, i.e. the type or typical features represented by this character, or his literary heirs.

⁹ The story-discourse distinction (see especially Chatman 1978) is a complex and controversial narratological issue. I do not wish to participate in the theoretical debate surrounding it, but employ it as a heuristic distinction to roughly distinguish different aspects of the texts I am interested in. In my usage I follow the systematic suggestion by Monika Fludernik (2006: 10) to subsume Genette's *narration* and *discours* under the heading of 'discourse'.

might also be interpreted as the suggestion that the book's actual reader should be interested in such moral evaluations, and that he or she is cast in the position of someone who needs to be educated about them (which, in effect, can then be seen to imply that moral education is one of the purposes of fictional texts).¹⁰

The novels I examine in my case studies reflect the changing status of the novel as a genre over the course of more than 250 years – from its early establishment as a new format of writing to its current role as a revered cultural classic. They use the quixotic figure of the obsessive reader to reflect on the effects and purposes of fictional reading in general, but also more specifically on the particular position of their own particular mode of writing at a specific point in history. In so doing, they also centrally participate in the novel genre's self-definition and continual self-reinvention.

Each of my case studies concentrates very closely on one novel, dissecting in detail how the work reflects contemporary concerns and discussions about reading. This does not mean, however, that I regard these works as stand-alone phenomena. On the contrary: my aim is to show how each of these novels works as a microcosm that is intricately connected with larger, also interlocking contexts: how it incorporates, condenses, reflects on specific other fictional and nonfictional works, larger contemporary debates on the purpose and effects of reading, as well as the current literary-historical status of the novel as a genre. Through their handling of the quixotic figure and plot, in particular, the works situate themselves within a larger tradition of self-reflexive writing about novel reading. Each case study offers a snapshot of a particular formation of 'writing the reader' at a particular point in time. Taken together, these snapshots tell a story of how 'the novel' as a cultural phenomenon developed.

This approach combines some of the advantages of a synchronic and a diachronic approach. The focus on a few selected works allows me to show in detail how content and form are interwoven at a particular point in time, and how a specific work is not only a reflection of its contemporary context but also a palimpsest of earlier literary and extra-literary discourses. The selection of works from different centuries makes it possible to examine in how far each work represents time-specific attitudes towards the reading as fiction, and in how far it registers persisting concerns. At the same time, because of its

¹⁰ This second way of writing the reader on the level of discourse is obviously not an exclusive feature of works focusing on readers as their protagonist – indeed, any work of fiction could be interpreted in the light of its reader construction in this sense. However, what makes it of particular interest in the case of novels with quixotic plots is the implicit (or sometimes even explicit) relation between the reading character and the work's handling of its own audience. Moreover, novels with quixotic plots often feature particularly noticeable cases of reader projection on the level of the discourse.

selectiveness, this approach obviously cannot yield a continuous or comprehensive history of the novel as a self-reflexive genre.

My survey of the history of the English novel as reflected in the prism of quixotic fiction starts in the 1750s, at a time when the novel started to gain in profile and appeal. Against the backdrop of then current literary successes such as Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748-51) and Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), Charlotte Lennox' *The Female Quixote* (1752) presents a reworking of Cervantes' narrative which confronts the question of fiction's moral effects and responsibility. Lennox' novel offers the most comprehensive and intricate representation of reading as a social practice in this early phase of the English novel. Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), which is at the centre of my second case study, in turn reflects a cultural sensibility in which the novel has already assumed a central – if highly contested – status. Austen follows Lennox in representing a *female* quixote and returns to some similar issues, such as moral didacticism.

The golden age of the novel as both critically respected and as firmly grounded in the popular mainstream forms the literary-historical context to Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife* (1864). This text complicates the reference to *Don Quijote* insofar as it presents a rewriting of yet another non-English quixotic novel, namely Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857). The last two chapters then turn to two twenty-first-century novels which use the quixotic plot to contemplate the current status of novel reading: Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) and Alan Bennett's *The Uncommon Reader* (2007). Each work represents an influential view on novel reading as a central – and possibly endangered – cultural practice.

The selected quixotic texts are not – in contrast to Cervantes' original – works that are usually regarded as the cornerstones of the canon, although they all earned critical respect (and sometimes also popular acclaim) in their time. However, they are all central to the respective literary landscapes in that they register discourses about the dangers and benefits of reading fiction as well as literary fashions. At the same time, I believe that it is precisely their self-reflexive stance on reading that has contributed to their marginal status in histories of the novel – there has been a tendency to regard these works as whimsical, light-weight, experimental or bookish. The critical reception of Austen's *Northanger Abbey* – often regarded as her weakest novel (see ch. 4) – is a prime example of this trend.

