William St. Clair 2004: *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. 765 pp.

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In his 1992 book *Politics by Other Means*, David Bromwich complained that in contemporary literary studies "[w]e need to teach not interpretation but the sociology of knowledge" (107), a sign of the times that he recognizes in most current trends of theory and criticism. Bromwich notes a recent shift in critics' interest towards the material conditions in which knowledge and art are produced and disseminated, and not so much its formal structure or its philosophical content. This new interest is typical, though not exclusive, of such trends as feminism, postcolonial criticism or the so-called "new historicism," and for the most part it asks the reader not to look at the text itself but at the different class, race and gender struggles the author is always attempting to mask. However, although shrinking in number today, there are still works in historical criticism which do not envision cultural change necessarily through the lens of ethnic or gender conflicts and therefore explain changes in the public sphere and the reading community by resorting to matters of editorial policy, habits of reading and public taste (see Chandler for the best recent example; also Klancher). In this type of criticism, which is "materialist" in the most literal sense of the term, the origin of literary change is established by empirical research into the very basis of the production and distribution of knowledge, yet without making political situatedness an overriding energy, or forcing an author's work to necessarily fall within a specific political, racial or sexual ideology.

William St. Clair's book *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* belongs to this second brand of "sociological" criticism. Its aim is to validate in historical terms whether changes in the practices and quality of reading actually transformed the cultural fate of Great Britain between the eighteenth century and the late Romantic period (although with greater focus on the latter). In other words, he attempts to examine the economic and cultural exchange between the world of editors, on the one hand, and the preferences of the reading public, on the other. The author resorts to all sorts of writings, from large collections of great classics to cheap editions, from letters to political pamphlets, in an effort to understand the Romantic culture of letters and its impact on public taste. His approach is to look at the formation of the modern literary audience in Great Britain "with information from outside the texts" (5). The book, which includes a bulk of detailed editorial information in thirteen appendices totalling 270 pages, demonstrates the major role of the publishing industry in the emergence of what St. Clair calls "extensive reading," that is, the tendency towards the habit of consuming larger amounts of books but with less thematic (or even moral) homogeneity (11), a process abhorred by neoclassicals and moralists but welcomed by most publishers. The ultimate objective of this monumental effort is to build up an empirical history of reading in the Romantic era: its principles, its social implications and the consequences for later decades; that is, to recreate the whole milieu of early nineteenth-century publications and see how these modified the public's literary tastes.

Chapters 1 through 6 are devoted entirely to the very material conditions of book production and consumption between the "long eighteenth century" and Romantic

England. Here William St. Clair focuses on the changing status of notions such as intellectual property, publishing monopolies, piracy, or the legal defence of intellectual rights in order to reconstruct what it meant (a) for the English entrepreneur to invest in book production and sales and, subsequently, (b) for the reading public to gain access to literary culture on a more systematic and widespread basis. Analysing with great historical rigour and accuracy legal cases and production figures, the author provides a general image of the publishing market and describes the transition between the Guild period and the High Monopoly period, and then into the Copyright period, a long process (1600–1842) characterised by the shift from an exploitation of literary works that secures no rights for authors to a regulated market that ensures both the author's property and the textual integrity of his work. This shift from an unprotected to a strictly regulated market not only fosters the consolidation of literary authors as professionals and their subsistence within an increasingly capitalist society, but also incorporates literary writing to the whole range of market-based activities and subjects it to its laws.

Chapters 7 and 8 introduce questions related to the literary canon. Moving from the old reading lists to the new impact of Shakespeare in 18th- and 19th-century culture, William St. Clair analyses the role of the book industry in the articulation of the British canon of "high literature" by looking at property rights and the marketing ideologies behind all sorts of collections of "English classics" (such as John Bell's *The Poets of Great Britain* or Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets*) and of the works of Shakespeare (Pope, Johnson, Warburton). This combined exploration of external and internal elements of canonicity yields, in my opinion, the most fertile insights of the book, the most interesting for literary studies *per se*, since they allow us to see the broadly cultural effects of the sociological investigation St. Clair so adroitly practices. In this sense, particularly revealing of the changes Britain was facing is the author's statement that "through such school anthologies, English literature entered the educational and imaginative space which had traditionally been occupied by the Bible, and by the anthologised readings of the Bible" (137). Only rarely is this fact acknowledged in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century studies, where the conservative mindset of Neoclassicism is usually understood to continue unchallenged well into the Victorian period. I agree with St. Clair that anthologies of classics—and one could also cite Edward Capell's *Prolusions* (1760), Elizabeth Cooper's *The Muses Library* (1738), some of the many Shakespeare editions, and even Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry*, though the latter is not an anthology—cooperate explicitly in the shift from a religious to a secular conception of culture. Although St. Clair does not discuss it, nor is it his intention to do so, this process is central to the consolidation of the empiricist vision of art, literature and tradition, and its slow imposition over the principles of neoclassical criticism, a substitution culminating in the subjectivist Romantic notion of art as a "lamp" (rather than a "mirror," in M. H. Abrams' famous metaphor). The religious view of education, which places the Book (the Bible) and the Word at the center of learning, is therefore displaced by a view in which the author becomes the core and object of study. As a consequence, literature becomes more author- than text-based.

