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## **Reader's Block: Response**

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

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**Reader's Block:**

Response

Leah Price

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"By-the-by, that very word, Reading, in its critical use, always charms me. An actress's Reading of a

chambermaid, a dancer's Reading of a hornpipe, a singer's Reading of a song, a marine painter's Reading of the sea, the kettle-drum's Reading of an instrumental passage, are phrases ever youthful and delightful" (Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* 605). Thus Eugene Wrayburn, in a novel that obsessively plays the symbolic value of literacy off against the interpretive challenge posed by nonalphabetic signs. "The streets being, for pupils of [Charley's] degree, the great preparatory Establishment in which very much that is never unlearned is learned before and without book" (263), the novel may not be able to distance itself as breezily as Eugene from the usage that allows Riah to "read his master's face" (281) or Charley to "call the fire at home, [Lizzie's] books" (636).<sup>1</sup> For Dickens, according to one of his shrewdest early readers, "London is like a newspaper"—if only, perhaps, in the semiotic density which makes the British Constitution indistinguishable from the traces of a horse (Bagehot 468).

Eugene's list calls attention to the metaphoricity of "reading" in Victorian culture, but its expansionism will sound equally familiar to readers of twenty-first-century cultural studies. Yet the imperialist extension of reading to encompass any interpretive act is only half the story. If, in John Plotz's words, the book is constitutively torn between its "metaphoric" and "metonymic" powers—put differently, its verbal content and material form—then the obverse of the Victorians' appeal to reading as a model for a broader range of hermeneutic practices would be their unease with the nonlinguistic functions that printed objects fill even, or especially, when not being read (472).

The tension between those two senses of "reading" is compounded by the question of who exactly the subject of that verb is. Looking at uses of the word in the literary criticism of the past twenty years, it may be too crude to hypothesize a shift from "reading" as a [End Page 231] noun used to describe the product of the speaker's own ruminations (as in "*Our Mutual Friend: A Lacanian Reading*") to "reading" as an activity delegated to others by a critic who describes it from a safe historical distance. Unquestionably, though, the inaugural NAVSA Conference tilted toward the latter sense of the word: apart from the occasional panel with a title as capacious as "Queer Readings," critics in Bloomington read—and theorized reading—over Victorian readers' and writers' shoulders. Thus, Andrew Elfenbein brought late-twentieth-century theories of reading comprehension into dialogue with Victorian debates about Robert Browning's legibility; Kelly Hager challenged recent historians' emphasis on novel-reading as a dangerous pathology (or thrilling transgression) by reconstructing medical defenses of the act; Emily Allen and Dino Felluga attacked the same historiographical consensus from a different angle by showing how central poetic figures such as Byron were to the debate over the somatic effects of reading; and Deb Gettelman unteased George Eliot's ambivalence about the readerly daydreams that—like the novel-reading that they both interrupt and impel—manifests at once passivity and hyperactivity, constituting a blank space as well as a rival narrative. Studies like these are finally beginning to carve out a niche (in Garrett Stewart's words) "between sociohistorical studies of the popular audience, on the one hand, and so-called reader-response criticism, on the other—between...purchasing or processing ends," or between redefining the text as "an affective structure of effected meaning" and displacing it "from linguistic effect to social artifact" (*Dear Reader* 8).

Departments of literature have usually defined the study of reading as a branch of literary criticism, but literary hermeneutics could just as easily be seen as a subset of book history.<sup>2</sup> As Eugene hints, the nominalization which makes "a reading" shorthand for "an interpretation" risks flattening out the specificity of books—both the ways in which their interpretation differs...

## Reader's Block: Response

LEAH PRICE

“By-the-by, that very word, Reading, in its critical use, always charms me. An actress's Reading of a chambermaid, a dancer's Reading of a hornpipe, a singer's Reading of a song, a marine painter's Reading of the sea, the kettle-drum's Reading of an instrumental passage, are phrases ever youthful and delightful” (Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* 605). Thus Eugene Wrayburn, in a novel that obsessively plays the symbolic value of literacy off against the interpretive challenge posed by nonalphabetic signs. “The streets being, for pupils of [Charley's] degree, the great preparatory Establishment in which very much that is never unlearned is learned before and without book” (263), the novel may not be able to distance itself as breezily as Eugene from the usage that allows Riah to “read his master's face” (281) or Charley to “call the fire at home, [Lizzie's] books” (636).<sup>2</sup> For Dickens, according to one of his shrewdest early readers, “London is like a newspaper”—if only, perhaps, in the semiotic density which makes the British Constitution indistinguishable from the traces of a horse (Bagehot 468).

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