In sketching a history of novel reading as self-reflexively explored, as well as devised, with the help of quixotic plots, I want to contribute to a better understanding of the evolution of fictional writing, in terms of its content, but also in terms of its form. This does not mean, however, that I put forward a teleological view in which the novel as a genre gains in

sophistication and scope as writers become more and more skilful. Instead, I show how at different times, novelists have sought to address changing contemporary beliefs, and constantly rethought the benefits fictional writing can bestow on its readers – as well as the limits and pitfalls of any kind of influence.

Normative notions about the desirable purposes of reading fiction have changed in the course of the centuries, but as the chapters on McEwan and Bennett will show in depth, they have never disappeared. Such ideas are obviously closely tied to changing views on identity and education, and they entail more or less specific theories about the actual effects a novel exerts on its readership. While ideas about *purposes* of fictional reading can be a matter of controversy because they are tied to different norms and values, ideas about its *effects* are just as controversial, but for a different reason: because they are very hard to ascertain.¹¹ I myself profess that I am sceptical about many of the advertised grand benefits of fictional reading, but nonetheless I am convinced that like any activity that is practised over a long period of time, engaging with books must leave its mark. What exactly this mark is (or should be), however, is not a question I set out to answer in this study. The actual effects of reading (or any kind of media consumption) are beyond the scope of my investigation. What I am interested in is the question how fictional reading is perceived at different times – how its purposes are reflected upon, and how its possible effects are imagined. Maybe even more importantly, however, I focus on the question of how the quixotic novels themselves complicate and problematise the assessment of ‘actual effects’. In manifold ways, they stage the genesis of discourses on the evaluation of reading and thus explore the many factors that influence them. In order to explore the different layers of these representations, then, I first need to distinguish the different vantage points from which ‘reading as a problem’ can be (and has been) approached.

1.1 Four Approaches to Reading

An inquiry into the changing evaluations of reading is, from the start, complicated by the fact that such evaluations can refer to widely differing aspects. To say that reading is ‘bad’ could mean that the effects of a specific work on a reader are suspect, for example when a female reader is thought to have been made licentious by the romance plots of the books she loves. It could also mean, however, that what is seen as problematic is the occupation of reading as

¹¹ For a differentiated discussion of the complex issues involved, not least because of the unpredictability of individual reactions to a text, see Keen (2007, especially 65-84).

such, and refer to perceived issues such as the reader's isolation from others, or the circumstance that the activity keeps her from doing more useful things. Then again, 'bad reading' could refer to literary quality, and be related to the aesthetic status of a certain work or genre.

Inquiries into representations of fictional readers in particular, and studies on the topic of reading in general, have tended to focus on one or the other of such aspects. As the synopses of the case studies given above suggest, however, quixotic novels tend to connect these perspectives on reading, thus reflecting how multi-faceted social perceptions of reading tend to be. My study pays tribute to this complexity: I propose a systematization of the different perspectives that may be involved, in order to examine how these different perceptions of reading as a phenomenon interrelate in the various works. In my differentiation between four major ways of approaching the issue of reading, I will briefly introduce some of the central strands of scholarship that have dealt with the respective aspects.

Probably the most influential approach to reading is as a **cognitive process**: the act of taking in and thereby interpreting or deciphering a text. This understanding of reading focuses on the relation between the person who peruses a text and the particular form and content of this text. It is central to literary studies and informs those branches of literary studies in particular that are concerned with interpretation. Notably, the figure of the reader even became *the* central point of reference for a valid interpretation for some influential theorists of interpretation from the 1970s onwards, in particular in Hans Robert Jauss's and Wolfgang Iser's reception aesthetic approaches, and reader-response criticism in the vein of Stanley Fish and Roland Barthes.¹² The focus on reading as a cognitive process lends itself to a figurative extension, in which 'reading' stands for 'making sense of something', and thus provides a primary metaphor for understanding.

