Toward a History of Reading in Modern France, 1800-1940

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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 illustration).[1] 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, a common 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, "Les Deux Soeurs, ou Les Brodeuses"; reading is not even mentioned. Knowledge of the women involved complicates still further an adequate understanding of their situation. The pensive Nathalie, we know, suffered from schizophrenia and was committed to the Maison nationale de Charenton in the same year that the painting was completed. Was Marie, then, reading aloud to render comfort to her deranged companion? Or was she reading silently to herself out of despair, or simply out of

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[1] On this artist's work, see Douglas Druick and Michel Hoog, *Fantin-Latour* (Ottawa, 1983), 94-95; and Edward Lucie-Smith, *Fantin-Latour* (Oxford, 1977), 11-37.

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. Both of them show the same detachment between the sitters, as do similar portraits by Berthe Morisot, Edouard Manet, Auguste Renoir, and Edgar Degas, to name some of the many painters of this common cultural activity in modern France.[2]

However ambiguous the artistic image, it does suggest two major themes in the history of reading which appear repeatedly and more clearly in other, less problematic historical sources.[3] Per-

THE TWO SISTERS, 1859, Henri Fantin-Latour (The Saint Louis Art Museum, Museum purchase)

[2] See Fantin-Latour's other versions of this motif in Druick and Hoog, *Fantin-Latour*, 89-90 ("Liseuse et brodeuse," 1855-58); and 145-46 ("La Lecture," 1870). See also John Rewald, *The History of Impressionism*, 4th ed. (New York, 1973), 201, 243, 276, 327; and Martyn Lyons, *Le Triomphe du livre. Une Histoire sociologique de la lecture dans la France du XIX^e siècle* (Paris, 1987), 240-48.

[3] These and other historical developments discussed here are based on extensive preliminary research in archival and published primary historical materials. These sources include journals, notebooks, memoirs, and autobiographies (such as those by Joubert, Stendhal, Chateaubriand, Michelet, Goncourt, Renard, Gide, Valéry, and Sartre); literary criticism and book reviews (by Mme de Staël, Nisard, Sainte-Beuve, Taine, Brunetière, and lesser critics

sonal letters, diaries, and autobiographies indicate that the circumstances in which people read and interpreted texts were changing in the nineteenth century; a new context was rapidly undermining the collective nature of reading. 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 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 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 long after literacy had become an ordinary feature of private life in the nineteenth century.[4]

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 religious, political, and social controls over printed matter weakened, the rapidly growing number of literate people was surrounded less and less intrusively by authorities,

writing for newspapers); pedagogical materials and student notebooks from the nineteenth century (at the Bibliothèque de l'Institut pédagogique national in Paris and the Musée national de l' éducation near Rouen); and personal correspondence, especially the fan mail addressed to prominent French authors, at the Bibliothèque nationale (letters to Anatole France, Zola, and the Goncourt), the Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris (to Sue and Michelet), and the Bibliothèque Spoelberch de Lovenjoul in Chantilly (to Balzac, Flaubert, and Sand).

[4] See *Histoire de l'édition française*, ed. Henri-Jean Martin and Roger Chartier ([Paris], 1984-86) 2:402-45, 498-514, 3:24-45, 470-509, and 4:528-41, 564-71; Daniel Roche, *Le Peuple de Paris. Essai sur la culture populaire au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1981), 204-41; *Pratiques de la lecture*, ed. Chartier (Paris, 1985), 62-88; and Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1984), 215-56. Cf. earlier accounts by Robert Escarpit et al., "La Lecture populaire en France du Moyen Age à nos jours," in *La Vie populaire en France* (Paris, 1965), 2:278-353, popular and dated; John Lough, *Writer and Public in France from the Middle Ages to the Present Day* (London, 1978), 274-399, more about writers than readers; and Claude Labrosse, *Lire au XVIII^e siècle. 'La Nouvelle Héloïse' et ses lecteurs* (Lyon, 1985), 241-73, mostly literary theory. More recent contributions are Chartier, *Lectures et lecteurs dans la France d'Ancien Régime* (Paris, 1987); *Les Usages de l'imprimé*, ed. Chartier (Paris, 1987); and Lyons, *Le Triomphe du livre*, 221-48.