Chapters 9 through 13 explore the romantic period and the impact of such changes on its literary world, which in general made it difficult for many poets to reach the public. St. Clair shortly describes the habits of composition of poets such as Shelley, Byron or Wordsworth and then goes on to recount the arduous process of getting their works published, the investment it required, and the kinds of contracts the writers were usually

offered. He does so—mainly in chapter 9—in order to show the reader that, popular though romantic poetry was among the British public, its "institutionalization" was not an easy process, and that the later shift from verse- to novel-reading at the end of the Romantic period is less than clear. These chapters focus mainly on the production of books, their accessibility, prices and costs—but not just that. In an analysis that expands on the opening chapters, St. Clair reveals the interrelation between publications and literary reviews in the articulation of a reading market for romantic poetry and fiction. The canon of English Romanticism was formed, according to the sales, by Scott, Byron, Moore, Campbell, Rogers, Southey, Wordsworth and Coleridge, whereas others such as Shelley, Keats or Blake simply "sold well" (217–18). This challenges our contemporary notion of the Romantic canon, which today places the latter in a much higher position, and gives the impression that canonization is not necessarily guided by commercial success, but rather by reasons internal to the texts. St. Clair's analysis, particularly in the case of Scott's novels, reveal that the public's preferences somehow forced publishers to shift their interests and look for literary merit rather than big sales. In this sense, the difference between the 19th-century view and our present one has been marked by what the author labels "reading constituencies," particularly circulating libraries of different kinds, which helped the dissemination of poetic works in a way earlier institutions could not. (Also important in St. Clair's account are the reading societies of the late 18th century, most of them from London, and from there extending to the South.) This advances affected also other types of texts, such as Payne's *The Rights of Man* and its precursor, Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, whose enormous celebrity paved the way for the publication of other political and social pamphlets of the time.

Chapters 14 to 19 move beyond poetry to encompass essayistic texts, such as Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*. St. Clair also expands the geographical terrain of his research to France and the United States in order to explore the relevance and influence of British Romanticism beyond its frontiers. In the first case, he explores the popularity among the French of pirated editions of English authors (especially Galignani's, which were later authorised) and describes how these helped to extend their works throughout the continent, particularly Byron's romances. In the case of the North American market, St. Clair explains that the eighteenth-century book trade between England and the colonies was carried forward into the nineteenth century under the same conditions, mainly through illegal copies, the exception being Scott's Waverley novels. A special case is that of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, an instantaneous success whose political and ethical significance earned the author a profit beyond the usual standards, and that with only the first edition. Reprints and a stage adaptation increased the benefits, but the author and her family saw no more money after the inclusion of the novel in Richard Bentley's *Standard Novels* from 1831 through 1849. From then on, it was up to publishers whether or not the novel was suitable for the public, given its philosophical and scientific implications, even though its impact upon the popular imaginary was already powerful. In this sense, Shelley's novel appears to be the canonical work *par excellence*.

Finally, chapters 20 through 22 explain the consequences for the Romantic and Victorian ages of the changes described in the previous pages. Here St. Clair resorts to the world of readers themselves, assuming that "romantics writers . . . offer models of reading which involve readers as well as writers" (401). This final part yields some of the most interesting insights for the literary critic, since we see here the literary representation of the

new literary public and market. St. Clair uses examples from nineteenth-century novels (*Adam Bede*, *Emma*, *North and South*) and chooses to focus on some of their characters and their ideas about books and editions—demonstrating that authors were not only aware of the fluidity of the new literary world, but were also willing to comment on it, if only marginally, in their works. The tension between "old" literature (and education) and the new writers is far from absent in the novels of George Eliot, Jane Austen or Anne Brönte. On the other hand, and besides that tension, the mainstream reading public of the Victorian age canonized the romantics (and Shakespeare) and left behind the religious focus of the publishing world typical of the eighteenth century, with the King James Bible as its national text. The well-known Longman editions, by far the most popular of the century, and the emergence of new publishers such as Macmillan and projects such as the Everyman's Library contributed to the consolidation of professional printing and carefully edited collections.

Let me finish with a sentence from St. Clair's final chapter which summarises the aim of the book and justifies its timeliness: "When authors are not just writing for themselves but attempt to anticipate the effects on their readers, the readers who are anticipated are always different from the past readers of past texts on whose reactions the author's anticipatory judgement has been based" (446–47). This gap between past and present, this impossibility for poets and novelists to foresee the influence and impact of literary change is—as I see it—the ultimate motivation for St. Clair to write *The Reading Nation*. If the continuity of aesthetic ideas does not explain the evolution of a nation's literature, then sociological research provides some answers, especially in terms of the availability of an author's work and his reception; but even in that case, editions and sales do not tell the whole story. My only criticism of this otherwise splendid book is that changes in poetic sensibility and style cannot be accounted for only in numerical terms, important though these are. Ideas emerge before texts and collections. The influence of empiricist poetics, the new interpretations of Shakespeare and the tradition, the role of psychologism—these facts explain the aesthetic side of the transition from the eighteenth century to the Romantic period (see Engell). *The Reading Nation* must be read as a study complementary to other types of cultural transformations, namely in poetic sensibility and taste.

I will conclude by saying that any general evaluation of St. Clair's book requires a comparison with its most illustrious antecedent, Richard Altick's classic *The English Common Reader*, which in the late 50s led the way for a rigorous sociology of literature in the English-speaking world. While archival research has improved dramatically over the last decade or so, it is also true that the breadth and quality of St. Clair's study place it above its predecessor. Both the period covered and the variety of sources and texts make *The Reading Nation* not a supplement to Altick's study, but a work that reconfigures the field of historical investigation. Apart from questions of method and research, Altick has been superseded by St. Clair's massive effort and brilliant results at historical reconstruction and interpretation. In addition, the book is also recommendable from the point of view of its content and style: it is at once well-researched and erudite, and elegantly written, which should be enough to secure it a well-earned mark in the field of Romantic studies.

Works Cited

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