Approaches that consider reading as cognitive process are closely connected with the understanding of reading as an act of communication: from this perspective, reading is still regarded as a cognitive operation, but the focus lies on the relation between the actors involved. Narrative theory, with its focus on models of narrative mediation, is primarily invested in this perspective on reading, paying particular attention to the different levels of sending and receiving that are involved in literary communication. The central entity in such

¹² For an overview of more recent developments in reader-centred literary studies see Bennett (1995a), Machor/Goldstein (2001) and Machor/Goldstein (2008). A comprehensive discussion of the development from classical reader response theory such as Iser and Fish towards more recent cognitive approaches, in particular involving schema theory and discourse analysis, is provided by Strasen (2008). Obviously, the matter is much complicated by the fact that every theory has a different concept of "the reader" – I will return to this issue in section 2.1.

models, however, is usually not the reader, but the text as an artifact. This focus has shifted in cognitive narratology, which regards the reader, and the processes by which he or she makes sense of a text, as its central field of inquiry.

A second fundamental way of approaching reading is as an **embodied act**: as physically manifest behaviour, or an act affecting a subject's body. This may seem counter-intuitive insofar as reading appears to be a physical activity only in a very limited sense, with the reader usually stationary and focused on nonmaterial entities. Karin Littau, in *Theories of Reading* (2006), argues that the dominant tendency in literary theories of the twentieth century has been to focus on the reader's mind, and thus on cognitive operations, which has in turn led to a neglect of his or her body. Littau pleads for the development of literary theories that include "bodily responses to literature" (2006: 156), "sensations" (2006: 155), "involuntary responses [...] registered by the body before the reader is able to respond intellectually" (ibid.). From a historical point of view, of course, it becomes clear that the aspects Littau wants to bring back into view have for a long time played a large role in discussions about reading. Critics in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were much concerned with the effects of reading on the body – pornography is only one especially prominent example; the concern with the reader's physical posture is another.¹³ A further important implication of highlighting this aspect of reading is the attention it calls to the emotional impact a book can have on a reader.¹⁴ Considering reading as an embodied act also calls attention to the particularity of the reader as a person situated in a particular time, at a particular place, with a particular gender, social background and so on – again, aspects of reading that may also be considered when looking at 'reading as a cognitive process', but in fact often tend to be overlooked when reading is regarded in this more abstract sense.

¹³ Kelly Mays, for example, traces the anxieties concerning reading as a bad (physical) habit in the second half of the 19th century (1995). Thomas Laqueur, in *Solitary Sex* (2004), argues for a close link between the eighteenth-century 'invention' of masturbation as a moral problem and the rise of private reading as a source of "unpoliced pleasure" (2004: 315).

¹⁴ It seems worth noting, however, that the various elements that play into the juxtaposition between body and mind pinpointed by Littau are by no means in stable alignment. While 'emotion' might be understood as an instinctive physical reaction, recent research tends to perceive it as the result of conscious reflection and thus as associated with the notion of reading as a cognitive process: "For many years, affective psychology – the psychology of emotion – was widely seen as an entirely separate field from cognitive psychology. Feeling was viewed as something non-cognitive. However, in the past decade or so, emotion has become an increasingly important topic in cognitive science. Far from being the opposite of thought, emotion is now viewed as intimately bound up with thought, to such an extent that one cannot fully understand cognition without understanding emotion, and one cannot fully understand emotion without understanding cognition" (Hogan 2003: 14). Instead of assigning one invariable position to 'emotional response' among the approaches towards reading, then, I will, in my case studies, ask how the notion of emotion is handled in particular cases, and whether it is framed in terms of involuntary physical responses or of conscious reflection (or both).

A third way of understanding the phenomenon of reading is to regard it in its function as **social behaviour**. This may again seem counter-intuitive, as there is a strong tendency towards envisaging typical readers as solitary figures, isolated from their environment. Notably, however, such a view of readers already conceives of them in terms of social interaction (even if, in this case, in negative terms, i.e. the lack of social interaction). When describing or evaluating reading from this vantage point, one uses completely different terms from those used for judging reading as interpretation: the focus of interest is no longer on the contents of a particular book, and the way in which those are processed, but on the forms of sociability that are enabled or limited by the act of reading. Since the 1970s, reading as social behaviour has been a central focus of historians who emphasize the plurality of reading practices, and their embeddedness in specific historical and cultural contexts.¹⁵

Last but not least, reading must also be understood **as an institutionalized practice**. The perceived value of reading is to a significant extent tied to the development of specialized systems such as the publishing industry, the journals and magazines involved in the establishment of professional criticism, the education system and so on. Reading in this sense is embedded within larger social power structures. Issues that come into view if one takes this approach to reading are, for example, the connections between particular practices of production and consumption and ascriptions of literary value. Another central field of inquiry would be the role that factors such as gender or class play in canon formation, or more generally into the status of certain kinds of reading (from particular genres to works by particular authors) at specific points in time. The sociology of reading is the main discipline that is concerned with such questions. Classics of the field include Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1979).