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 more 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. Thus nineteenth-century portraits of such readers not only made effective use of a familiar artistic device, however intriguing on close inspection, they also illustrated a remarkable transition in the historical circumstances of reading over the past two hundred years.[5]

A rich variety of artistic and literary sources also suggests the second 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 aloud, she surely paid far closer attention to the text than her sister did. They must have experienced the author's world in very different ways, Marie more immediately than Nathalie. Given the 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. Letters, for instance, 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 infer personal concerns from their reading. Controversial works frequently elicited responses having less to do with the authors' intentions than with the readers' preoccupations. Consequently, predispositions and prejudices also played a prominent role in the way literary texts were and still are received.[6] To that extent Nathalie Fantin-Latour

[5] This perspective on the changing circumstances of reading in the modern period owes much to the modernization theories of Robert Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition* (New York, 1966), 21-44; C. E. Black, *The Dynamics of Modernization: A Study in Comparative History* (New York, 1967), 1-34; and Peter Berger et al., *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York, 1974), 63-82.

[6] Ample consideration of the nontextual sources of interpretation appears in Levin L. Schücking, *The Sociology of Literary Taste*, trans. Brian Battershaw (Chicago, 1966), 31-108; Walter J. Slatoff, *With Respect to Readers: Dimensions of Literary Response* (Ithaca, 1970), 57-90; and on French reading in particular, Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), 440-51.

was not exceptional in the way she must have responded to books; 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 tended to move from public and collective to private and individual, readers' responses to texts developed accordingly. From the evidence of the writers of personal letters, journals, and diaries about the reading experience from the eighteenth century onward, men and women were less and less given to seek out identifiable individuals, most often the author in the books they read, while they came more and more to look for themselves. Over time, readers' predispositions evolved from the expectation that the novel, for example, 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 in the early twentieth century. In the interim the rational and neoclassical preoccupation with empirical phenomena, a prominent feature 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 experience developed here much later than did self-consciously literary and artistic creation in the history of modern culture.[7]

At the same time, the readers who were 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 whom were authors themselves). In the experience of many literate French men and women, literary and intellectual trends appeared in a personal guise surprisingly different from what scholars have studied so diligently.[8] The reception of complex literary works, espe-

[7] See good discussions of authors at odds with their audience in César Graña, *Modernity and its Discontents: French Society and the French Man of Letters in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1967), 1-83, despite errors of fact and citation; F. W. J. Hemmings, *Culture and Society in France 1848-1898: Dissidents and Philistines* (London, 1971), 1-6; and Michel Raimond, *La Crise du roman. Du lendemain du naturalisme aux années vingt*, rev. ed. (Paris, 1985), 9-22, a more scholarly view.

[8] Interpretive variations on the literary canon are the substance of professional criticism. Cf. responses of different audiences to prose realism: David Bellos, "Reconnaissances: Balzac

cially, involved an equally complex process of filtering colored by many 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 *A la recherche du temps perdu,* that reception reflected creation, perhaps because the author had come to accept reading as a legitimate complement to writing.[9] But the reader's active, creative participation was still more easily elicited by a text than directed by it. Other external factors were also clearly involved and continued to confound the direct relationship between the reader and the printed page.

Many sources, such as Fantin-Latour's portrait of his sisters, thus 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 circumstances, and their responses in discernible ways that require serious consideration—and for good reason. Study of contexts and interpretations can elucidate the main 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 the more literacy came to pervade public and private life. How certain documents were interpreted—such as France's many constitutions since 1791—informed subsequent political events at times even more profoundly than the composition of the texts themselves.[10] Clearly, the interpretive activities of readers mattered to

et son public féminin," *Oeuvres et critiques* (special issue, in press, on "Lectures de Balzac"). Nora Atkinson, *Eugène Sue et le roman-feuilleton* (Paris, 1929), 67-77; and Anne-Marie Thiesse, *Le Roman quotidien. Lecteurs et lectures populaires à la Belle Epoque* (Paris, 1984), 37-60.

