


JAMES SMITH ALLEN

# In the Public Eye

*A History of Reading in Modern  
Britain, 1800-1940*

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A HISTORY OF READING IN MODERN  
FRANCE, 1800–1940

*James Smith Allen*

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À Anne

Tu n'as pas perdu ces heures  
Si légère tu demeures  
Après ces beaux abandons;  
Parcille à celui qui pense  
Et dont l'âme se dépense  
À s'accroître de ses dons!  
—Paul Valéry, "*Poèmes*"

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May such blessings come to you.

*Enid, Oklahoma*  
*September 1990*



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## ABBREVIATIONS

ADSVP	Archives du département de la Seine et de la ville de Paris
AMG	Archives du ministère de la guerre
AN	Archives nationales
APP	Archives de la préfecture de police
BA	Bibliothèque de l'arsenal
BHVP	Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris
BIPN	Bibliothèque de l'Institut pédagogique national
BN	Bibliothèque nationale
BSL	Bibliothèque Spœlberch de Louvain-la-Neuve
RTF	Bibliothèque du théâtre français
Coll.	Collection
Corr.	Correspondance
Deltail	Louis Deltail, <i>Le Peintre graveur illustré (XIXe-XXe siècle)</i> , 32 vols. (1906-26)
EZRP	Émile Zola Research Program
HEF	<i>Histoire de l'édition française</i> , ed. Roger Chartier and Henri-Jean Martin, 4 vols. (1982-86)
MdF	<i>Mercur de France</i>
MNF	Musée national de l'éducation
NAFr	Nouvelles acquisitions françaises
RdM	<i>Revue des deux mondes</i>

Unless noted otherwise, all books cited here and in the footnotes were published in Paris. All translations from the French are the author's.





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## In the Public Eye

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## INTRODUCTION

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"DOCUMENTS" in the history of reading can appear in curious guises, such as the portrait of Henri Fantin-Latour's two sisters completed by 1859 (see III. I. 1).<sup>1</sup> Seated in the corner of a sewing room, Marie is portrayed with an open book before her, while Nathalie appears in a deeply pensive mood. The two women are apparently reading together, an ordinary middle-class activity in nineteenth-century France. And yet Fantin-Latour's treatment of this familiar domestic scene leaves the attentive viewer uneasy. Is Marie reading aloud here or not? Her lips are neither parted nor pursed, and her sister seems absorbed if not entirely distracted by her own thoughts. Their immediate relationship is made no clearer by the artist's odd choice of title, "The Two Sisters, or The Embroiderers"; reading is not even mentioned. Knowledge about the women complicates still further an adequate understanding of their situation. The pensive Nathalie, for instance, suffered from schizophrenia and was committed to the *Maison nationale de Charente* in the same year that the painting was completed. Was Marie then reading aloud to comfort her tragically deranged companion? Or was she reading silently to herself out of despair, or simply out of neglect? Without closer study, answers to these queries may not be ventured, especially in light of the other, equally curious double portraits by Fantin-Latour. All of them show the same detachment between the sitters, as do similar portraits by Berthe Morisot, Édouard Manet, Auguste Renoir, and Edgar Degas, to name some of the many painters of this common cultural practice.<sup>2</sup>

However ambiguous, the artistic image does suggest one major theme in the history of reading that appears repeatedly and more clearly in other, less problematic historical sources: a new context was rapidly undermining the collective nature of reading. Personal letters, diaries, and autographes indicate that the circumstances in which people read and interpreted texts were changing in the nineteenth century. For centuries literacy had been the preserve of a small religious, political, and social elite who used their mastery of the printed word, in part at least, to maintain control of the illiterate majority of French men and women. The church protected its privileged reading of the scriptures

<sup>1</sup> See Douglas Druick and Michel Hoog, *Fantin-Latour* (Ottawa, 1983), 94-95; and Edward Lucie-Smith, *Fantin-Latour* (Oxford, 1977), 11-37.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Druick and Hoog, *Fantin-Latour*, 89-90, 145-46; Lucie Smith, *Fantin-Latour*, pl. 7; and John Rowland, *The History of Impressionism*, 4th ed. (New York, 1972), 201, 213, 216, and 321.