This aspect is obviously related to that of reading as social behaviour, and the historiography of reading has also concerned itself with relevant aspects, tracing the development of phenomena such as libraries, publishing houses and literary magazines. As Chartier and Cavallo argue, traditionally historians have tended to engage with only a small

¹⁵ See especially Chartier 1994 [1992], Chartier/Cavallo 1999a, Darnton 2001, Engelsing 1973, Manguel 1996, Raven/Small/Tadmor 1996, Schenda 1977. In their programmatic introduction to *Storia della lettura nel mondo occidentale* (1995), a volume that describes reading practices from ancient Greece to today, Roger Chartier and Guglielmo Cavallo emphasize the multitude of factors that need to be considered for an adequate analysis of reading in history, including the histories of media technology and material objects as well as the histories of the gestures, habits, and spaces shaping individual acts of reading (see 1999b: 12-13). Somewhat ironically, given the work's focus on historical and cultural plurality, the title of the German translation confirms Michael Giesecke's thesis about the tendency to regard reading in universalizing terms (see 2007: 203): *Die Welt des Lesens: Von der Schriftrolle zum Bildschirm* (1999) omits the geographical limitation indicated in the Italian title.

number of the questions raised by such a view of reading and have focused mainly on the key question of the access that different social groups had to different kinds of literature (1999b: 14-15). Chartier/Cavallo themselves plead for a more complex view: as they emphasize, class is only one among many factors determining what and how people read at different times in history (they mention gender, age, and religion as further important aspects). Looking at reading as an institutionalized practice, then, means not only to understand it as a historically embedded kind of behaviour, but also to ask how evaluations of this behaviour are tied into and shaped by social status.

Most of the scholarship on reading approaches the subject from just one of these different vantage points. Those studies on reading which have most shaped my thinking on the subject, however, have provided some ideas as to how the approaches might be related, thus raising awareness for the interplay of very different considerations that influence widely accepted notions concerning reading. I will conclude the section with a brief survey of those fusions of approaches that have been most important to my own.

A particularly important suggestion of how different approaches of reading can be related comes from Janice Radway's ground-breaking *Reading the Romance* (1984), which connected reading as a cognitive process with reading as social behaviour. Radway's aim was to explore the significance of contemporary romance fiction for a small circle of female readers in the American Midwest in the early 1980s. This project centrally involved the question of how to evaluate the women's fascination with those books. Where earlier feminist studies on romance reading had focused on reading as interpretation, and had thus arrived at a mainly negative assessment of the romances' reinforcement of traditional gender stereotypes, Radway introduced a new scale for evaluation by considering reading also as social behaviour. This allowed her to take into account the women's own impression that their pastime constituted a declaration of independence, time taken off from domestic duties. *Reading the Romance* thus provided a complex discussion of the various vantage points from which a certain type of reading might be perceived and subsequently evaluated as 'good' or 'bad'.

Obviously, my own approach to the subject differs greatly from Radway's, not least because she used ethnographic methods in order to study "the way romance reading as a form of behavior operated as a complex intervention in the ongoing social life of *actual social subjects*" (Radway 1991: 7; emphasis added), whereas I deal with representations of such

reading behaviour in fiction.¹⁶ However, I find her aim to explore, rather than tidy up, seemingly contradictory intuitions about reading as a pastime to be congenial to the way in which the problem of reading figures in the texts I examine.

Another highly productive fusion is proposed by Jane Tompkins, who in her programmatic essay “The Reader in History” calls for a historical contextualization of the ‘reading as communication’ paradigm that is so central to reader response theory and narratology. As Tompkins sees it, by focusing on the meaning of individual texts (in my terminology, solely concentrating on reading as a cognitive act), these approaches detract attention from the social and political function of reading as interactional behaviour (i.e., my approaches 3 and 4). This trend, she argues, corresponds to a shift in literature itself: the “process of separation between literature and political life [...] begins to occur in the second half of the eighteenth century when the breakdown of the patronage system, the increase in commercial printing, and the growth of a large reading public change the relation of authors to their audiences” (Tompkins 1980b: 214). The genre of the novel, in particular, is the expression of a new notion of literature as “both impersonal and privatized” (ibid.): authors no longer have personal contact with their readership, but at the same time subgenres like the sentimental novel reflect the idea that this kind of reading has a strong emotional effect on the individual. Works of literature, in other words, are perceived both as products of changing reading practices, and as themselves shaping such changes. Abstract communication models like that offered by narratology, Tompkins cautions, should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the social parameters of the actual communications as practised by authors and audiences, and with them the understanding of how such communications work, are changing over time.