[9] Cf. the reflections of the narrator, as writer and reader, on George Sand's *François le champi* in Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu,* ed. Pierre Clarac and André Ferré (Paris, 1954), 3:883-86; with Proust's reviewers in Douglas Alden, *Marcel Proust and His French Critics* (Los Angeles, 1940), 67-82.

[10] E.g., the variations on the "Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen" of 1789 in the constitutions of 1791, 1793, 1795, 1848, 1946, and 1958. The different definitions of rights suggest well the historical role played by interpretation in the framing of France's most important political documents. See *Les Constitutions de la France depuis 1789,* ed. Jacques Godechot (Paris, 1979), 33-35, 79-83, 101-3, 264-66, 371-76, and 424. Cf. a related concern with the active historical agency of culture in Roger Thabault, *Education and Change in a*

the course of history as well as to the nature of culture. And yet, a comprehensive study of this pervasive and profound feature of earlier centuries remains unwritten.

Approaches

For a host of reasons, reading as an important cultural activity has not been studied historically. Intellectual historians have largely ignored this aspect of the past, however central reading is to the fate of ideas. Until recently historical scholars were usually concerned with tracing influences among texts; many of them assumed that a book once written existed as a cultural artifact independent of the audience that interpreted it.[11] More venturesome historians have explored the book trade and assessed literacy rates as ways to account for the nature and extent of readership. In doing so, however, they have only inferred actual interpretive practices.[12] On the other hand, literary historians have been seriously interested in the history of reception, albeit of a highly critical sort. But their well-documented work remains limited to the published responses of established authors to texts recognized as classics, and it fails to consider the wide range of responses to other printed material available to a more ordinary but far larger audience.[13] Unfortunately, literary theorists with broader interests than those of literary historians in reception deal mostly with readers who exist solely as ideal constructs or as figures in the literary text. Occasionally they consider their colleagues or students as readers, but, like education specialists, psychologists, and sociologists, they rarely study readers of the past.[14]

Village Community: Mazières-en-Gatine 1848-1914, trans. Peter Tregear (London, 1971), 133-228.

[11] Note how little attention is paid to audiences in otherwise admirable histories of French ideas and literature: Pierre Barrière, *La Vie intellectuelle en France du XVI^e siècle à l'époque contemporaine* (Paris, 1961), 551-62; and *Littérature française,* dir. Claude Pichois, 16 vols. (Paris, 1968ff.), esp. the sections in each volume on literature and society.

[12] E.g., James Smith Allen, *Popular French Romanticism: Authors, Readers, and Books in the 19th Century* (Syracuse, 1981), 21-73, 103-77; and François Furet and Jacques Ozouf, *Lire et écrire. L'Alphabétisation des français de Calvin à Jules Ferry* (Paris, 1977), 1:13-68.

[13] See René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism 1750-1950,* 6 vols. (New Haven, 1955-85), with excellent bibliograhies for each chapter on a major critical movement or critic at the end of each volume. Cf. Henri Peyre, *Writers and their Critics: A Study of Misunderstanding* (Ithaca, 1944), 81-136.

[14] Excellent collections of essays in reader-response theory and criticism, with annotated bibliographies, are *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism,* ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore, 1980), 233-72; and *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation,* ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton, 1980), 401-24. Related work in the social sciences is well surveyed by Alan C. Purves and Richard Beach, *Literature*

Reading thus still requires examination over time, first of all in its immediate historical context. Most historians know how important milieu is to cultural developments.[15] For instance, the industrial economy made possible the proliferation of print to ever larger numbers of people who could easily spare the money to acquire books and the time to read them. In the early modern past, a recently published novel, for example, cost as much as a worker's monthly earnings. But after 1800, new commercial practices in publishing and new machinery in printing, including the rotary press and the linotype machine, significantly expanded the availability of texts. Publishing shared in the rapid growth of an industrial economy based on vastly higher productivity and the lower prices this productivity made possible. Higher material standards of living, in turn, made reading a common leisure and business activity, one appropriately symbolized by the growing delivery of mail; the French sent and received five times more correspondence in 1940 than they did in 1870.[16] Similarly, access to the daily newspaper has expanded to the regular clientèle of nearly every café in France—its cost is usually a glass of wine, a small fraction of a worker's hourly wage.

