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Anarchic Literacies: Working-Class Readers and Ramblers in Romantic-Era England

Absent amenities such as indoor lighting, warmth and privacy, working-class readers in early nineteenth century England read in the open air or by the light of the sun; they read while rambling through nearby forests and fields, or while walking through the streets of the cities in which they lived. Their reading practices, in other words, were mobile, itinerant, and enacted in ostensibly “public” spaces. In the following essay, I examine five autobiographies written by working-class men, all published by mid-century and all detailing the reading practices that these cobblers, shepherds and tailors engaged in as children, young men and adults. I consider the following questions: what might it have meant, in the beginning of the nineteenth century, to read *outside*, as opposed to *inside*? What might it have meant to read while *walking*, as opposed to reading while remaining largely immobile? What does either activity suggest, not only for a history of reading, but also for a history of discourses of mobility and spatial relations, particularly given the increased systematization, demarcation and surveillance of space in the nineteenth century?¹ Alternately, consider Michel de Certeau’s suggestion that reading is a kind of spatial activity. Indeed, the metaphor he offers is of reading *as* walking – or more accurately, as a form of rambling: erratic and anarchic, neither route nor destination determined beforehand.² To what extent is it possible to conceive of the working-class readers I examine in this essay as precisely such anarchic “ramblers?” What, indeed, does it mean to do so? Finally, to what extent do these readers perceive *themselves* as enacting such an “anarchic” form of literacy?

¹ E.g., the policing of vagrants, systematized “localization” of the itinerant poor, an increased focus on the morality of the home, and subsequently of dwelling permanently *in* the home, etc.

² In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: California UP, 2002.