Tompkins’ call for a contextualizing approach to the act of reading within literary studies has since been followed by a number of scholars, among them Patrick Brantlinger (1998), Joe Bray (2009), Kate Flint (1993), the contributors of a volume edited by Paul Goetsch (1994), Jacqueline Pearson (1999) and a few others who will figure at various points in the following chapters. My study is a contribution to this larger project, in that I chart the ways in which novels themselves – both through their form and their content – reflect the changing social and institutional contexts in which novel writers and their readers interact. My focus on the fictional works themselves, their techniques and their complex self-reflexive

¹⁶ Not only does *Reading the Romance* spell out the difference between reading as interpretation and reading as social behaviour, but it also touches upon reading as an institutionalized practice. Its first chapter deals with the publishing industry involved in the romances’ production. This is presented as a frame for the findings about the real romance readers, but it is not discussed as an alternative way of understanding and evaluating the phenomenon of reading itself, and there is not much discussion about possible interrelations with the other two views on reading.

participation in the larger social conversation about reading, however, entails a main difference between my approach and that of the works just listed, which primarily focus on the social and historical contexts.

Even within the field of narratology itself, which – as Tompkins rightly points out – has traditionally been interested in reading mainly in an abstract or decontextualized sense, and thus in a pared-down version of reading as a cognitive act,¹⁷ there have been some attempts to integrate the kind of historical awareness she calls for in her article. In particular, feminist narrative theory has linked the focus on reading as an act of communication in an abstract sense with an inquiry into historical and sociological contexts. Susan Lanser's *Fictions of Authority* (1992) and Robyn Warhol's *Gendered Interventions: Narrative Discourse in the Victorian Novel* (1989), to name but two of the most important works, have demonstrated how concepts which have been developed to examine communicative positions (such that of the 'implied author' and the 'implied reader') can and should be historicized and contextualized. Lanser's and Warhol's work calls attention to the role that (historically variable) gender roles and social distributions of power play in authorial self-representations (Lanser) and reader address (Warhol).¹⁸

1.2 A Literary Fusion of Approaches to Reading: The Quixotic Plot

While scholarly examinations of reading as a topic have tended to prioritize one of the four approaches I have outlined, novelists have since the early days of the genre shown a keen interest in their intersection. Novels featuring what I call the 'quixotic plot' are prime examples of the sustained attention that has been paid to literary reading as a complex phenomenon. These works explore the nexus of historical, sociological, ethical, psychological and aesthetic considerations. Through the quixotic plot, the genre of the novel, then, addresses the shifting – but seldom, as I will show, radically changing – notions concerning its own

¹⁷ An exception is the already-mentioned cognitive branch of narrative theory, which focuses on the experience of reading as a sense-making process and thus is based on an understanding of reading in a more elaborate sense. Scholars of cognitive narrative theory are, as David Herman puts it, interested in the "basic mental abilities and dispositions" whose examination enables inquiries into the "interconnection between narrative and mind" (Herman 2012: 17). My own study is informed by some cognitive narratological ideas, such as the emphasis on the way in which fictional texts appeal to a reader's story of literary and extra-literary knowledge, or the premise that one should pay attention to the sequence in which information is conveyed in a text, as this crucially informs the way in which it will be experienced by a reader (i.e. understanding narrative as a process). I would not say, however, that I myself 'do' cognitive narratology in this book, as I do not attempt to spell out readers' sense-making processes in terms of schema theory or similar approaches.

¹⁸ Lanser and Warhol's work will be discussed more extensively in sections 2.2 and 2.1, respectively.

effects and purposes. In this sense, my case studies will chart a development of discourses on reading.

Cervantes' *Don Quijote* can serve as an illustrative example of how the various perspectives on reading outlined above may be brought together – an example which has also served as an influential model for later quixotic texts. The novel's two volumes (published 1605 and 1615, respectively) feature a main protagonist whose obsessive interest in books leads to many conflicts and adventures, as he insists on seeing himself as a knight. Reading as a cognitive process, in other words, is the mainspring of all that happens on the level of the story. Different worlds – the reality in which the reading protagonist lives, and the world about which he reads – collide, and Cervantes' work examines the influence the latter exerts on the former in Don Quijote's lived experiences. The staging of reading as an act and an experience on the level of the story, however, also entails the evocation of other approaches than a purely cognitive one.

