For lovers of literary gossip, the domed reading room of the British Museum is a goldmine. E. Nesbit hovered there waiting for George Bernard Shaw, with whom she was briefly in love. Eleanor Marx shocked Beatrice Potter there, with her unkempt hair and look of having "somewhat 'natural' relations with men" (39). And there Clementina Black met Richard Garnett--then Superintendent of the Reading Room--who became the means by which her sister Constance met and married his son Edward and became Constance Garnett, famed translator of the great Russian novels.

But the British Museum Reading Room inspired more than appealing anecdotes. As Susan David Bernstein points out, the Reading Room was also an instrument of social and aesthetic change. Opened May 2, 1857 in what had been the courtyard of the British Museum, designed to accommodate more books and readers than previous sites, the new space, with its rows of desks raying out from a central platform presided over by the superintendent, offered women a stage on which to renegotiate their relation to public life. Bernstein has scoured a range of primary sources--the British Museum signature books and letters of application for reader's tickets, the reading notebooks kept by Amy Levy and George Eliot, the correspondence between Garnett and Mathilde Blind--to show how women writers interacted, socially and intellectually, with the scholarly resources and spaces offered by the Reading Room during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The result has implications for both how we think about reading and how we think about the intersection of individuals with such newly prominent public institutions as the museum and the library.

Nineteenth-century images of women readers often depicted reading as a private, domestic activity. From Winslow Homer's The New Novel (1877, above) to Frederick Leighton's The Girl with the Golden Hair (1895), paintings of women reading emphasized a suggestive, mysterious inwardness. Even the 1885 Punch cartoon of Reading Room regulars, which Bernstein includes, isolates the only woman among them, poet Mary Robinson, who appears dreamily perched on a desk surrounded by male readers. But reading is a social as well as a private activity. Almost twenty years ago, in The Woman Reader (1995), Kate Flint called for more materialist analyses of reading practices. Providing a richly historicized response to this call, Bernstein shows why it mattered for women to read in the company of others, in a publicly visible space associated with professional labor. Insisting on the "exteriority" of women's reading experiences, Bernstein offers a valuable counterweight not only to Homer's and Leighton's isolated readers, but also to the assumption that what ambitious women needed was solitude, the oft-cited Woolfian "room of one's own." In chapters on women translators and poets as well as on novelists George Eliot and Virginia Woolf, Bernstein shows how women writers used the Reading Room, and how this public space--this "roomscape"--played a crucial role in the making of their writing careers.

Bernstein's four-pronged method involves historical, theoretical, literary, and "catalogical" angles of vision (3). Of these the historical is most fully developed. Chapter Two in particular, which highlights the translating work done by Eleanor Marx, Clementina Black, Constance (Black) Garnett, and Amy Levy, vividly re-creates these women's intellectual engagement with new ideas and with each other. Translation, Bernstein suggests, not only brought them a livelihood, but also led them into personal and intellectual connections that facilitated their reshaping of women's roles. Consider what Eleanor Marx did in the single year of 1886. While working daily at the Reading Room, she finished her translation of Madame Bovary; invited friends to a reading of A Doll's House at her home near the British Museum; "danced with anger," according to one observer, when she failed to gain access to the Kama Sutra; and wrote a pamphlet, The Woman Question, with her lover Edward Aveling. Along with fellow Reading Room habitués like Olive Schreiner (who introduced her to Ibsen's work), Beatrice Potter Webb, and Annie Besant, as well as the Black sisters, she was part of a "veritable social translation of women's roles" (36). Thus the Reading Room facilitated women's access to public life. Designed by political exile Anthony
The question of how the Reading Room space affects those working within it underlies Bernstein's theoretical framework. Here, her work intersects with the burgeoning field of museum studies. Many museologists, following the lead of Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach in "The Universal Survey Museum" (1980), Eileen Hooper Greenhill in Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge (1992), and Tony Bennett in The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics (1995), have emphasized the museum's disciplinary role, its inculcation of imperialist and nationalist ideologies as part of what Bennett calls the nineteenth-century "exhibitionary complex."  

In contrast, Bernstein draws from Bourdieu's "space of possibilities," Benjamin's arcades, Derrida's archives, and particularly from Foucault's notion of the "heterotopia" to theorize the museum's contradictory pressures and generative potential. Foucault himself was tantalizingly brief on the subject of heterotopias, using the word in a brief essay called "Des Espaces Autres" ("Of Other Spaces") in 1984. Listing as examples boarding schools, prisons, cemeteries, festivals, brothels, and colonies as well as museums and libraries, he defines the heterotopia as a space in which other actual sites within a culture are "simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted." Citing this essay, Bernstein uses heterotopia to denote "a transitional space, one that encompasses temporal discontinuities" in productive, unsettling ways, opening the museum and library to "occult and spiritual elements" (18). Bernstein might have drawn usefully as well from Kevin Hetherington's The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering (1997). Here Hetherington points out that Foucault also referred to heterotopias in Les mots et les choses (1966), where Borges's "Chinese encyclopedia"--which divides animals into logically inconsistent categories--served as his example. Drawing on both usages, Hetherington defines heterotopias as "sites of contrast whose existence sets up unsettling juxtapositions of incommensurate things within either the body of society or within a text" (Hetherington 8). This linkage of heterotopic spaces to texts would have served Bernstein well as she sought to make the sometimes difficult leap from the space of the Reading Room to the literary texts produced there.