Historians also recognize the rapid social dispersion of reading. Once the privilege primarily of religious, political, and social elites in major urban centers of the Old Regime, literacy reached "outward and downward" to the working and rural classes almost everywhere in France, and by the beginning of the twentieth century was nearly universal.[17] Efforts to establish free, compulsory, and secular

and the Reader: Research in Response to Literature, Reading Interests, and the Teaching of Literature (Urbana, Ill., 1972); and *Researching Response to Literature and the Teaching of Literature: Points of Departure,* ed. Charles R. Cooper (Norwood, N.J., 1985). For accounts of comparable work in France, see Nicole Robine, "La Lecture," in *Le Littéraire et le social. Eléments pour une sociologie de la littérature,* ed. R. Escarpit (Paris, 1970), 221-44, with bibliography 312-15; and more recently, Jacques Leenhardt and Pierre Józsa, *Lire la lecture. Essai de sociologie de la lecture* (Paris, 1982), 17-26.

[15] E.g., Barrière, *La Vie intellectuelle,* 551; as part of the *Littérature française* series, Germaine Brée, *Twentieth-Century French Literature,* trans. Louise Guiney (Chicago, 1983), 11-80; and Maurice Crubellier, *Histoire culturelle de la France, XIX^e^-XX^e^ siècles* (Paris, 1974), 9-17.

[16] Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques, *Annuaire statistique de la France. Résumé retrospectif, 1939* (Paris, 1940), 56:*2. Particularly relevant to industrialization's impact on reading and other cultural activities are the optimistic view presented by Jean Fourastié, *Machinisme et le bien être* (Paris, 1951), 93-96; and the more critical view by Crubellier, *Histoire culturelle,* 205-14.

[17] See Michel Fleury and Pierre Valmary, "Le Progrès de l'instruction élémentaire de Louis XIV à Napoléon III," *Population* 12 (1957), 71-92; Antoine Prost, *Histoire de l'enseignement en France 1800-1967* (Paris, 1968), 96-107; and Furet and Ozouf, *Lire et écrire,* 1:349-69. A good, though now somewhat dated, bibliography of historical work on literacy is *Literacy in History: An Interdisciplinary Bibliography,* ed. Harvey J. Graff (New York, 1981).

elementary education, beginning with the Guizot laws in 1833, culminated in Jules Ferry's legislation in the second decade of the Third Republic. More formal instruction affected adults as well as children. By the end of the nineteenth century many women had acquired this essential skill: three times as many of them could sign their names in 1876 than had been able to one hundred years earlier. With the expansion of basic literacy came greater sophistication in the consideration of printed texts, as the time people spent in school lengthened and the literacy requirements of an industrial economy grew. This diffusion of reading skills made possible the remarkable modern demand for textual material—remarkable, that is, before the information explosion in a postindustrial consumer economy after the Second World War.

The political dangers posed by these developments in the French economy and the changing social structure were obvious to many fearful observers before and after the Revolution of 1789; legal controls on popular reading seemed necessary.[18] Thus literary and press censorship remained a fact of French literate life, with few interruptions, from the Old Regime to the Third Republic. However anachronistic because of the rapid growth of literacy and the publishing industry, censorship of the French theater lasted until 1906. But other political influences on interpretive activity appeared in the various intrusions of new ideologies into literary and nonliterary texts alike. Royalism, Bonapartism, republicanism, socialism, and syndicalism, among other important political ideas, colored the way people read as well as wrote during the major revolutionary upheavals in nineteenth-century France. (Everything French seems to involve politics.) Even symbolist literature could be subject to politicized readings by opinion leaders in French society, as Jean-Paul Sartre noted in his wartime notebooks.[19] Interpretive