Reading as an embodied act is, to name but one significant instance, addressed through a theme that constitutes an important comic element in the text (often taken up in visual representations of the Don): that Quijote, as a bookworm, is not well equipped to face the skirmishes he seeks. Both physically and in terms of the gear he can provide (his armour, his horse), he is the opposite of a well-trained and fit warrior. This contrast raises the issue of the physical effects of reading, and of the contrast between body and mind.

Similarly, the focus on reading on the level of the story serves to explore its function as social behaviour. Don Quijote's preoccupation with books clearly sets him apart from the people surrounding him, who do not share his interest. The special status it accords him is ambivalent, as it can be interpreted either as errant madness or as pardonable idealism – a point that potentially opens up debates about the constitution of values and norms. In any case, what is central is that the work represents the impact an obsessive way of reading has on social interaction.

Reading as an institutionalized practice features on the level of the story when, for example, in the famous "inquisition into the library" (DQ 34), the barber and the priest engage in a discussion about the value of specific books in Don Quijotes's possession in order to determine which of these should be burnt as dangerous reading. Their conversation reflects contemporary debates concerning the status of different genres of writing as well as of specific works. Another instance showing how the novel touches upon institutional aspects of literature is a scene in which Don Quijote enters a printing shop and is involved in a discussion about the production and consumption of books, thus reflecting on some of the

material and technological foundations of reading as an institutionalized practice. And, last but not least, an interest in the literary system as an institution in its own right is reflected in the many intertextual references (both on the level of the story and on the level of the discourse), which evoke a long tradition of writing and emphasize that Cervantes' novel itself stands in complex relations to a large number of other works.

The handling of reading as a multi-faceted phenomenon in *Don Quijote*, then, reflects a keen interest in the effects of fictional writing on the reader – an interest that includes not only moral or psychological facets, but also an exploration of material and social aspects of the development of literature as an institution. Crucially, this interest is linked to a self-reflexive treatment of the purposes of fictional writing, which is expressed in the extensive intertextual references as well as in explicit narratorial commentary and reader address. Explorations of reading as a theme on the level of the story are complemented with a marked interest in the work's impact on its own readers on the level of the discourse (I will discuss these aspects in depth in chapter 2).

The works featured in my case studies are 'quixotic' insofar as they follow Cervantes' blueprint for an exploration of reading as a complex phenomenon, foregrounded on both the story and the discourse level.¹⁹ While the texts vary widely in their application of their shared theme, I have defined the following characteristics as a lowest common denominator for those texts classifiable as featuring 'quixotic plots':

1. The novels focus on a protagonist who is characterized as an unusually avid reader of fiction, and whose perception of the world is strongly influenced by reading.
2. The protagonist's changed perception plays a central role in a conflict that drives the action.
3. The novels contain a striking number of intertextual references situating the work itself in a tradition of fictional writing and inviting comparisons to other works. At least a part of those intertextual references refer to the works the characters read on the level of the story – that is, the characters read and discuss books that also exist outside of the text and that therefore may be familiar to the actual reader.

¹⁹ As a look into the *OED* confirms, "quixotic" has become an established adjective in the English language, describing the quality of "resembling Don Quixote; hence, striving with lofty enthusiasm for visionary ideals". There is also the noun "Quixote", i.e. a person who is "inspired by lofty and chivalrous but false or unrealizable ideals". In the context of my study, this usage is of great significance insofar as it highlights the gap between the quixotic character and the society around him or her that is also at the centre of my own interest in this figure. At the same time, the popularized associations with the word tend to omit the aspect of Don Quijote's misled enthusiasm that is central to my own definition of the "quixotic plot": the fact that in Cervantes' work, this mind set is associated with *reading* in a literal sense.

The reason for calling this constellation of features a ‘plot’ rather than, for example, a motif, lies in the conjunction of 1) and 2): the novels that I am interested in not only present a main character who reads obsessively, but they make the relation between reading and other kinds of experience a concern that is – albeit in very different ways – at the root of the works’ central conflict. 1) and 2) together thus considerably narrow down a potentially gigantic corpus of ‘quixotic’ works. I discard those texts that feature the consequences of obsessive reading only as a secondary point, as well as those in which the protagonist’s misreading is purely, or mainly, figurative.²⁰ In other words: works featuring characters who are reminiscent of Cervantes’ Don Quijote are legion. Works with quixotic plots in this narrow sense are much rarer, even though they can still be found in many literary epochs.