1.1 Henri Fantin-Latour, "The Two Sisters, or The Embroiderers" (1890). Courtesy of the Saint Louis (Missouri) Art Museum

in monasteries and universities; the king's officials monitored all secular publications and carried word of royal edicts to the populace; and the landed nobility shaped the world of letters by their patronage. Reading had long served a public purpose—in the church, in the courts, in the salons, even in the family. Within this historical setting, relatively few people read alone or silently, much less pondered the meaning of the restricted number of books available without the assistance or intrusion of others. Moreover, the face-to-face relations of a preliterate culture lingered on after literacy had become an ordinary feature of private life in the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

From the early nineteenth century onward, however, the practice of oral reading appears less prominently in the personal accounts of literate individuals. Reading aloud, once a common element of intellectual life in the Old Regime, became a special event at church, in the classroom, on the rostrum, or for children at bedtime. Accordingly, as political, religious, and social controls over printed matter weakened, the rapidly growing number of literate people was surrounded less and less intrusively by authorities, neighbors, and relations. Freed from a traditional milieu, individuals increasingly sought the meaning of more freely available texts in deeply personal, isolated acts. These literate activities, moreover, occurred within a diffuse context of institutions and networks—such as primary schools, literary reviews, reading circles, even bookstores—that suggested rather than determined what and how people read. By the end of the nineteenth century, women like Marie Fantin-Latour could well have neglected their nearby companions or family members for the sake of a book. Nineteenth-century portraits of such readers not only made effective use of a familiar artistic setting, however intriguing on close inspection; they also illustrated a remarkable transition in the historical circumstances of reading in the last two hundred years.<sup>4</sup>

A rich variety of artistic and literary sources also suggests another significant theme in the history of reading: the development of private interpretive practices. In Fantin-Latour's portrait it is clear that even if Marie were reading

<sup>3</sup> See HEP 2:402–43, 498–514, 3:24–45, 470–509, and 4:528–43, 564–71; Daniel Roche, *Le Peuple de Paris. Essai sur la culture populaire au XVIIIe siècle* (1981), 204–41; Roger Chartier, ed., *Pratiques de la lecture* (Marseille, 1985), 62–68, 126–52; Marie Lyons, *Le Triomphe du Livre. Une Histoire sociologique de la lecture dans la France du XIXe siècle* (1987), 221–48; Roger Chartier, *Leçons et lectures dans la France d'Ancien Régime* (1987), 223–44; and idem, ed., *Les Usages de l'imprimé* (1987), 7–20, 85–127. Cf. Robert Escarpit et al., "La Lecture," in *La Vie populaire en France du Moyen Âge à nos jours* (1968), 2278–352; John Lough, *Writing and Public in France from the Middle Ages to the Present Day* (London, 1978), 274–309; Claude Labrousse, *Lire au XVIIIe siècle. 'La Nouvelle Héloïse' et ses lecteurs* (Lyon, 1983), 241–73; and Jean Hébrard and Anne-Marie Chartier, *Discours sur la lecture (1350–1980)* (1989).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Peter Berger et al., *The Hidden Mind: Modernism and Consciousness* (New York, 1974), 62–82; Richard S. Tedlow, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York, 1977), 1–14, 123–255; and Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 1–56, 141–80.

aloud, she surely paid far closer attention to the text than her sister did. The two women must have experienced the author's world in very different ways. Marie more immediately than Nathalie. Given the apparent psychological distance from her sister, the latter may have pursued another train of thought entirely. Similar interpretive differences appear in the responses of readers to other texts. For example, letters that people wrote about the books they read in the nineteenth and early twentieth century express a surprisingly wide range of interpretation, not all of which was based on careful attention to the texts. Like critics who failed to recognize the merit of their contemporaries, usually for extraneous reasons, the correspondents tended to read personal concerns into their books. Controversial works frequently elicited responses having less to do with the authors' intentions than with the audiences' preoccupations. Consequently, predispositions and prejudices also played a prominent role in the reception of literary texts, past and present.<sup>5</sup> To that extent, Nathalie Fajon-Lamour was not exceptional in the way she must have responded to print; her distraction was only more extreme.