[18] See Irene Collins, *The Government and the Newspaper Press, 1814-1881* (London, 1959); Odile Krakovitch, *Hugo censuré. La Liberté au théâtre au XIX^e siècle* (Paris, 1985), based on the author's doctoral thesis; and Fernand Drujon, *Catalogue des ouvrages: Ecrits et dessins de toute nature poursuivis, supprimés ou condamnés depuis le 21 octobre 1814 jusqu'au 31 juillet 1877* (Paris, 1879), invaluable though incomplete. These studies may be complemented by the substantial material pertaining to censorship in the Archives nationales (AJ[13]1050 for the Opéra 1799-1841, F[18] 39-40 for the Parisian booktrade 1799-1814, F[21] 966-95 for various Parisian theaters 1804-1864) and in the Bibliothèque nationale (NAF 5001-2 and 10739 for the Parisian booktrade 1811-1814).

[19] See Sartre's wartime reflections on Anatole France as a source of personal influence on Proust's work when Sartre was particularly sensitive to the political as well as the philosophical implications of nearly all his reading, in *Les Carnets de la drôle de guerre. Novembre 1939-mars 1940* (Paris, 1983), 415. Cf. the perspective of Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London, 1978), 11-43; Frank Lentricchia, *After the New*

communities, like critics and teachers, played important roles in shaping reception.

These contextual influences, among others, studied by historians coincide with those studied by literary specialists. Major cultural developments in literature invariably affected the expectations of many readers of French authors.[20] Alfred de Musset's provincial readers, Dupuis and Cotonet, were bemused by the literary news from Paris during the July Monarchy, and they sought out what was Romantic in all their reading, only to suffer serious disappointment.[21] Their naïve literary predispositions were shared by each succeeding generation of informed provincial readers eager to appreciate other "isms" emanating from Paris. But they were no wiser for their eagerness. During the Third Republic, some in Emile Zola's audience were similarly outraged by the apparent contradictions of another literary movement, Naturalism. Long after Zola had completed the Rougon-Macquart series, he was still accused of obscenity, even when his cause has clearly shifted from the naturalistic novel to the defense of Captain Alfred Dreyfus.[22] All the same, the contextual interests of intellectual, literary, and political historians clearly intersect in their respective assessments of the climate of opinion and its impact on ordinary readers, however extraordinary the authors or their texts.

Reading as an historical phenomenon, nevertheless, involves more than the elucidation of the historical moment that contributed to the way printed material was perceived. It also involves serious consideration of the interpretations that identifiable readers had of specific texts. Literary specialists schooled in the Anglo-American "New Criticism" after the Second World War know full well the importance of the work itself to the reader's response.[23] They con-

Criticism (Chicago, 1980), 102-55; Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, 1981), 17-102; and Edward Said and Hayden White in *The Politics of Interpretation*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago, 1983), 7-32, 119-44.

[20] This is the assumption underlying nearly every major study of literary movements. See the introductory sections of Fernand Brunot et al., *Histoire de la langue française*, 13 vols. (Paris, 1966-68); Jean-Pol Caput, *La Langue française. Histoire d'une institution* (Paris, 1975), vol. 3; and Marcel Cohen, *Histoire d'une langue. Le Français (des origines à nos jours)*, 3rd ed. (Paris, 1967).

[21] Alfred de Musset, "Lettres de Dupuis et Cotonet," *Oeuvres complètes en prose*, ed. Maurice Allem and Paul Courant (Paris, 1960), 819-36.

[22] The flood of letters that Zola received during the Dreyfus affair often confused his former literary interests with the defense of Captain Dreyfus. See the most complete collection of this correspondence at the Emile Zola Research Program in the Robarts Library of the University of Toronto.