Crucial to the Reading Room's productive role in women's writing careers was its literal and figurative "hub," Richard Garnett. As superintendent, Garnett sat at the room's central desk. There he answered readers' questions with extraordinary kindness, often putting his many female friends--among them poets Robinson, Levy, and Blind--in contact with each other and with potential publishers. "Garnett's physical presence and frequent advocacy," writes Bernstein, "provided a nodal point that extended beyond the circular walls of the Reading Room" (102). In much the same way, the room's complex spatiality extended into the poetry inspired there. Blending historical, theoretical, and literary analysis, Bernstein argues that poems by Levy, Robinson, and Blind allude to the heterotopic qualities of the Reading Room by emphasizing thresholds and mingling interior with exterior spaces (81).

But not all women writers loved the Reading Room. Turning to George Eliot and Virginia Woolf, Bernstein coins the term "dome-consciousness" to suggest the discomfort both of them felt there. For Eliot, writes Bernstein, the domed Reading Room delivered a "blistering blend of imagined surveillance and judgment of both her writing and her lifestyle" (120). Both writers treat domes negatively: in Eliot's Romola, the Duomo embodies an oppressively all-seeing authority; in Woolf's Jacob's Room and A Room of One's Own, domes are conflated with a masculinist public space. But Bernstein argues that their responses were not purely negative. The Reading Room, she says, offered Eliot both essential scholarly resources and a model for Romola: "a corollary to the kind of panorama that her historical novel achieves" in shuttling between internal and external views of characters, and between the personal and the historical (116).

Woolf's response, according to Bernstein, was similarly complex. Although Woolf complained about the male canon inscribed under the dome's windows in the 1907 redecoration, her annoyance led not only to rebellious doodles but also to her stylistic experimentalism in Jacob's Room (1922). Woolf's "recycling and meandering style of thinking and researching and writing," Bernstein argues, is a turn not inward but outward, an "exteriority" inspired by the room's cartwheel design and chronological heterogeneity (149). Indeed the index of misogynistic subject headings Woolf constructs for A Room of One's Own opens up a whole new "catalogical" methodology, inviting us to examine indexes and catalogues for what they tell us about women writers.

Insisting on "the public and social dimensions of literary production," Bernstein leans heavily on the word "exteriority," which she defines as "public, social spaces where women could meet, conduct research, find mentors, and inspire and learn from one another" (2). Although these spaces do not exclude "interiority," since women can still think private thoughts in them, Bernstein contrasts her term, "exteriority," with the emphasis on "interiority" in Diana Fuss's Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms That Shaped Them (2004). Since Fuss, citing Benjamin, sees interiority as a defining trait of modernity--"the moment of history where exteriority is driven inside by the domesticating passions of the bourgeoisie" (12)--there is a lot at stake in the term "exteriority." Does the Reading Room--like the arcades--suggest the colonization of public space by the bourgeois interior, with women's presence there suggesting simply an extension of their domestic role? Or does it offer an insistently exterior space in which professional women can make their involvement in the public sphere visible?

Opting for the latter viewpoint, Bernstein argues that the Reading Room "promoted a valuable exteriority precisely through the visibility that facilitated networking and imaginative speculation rather than only a gendered policing of domination and subordination" (16). Her account of how women used the space supports this contention, as does her intricate examination of Eliot's and Woolf's more reluctant use of various libraries, each offering a different degree of privacy. But the term "exteriority" itself is used in so many different ways that it sometimes seems to lose its precision and occasionally even push this otherwise convincing argument to the verge of circularity. A reference to "women seeking the wider waters of exteriority" (63), for example, begs the question of whether the professional stature these women seek is, in fact, identical with what Bernstein means by "exteriority."

That said, Bernstein's book provides a fascinating glimpse into the reading practices of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women who sought to define themselves as professional writers and public intellectuals. In the process, Bernstein makes three important contributions to nineteenth-century studies. First, building on the work of Judith Walkowitz's City of Dreadful Delight (1992) and, more recently, Ana Vadillo's Woman Poets and Urban Aesthetics (2005), she furthers our understanding of how Victorian women used newly accessible public spaces. Particularly for women without independent means, she suggests, the British Museum provided a vital, salon-like web of connections. Secondly, as mentioned above, she sheds fresh light on women's reading practices. And finally, she joins the growing number of scholars-
such as Catherine Paul, in *Poetry in the Museums of Modernism* (2002), or Rupert Arrowsmith in *Modernism and the Museum* (2010)—who find in museum studies a rich and illuminating way of understanding writers’ relations to the ideas, art, and institutions around them.

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