With regard to the intertextuality of quixotic novels, Cervantes’ work functions both as a model and a point of reference for later texts even beyond the focus on the protagonist’s reading and the resulting conflict. It is a model insofar as it famously presents the already-mentioned contrast between the medieval romances its protagonist enjoys, and the more realist modes of fictional writing that characterize the work *Don Quijote* itself. This self-reflexive concern with its own writing programme is one of the reasons why Cervantes’ work is considered one of the foundational texts of the novel as a genre. The use of *Don Quijote* as a point of reference establishes a line of tradition spanning the centuries and adding layers of significance. This is particularly obvious in paratextual features such as the title of Charlotte Lennox’ *The Female Quixote*, or the epigraph from *Northanger Abbey* (referring to the protagonist’s quixotic reading) that Ian McEwan employs to open *Atonement*. In calling these works ‘quixotic’ I foreground their play with established traditions and their self-reflexive view on the development and status of the novel as a genre.

There is yet another significant factor involved in my selection of works, which concerns the level of discourse: the ‘quixotic plot’ as I understand it seems to be tied to heterodiegetic narration, i.e. it is told by a narrator who is not present as a character in the story he tells (see Genette 1980: 244). More specifically, works with quixotic plots are distinguished by what Franz K. Stanzel has called an ‘authorial narrative situation’, i.e. by a

²⁰ Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, to name but one example, comes close to qualifying as a quixotic work but falls short in both ways. There is an obsessive reader in a literal sense, Tom Sawyer, who involves his friends in quixotic exploits inspired by adventure novels (both at the beginning of the book, when they play at being robbers, and in the final part, when Huck and Tom free Jim in a complicated procedure inspired by Tom’s reading of books like *The Count of Monte Christo*). This, however, is only a side plot in the novel as a whole. Conversely, misreading is a central theme throughout the novel, in which Huck continually makes mistaken assessments about people and situations he encounters, but these misinterpretations are not (or at least not very obviously) associated with book reading in a literal sense.

narrative voice that comments with particular authority, more or less extensively, on characters and events. The affinity of quixotic plot and authorial narration might seem coincidental at first sight, but it starts to make sense once one understands authorial narration as enabling self-reflexive commentary: as I will argue in more detail in section 2.2, authorial narration can be regarded as engendering a performance of authorship, which implicitly or explicitly presents notions about the purpose of fiction underlying the production of the text. The novels examined in the following case studies, then, share a fourth criterion, which complements the ‘quixotic plot’ as defined above:

4. Novels with quixotic plots in the narrow sense tend to feature authorial narrative situations with fairly intrusive commentary.

There is one period in the history of the novel that is not favourable to the quixotic tradition in this sense: the era of modernism, in which modes of telling were relinquished in favour of modes of showing, and the focus was on representations of characters’ consciousness. The example of modernism, however, seems to bear out the theory of the affinity between quixotic plot and authorial narration: while there are many characters in modernist novels who are reminiscent of Don Quijote in that they misread the world that surrounds them, I have not been able to find a modernist British novel that combines the story of such a protagonist with an exploration of reading books as a social practice, and with an authorial narrative situation. Although this means that there is no extra chapter on modernism in my survey of the quixotic tradition as an instrument of self-reflexive inquiry into the state of the novel, I do pay tribute to the formative influence of this era on the history of the novel. The last two works I discuss, McEwan’s *Atonement* and Bennett’s *The Uncommon Reader* both, and in rather different ways, tackle legacies that modernist works and writers have bequeathed to the twentieth- and twenty-first-century English novel.