[23] Twentieth-century American and British literary critical practice is well surveyed by

sider an exclusive emphasis on contextual concerns to be a serious diversion from the critic's main task. In urging a return to the text whose meaning is self-contained and apparent to close scrutiny by the trained reader, the New Critics in fact often identify the "affective fallacy"—the mistaking of readers' responses for the text itself—common in the critical reception studies written by so many Continental European scholars.[24] All the same, the history of criticism has been an important feature of literary history, a field that is now complemented by an important new field of literary study, reader-response criticism, drawing on some of the same textual insights of the New Critics.[25] The texts, these reception specialists well know, provide clues to how readers interpret in ways of special interest to the historian of reading.

Careful consideration of what readers do with texts constitutes a new focus of fruitful inquiry. In some studies, depending upon the approach specialists take, readers can be shown to follow the contradictory clues offered or suggested by the narrative; other readers tend to fill in the gaps left deliberately or unconsciously by the author; while still others seek to re-create the work itself according to predispositions defined by schools or styles of interpretation.[26] Here the text becomes a pretext for imputing meaning sometimes far removed from what the author either intended or achieved. Because the rich variety of approaches that readers take to a literary work sheds light on both the reader and the text, the full range of those approaches deserves study if the experience of literature is ever to be assessed more fully. For the historian of reading, this suggests a means of examining the way actual readers dealt with specific works over time. The tools of reader-response

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Wellek, *History of Western Criticism,* vols. 5 and 6. For critical variations in France, see *Modern French Criticism: From Proust and Valéry to Structuralism,* ed. John K. Simon (Chicago, 1972). Both works contain excellent bibliographies of this enormous field.

[24] On the "affective fallacy," see Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy," *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, 1954), 21-39. Note the revealing absence of "readership" from Wellek's discussion of extrinsic approaches to the study of literature, in Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York, 1956), 73-135.

[25] See Tompkins, "An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism" in *Reader-Response Criticism,* ix-xxvi; and Suleiman, "Introduction: Varieties of Audience-Oriented Criticism" in *Reader in the Text,* 3-45. Cf. Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, 1982), 31-83.

[26] Cf. Louise Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration,* rev. ed. (New York, 1968), 25-53; Wolgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, 1974), 274-94; and Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), 1-17.

critics and theorists can thus be appropriated by the historian specifically interested in readings and readers of the past.[27]

The history of reading therefore also demands attention to historical interpretive practices, to the extent that these can be known from existing sources. This involves consideration of responses to different genres, since historical readers did not read solely what scholars study critically today. Real readers did not limit themselves to drama, fiction, or poetry, they also responded to natural history, political commentary, criticism, letters, journals, newspapers, even advertisements and street signs. Moreover, what they read was of widely varying sophistication—some texts that were good, many that were bad, and many more that were mediocre. These were considered with varying degrees of competence. Informed and uninformed readings of the same texts arose in the same period and in the same culture, as well as over time and across cultures. Children read books that they considered differently as adults, and women often read differently the same texts read by men. Similarly, some people received works in foreign languages they knew poorly. These interpretive differences, among many others, the historian must recapture as best as possible.[28]

In all these variations of text and response, there remains at least one significant focus that permits a coherent account of them. That focus is the reader's dialogic relationship to the work.[29] One important source of cultural meaning is found in the interaction between the world of the reader and that of the text (often quite different from each other). Each contributes something essential to

[27] For fuller discussion on the historical uses of literature, literary criticism, and theory, see James S. Allen, "History and the Novel: *Mentalité* in Modern Popular Fiction," *History and Theory* 22 (1983): 233-52.

[28] The varieties of text are well illustrated in annual editions of the *Bibliographie de la France*, the national trade catalogue of new books; varieties of response are more difficult to document. But suggestions on the different ways texts can be received by women appear in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweickart (Baltimore, 1986), 3-30, with a good bibliography 289-303. The complications posed by cultural differences are well suggested by Laura Bohannan, "Shakespeare in the Bush," *Natural History* 75 (1966), 28-33, where members of an East African tribe find puzzling essential elements to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, such as incest and ghosts. The first half of Sartre's autobiography, on reading, in *Les Mots* (Paris, 1964) highlights the nature of children's interpretive practices.