But the complexities of interpretation remained no more the same from 1800 to 1940 than did their circumstances. Just as the social and institutional context of reading was moving from public and collective to private and individual, readers' responses to texts developed accordingly. From the evidence in personal correspondence, journals, and autobiographies about the reading experience from the eighteenth century onward, men and women were less and less given to seeking out identifiable individuals, most often the author, in the books they read; meanwhile, they came more and more to look for themselves. Over time, readers' predispositions evolved from the expectation that the novel, most notably, would represent and explain external reality, to the expectation that it would provide new sources of inspiration for self-discovery. The specific emotional and introspective concerns of the romantics, like those of Chateaubriand early in the nineteenth century, took fully one hundred years or more to become those of readers, like Anatole France's audience in the early twentieth century. In the interim, rational and neoclassical preoccupations, prominent features of the Enlightenment, lingered on in the presuppositions of many French readers who considered literary texts in an immediate, often quite utilitarian fashion. Reading as a self-consciously textual and interpretive experience thus developed much later than did self-consciously literary and artistic creation in the history of modern culture.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Levin F. Schickel, *The Sociology of Literary Taste*, trans. Brian Battenbaw (Chicago, 1966), 31-108; T. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study in Literary Judgment* (New York, 1929), 1-15; Walter J. Stimpert, *With Respect to Readers: Dimensions of Literary Response* (Ithaca, 1970), 57-90; and Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), 440-51.

<sup>6</sup> See Cécile Grégh, *Moderernity and Its Discontents: French Society and the French Man of Letters in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1967), 1-83; F. W. L. Hemmings, *Culture and So-*

At the same time, the readers who can be documented in available historical sources barely acknowledged the changing creative concerns of the major writers. The new forms that authors explored from the early romantic to the late symbolist movements attracted the attention of relatively few contemporary readers (most of them authors themselves). In the experience of literate French men and women, literary and intellectual trends appeared in a personal guise remarkably different from what scholars have studied so diligently.<sup>7</sup> The reception of literary works, especially, meant an equally complex process of filtering colored by various factors, including the psychological disposition, social context, and cultural background of the reader. In any case, the reader rarely shared the author's concerns in the text. It was not until the twentieth century, in more deliberately ambiguous creations like Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, that reception reflected creation, perhaps because the author had come to accept reading as a legitimate complement to writing.<sup>8</sup> But the reader's creative participation was still more easily elicited by a text than directed by it. Other external factors were also clearly involved and continued to conform the direct relationship between the reader and the printed page.

Thus many sources, such as Fautin-Labour's portrait of his sisters, suggest the need for a careful historical examination of readers and reading. Writers and texts changed over time, of course, but so did readers, their responses, and their circumstances. Interpretive practices and their temporal milieus require serious consideration - and for good reason. Study of interpretations and contexts elucidates the larger forces affecting the reception of texts central to the transmission and evolution of culture. Publishing, education, censorship, and taste, for example, all affected the way texts were perceived from one generation to another. But a history of reading also reveals the influence of textual reception on the very nature of literate culture, and more, on the historical periods in which it developed. As with all cultural activities, reading was not solely the object of changes occurring around it; it was as well an active agent of those changes. Textual reception became increasingly important in France as literacy came to pervade public and private life (if only because there were more people responding to print). How certain documents

city in France 1848-1898. *Disidents and Plutocrats* (London, 1971), 1-6; and Michel Raimond, *La Crise de roman. Des romans de naturalisme aux années vingt*, rev. ed. (1985), 9-22.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Robert Escarpit, "Creative Transfer: as a Key to 'Literature,'" *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 10 (1961): 16-21; David Bakke, "Reconnaissance: Balzac et son public féminin," *Oeuvres et critiques* 11 (1986): 253-62; and Anne-Marie Thiébaud, *Le Roman quotidien. Lectures et lectures populaires. À la Belle Époque* (1984), 37-60.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Pierre Clarac and André Berthelot (1951), 3:282-86; Douglas Alden, *Marcel Proust and His French Critics* (Los Angeles, 1940), 67-68; and Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington, Ind., 1984), 47-66.



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