In understanding the quixotic novel in terms of both form and content, in systematically exploring the way in which it connects different approaches to reading, and in charting its progress in one national tradition over a time span of almost 250 years, I go beyond previous scholarly examinations of quixotic figures in the history of the novel. Traditionally scholars analyzing novels about quixotic readers have primarily focused on such works’ staging of reading as a cognitive process. Theodor Wolpers, the editor of the first comprehensive study on quixotic readers in a larger European context (1986), suggests the label of ‘lived literature’ (“gelebte Literatur”) to sum up the impact of literary texts on Quijote

and his literary heirs, such as Wieland's Don Sylvio, Goethe's Werther, or Flaubert's Emma Bovary.²¹

One of the rare studies which concentrates on representations of obsessive readers and emphasizes the link between such a view of reading as a cognitive act and the 'institutional practice' approach is Friedhelm Marx's *Erlesene Helden: Don Sylvio, Werther, Wilhelm Meister und die Literatur* (1995), which traces the motif in German literature of the late eighteenth century. Marx relates the figure of the quixotic reader to Enlightenment traditions of thought and argues that this figure reflects a growing appreciation of the imagination as an important human faculty. Through this emphasis, Marx argues, plots with quixotic readers serve to elevate the previously derided genre of the novel. They do so not only on the level of the story, but also on the level of the discourse, insofar as the figure of the reading character adds a self-reflexive dimension and thus a level of meaning on which reception is itself staged as a problem (see 1995: 11).

Marx's findings – though limited to a small period in the history of the novel, and more applicable to the German context than to the English one, where the genre was at that time already a more established phenomenon – fit well with my own line of argument insofar as I also see the quixotic plot as an instrument of celebrating fictional reading as much as of exploring its dangers or drawbacks. However, as I will show in the case studies, notions like the elevation of the novel genre become much more complex once one also pays attention to the question how the texts themselves problematize the ways in which reading as an institutional practice is evaluated. In other words, my interest in 'elevation' is not so much in arguing for an objective increase in literary value as in the workings of the process itself, i.e. the question of how literary value is ascribed, how the works more or less self-reflexively align themselves with certain literary works, genres, or tendencies and distance themselves from others and thus position themselves within a larger cultural field.

Another issue that needs to be examined more closely than previous readings of quixotic texts have done is the question to what extent and to what ends they represent reading as an embodied act. I have already referred to Karin Littau's complaint about the

²¹ I am focusing here on those studies which look at Quijote and his heirs as *readers*. Much has of course been written on other aspects of the afterlives of quixotic figures – notable recent collection of articles are *Europäische Dimensionen des Don Quijote in Literatur, Kunst, Film und Musik*, edited by Tilmann Altenberg and Klaus Meyer-Minnemann (2007), *1605-2005: Don Quixote Across the Centuries*, edited by John Philip Gabriele (2005), and *Don Quijotes intermediale Nachleben/Don Quixote's Intermedial Afterlives*, edited by Wolfgang G. Müller and Ines Detmers (2010a). A seminal contribution to the reception of *Don Quijote* in England in particular is Ronald Paulson's *Don Quixote in England: The Aesthetics of Laughter* (1998). Ines Detmers is currently working on a book-length study on the intermedial history of *Don Quijote* adaptations in Anglophone literatures.

neglect of the physical aspects of reading in recent twentieth-century theory. Littau herself in her survey *Theories of Reading* includes some relatively brief examinations of literary examples – many of them quixotic readers such as Werther, Catherine Morland and Emma Bovary – to show that in literature itself, the impact of reading on the body has often been a major topic. Prototypes of physically affected readers include, in Littau’s list, stock figures such as the “weeping reader” as well as the “frightened reader” (see 2006: 69-72). Joe Bray, in his more recent *The Female Reader in the English Novel: From Burney to Austen* (2009), follows this cue and also highlights the significance of representations of the reader’s body (quixotic and otherwise) around the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. The title of his introduction – “Texts, Bodies, Readers” already signals the shift in interest he is proposing. In my case studies, I will take up this cue and pay particular attention to the question how precisely these texts bring in physical dimensions of reading – but also ask how these are related to the other approaches to reading, especially notions about its cognitive effects.

Various scholars have warned against understanding fictional readers as representative examples of actual historical reading practices (see e.g. Flint 1993: 14, Bray 2009: 24). With most of the protagonists in quixotic novels, it is particularly obvious that their utility in this sense is questionable or at least limited: their stances towards reading are obviously extreme, and they are to some degree both literary types and embodiments of prevalent clichés about dangers of reading. I do not, then, propose to read quixotic novels as documentaries about historical reading practices; rather, I see them as particularly condensed case studies exploring a wide range of different possible ways of reading, from passive to active, compliant to resistant, isolated to shared, cognitive to physical.²² What they all have in common is the underlying idea that fictional reading matters – not only as an individual pastime, but also as a broader cultural endeavour.

²² The point that the attitudes about reading, rather than the mimetic representation of historical practices, is the main point of looking at fictional reader figures is also, for instance, made by Bray (2009: 27).