[29] Interpretive dialog, derived from larger philosophical issues, is stressed by various phenomenological theorists. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston, Ill., 1964), 12-42, 159-92; Sartre, *What is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York, 1965), 61-154; W. Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore, 1978), 163-231; and Georges Poulet in *Reader-Response Criticism*, ed. Tompkins, 41-49.

the reading experience. As texts and readers vary, the experience naturally changes, but the relationship between text and reader remains central to an adequate understanding of reading. Any historical study of interpretive practices must therefore attend to this particular interaction that constitutes a stable analytical element to an otherwise bewildering phenomenon. Consequently, an adequate number of "reader/text" studies over a long enough period elucidates clear, coherent patterns that can be related to the contexts long studied by intellectual, literary, and social historians. However complex, textual reception is not entirely unpredictable. The limits to reader subjectivity, largely unperceived by the New Critics and even some reader-response theorists, can be studied most usefully here within the historical dynamics of the dialog between text and reader.[30]

Examining reading in this way, within the appropriate contexts and in the changing modes of interpretation, provides an understanding of the relationship between large historical developments on the one hand and specific reading practices on the other. The result is a clearer understanding of the different roles played by texts and contexts in the way people read over the past two centuries. The full significance of this widespread activity in modern life, however, can be derived only from a broad empirical perspective on a large range of sources. Given the sizeable body of recent work by historical and literary specialists on closely related problems, this synthetic approach to the history of reading becomes all the more imperative. Examination of the responses of readers over an extended period, to elucidate both their active and passive historical roles, thus has implications for at least two fields of study, the historical and the literary, concerned with similar phenomena. But this study also involves concerns central to education, psychology, sociology, even anthropology, everywhere culture and its transmission are studied. Research on interpretation, past and present, is preeminently interdisciplinary.[31]

[30] Many debates over the objectivity/subjectivity of reading activities have centered on Stanley Fish's location of interpretive authority in various "communities." E.g., see his exchange with Ronald Dworkin in *The Politics of Interpretation,* pp. 249-313; and another exchange with Wayne Booth and Eugene Goodheart in *Daedalus* 112 (1983): 175-238. In each case, the historical limits to interpretive subjectivity in reading practices are not considered, despite their importance to the problem. Cf. the historical perspective in James S. Allen, "'A Distant Echo': Reading Jules Michelet's *L'Amour* and *La Femme* in 1859-60," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 16 (Fall-Winter 1987-88): 1-2, in press.

[31] See the range of contributions to Chartier's collection of essays, *Pratiques de la lecture,*

Sources

There remains much to know about readers, of course, especially about those in the past. Like the study of sexuality and for many of the same reasons, the history of reading seems to lack reliable sources of information; literate activities were too private or too mundane to be noticed or recorded. Until now historians have generally resorted to inferences drawn from signatures on church marriage registers, for example, to document the percentage of literate adults in the population.[32] For the early modern period, signatures indicated a minimal level of education. This rudimentary education, historians believe, almost always included some reading ability because students usually learned to read before they learned to write.[33] But how sophisticated a measure of literacy is the signature? Not all historians are willing to accept it as anything more than a very crude indicator before the adoption of modern methods of teaching reading and writing simultaneously. Similar problems, however, are raised by the significance of other indirect sources, such as school enrollment figures, publishing records, and changing modes of literary criticism. In each case the actual reading experience of real people can only be surmised, even in more recent historical periods.

Leaving few records of their interaction with different kinds of texts, ordinary readers are also omitted from the careful work by literary and intellectual historians. Histories of criticism generally focus on the published responses of exceptional individuals. René Wellek's monumental *History of Western Criticism 1750-1950* (1955-85) suffers precisely from this exclusive attention, one compounded by its survey of critical principles rather than particular responses to specific texts.[34] Similarly, narrower studies of critical reception generally deal with the responses to the masterworks of major literary figures over a long period. Although this latter approach has the merit of highlighting both the reader and the text, it ignores

by scholars in psychology, sociology, linguistics, education, literature, art, besides social and cultural history.

[32] The significance of the signature as an indicator of literacy in the early modern period was first suggested by Roger Schofield, "The Measurement of Literacy in Pre-industrial England," in *Literacy in Traditional Societies,* ed. Jack Goody (Cambridge, 1968), 311-25.

[33] Cf. Furet and Ozouf, *Lire et écrire,* 1:131; and the historical work on the teaching of reading and its effectiveness: Pierre Clarac, *L'Enseignement du français* (Paris, 1972), 35-118; *Histoire de la pédagogie du 17^e siècle à nos jours,* ed. Guy Avanzini (Paris, 1981), 281-310; and Pierre Giolitto, *Histoire de l'enseignement primaire au XIX^e siècle* (Paris, 1984), 2:7-67.

[34] See a useful summary of this critique in Martin Bucco, *René Wellek* (Boston, 1981), 90-93.

unpublished responses and limits its attention to the readers of only a few authors and their particular work, however atypical these authors may be to the intellectual world of their generation. There were many more and many more widely published writers in the modern period than Balzac, Baudelaire, Huysmans, Maupassant, and Rimbaud, to name only a few of the nineteenth-century writers whose critics have been studied carefully.[35] The wider responses, published and unpublished, to more popular works by their contemporaries, such as Paul Féval, Ponson du Terrail, and Jules Verne, remain unstudied.

One of the many reasons for this neglect of a general history of readers and readings, besides its apparent unimportance to the creative life of great writers, is the problem of selective, or more precisely, problematic documentation. Whereas intellectual and literary histories have obvious texts to exploit, the history of reading does not, except those left by important authors. But their accounts pose serious difficulties, most frequently because writers are self-conscious creators of texts, hence self-conscious readers of texts as well. André Gide's personal journal is a particularly good example of this problem: the more mature this author grew in his craft, the more directed became his responses to the work of other authors. Reading, for him, was a logical and necessary extension of his writing.[36] As in the case of many other authors like him, his reading experiences served as a primary source of inspiration in the process of creation. Consequently, however abundant the personal accounts by some voracious readers, that is, by many prominent authors, they demand treatment every bit as careful as more complex literary texts.

Other problems are posed by similar documents left by less extraordinary individuals. Personal journals and diaries, besides autobiographies and memoirs, are notoriously distorted by motives that compete or conflict with the accurate recording of responses to printed matter. In many cases, reading is not mentioned at all,

[35] See Bellos, *Balzac Criticism in France, 1850-1900: The Making of a Reputation* (Oxford, 1976); W. T. Bandy, *Baudelaire Judged by his Contemporaries (1845-1867)* (New York, 1933); Michael Z. L. Issacharoff, *J. -K. Huysmans devant la critique en France, 1874-1960* (Paris, 1970); [René] Etiemble, *Le Mythe de Rimbaud*, vol. 1: *La Genèse du mythe, 1869-1949* (Paris, 1949); and Artina Artinian, *Maupassant Criticism in France, 1880-1940* (New York, 1941).

[36] See Gide's remark, for example, about why he wished to discontinue reading one book, *Voyage d'un naturaliste,* on May 3, 1906, because it distracted more than it contributed to his writing: *Journal* (Paris, 1948), 1:219. Cf. the responses to texts recorded in the journals of Michelet, Renard, and Valéry, among other literary figures in the modern period.

even though it is almost inconceivable that a writer, however humble, could have been totally unaware of texts by others. Why, for instance, did Captain Jean-Roch Coignet's memoirs fail to mention the speeches and bulletins read aloud to the troops during the Napoleonic Wars?[37] One can only speculate. Moreover, much of what is said about reading is extremely anecdotal, entirely unrepresentative of the usual experiences the individual must have had. After the school years, reading is usually mentioned as an unimportant diversion even when the diarist's livelihood depended upon this essential literate skill. The historian surely cannot take at face value the evidence of reading, or its absence, in all published personal accounts. Lesser writers pose problems as real as those posed by great authors.

The basis of most critical reception studies suffer from problematic sources, too, as suggested earlier. Book reviewers were published authors themselves, often personally acquainted with the writer of the text under review. A perusal of the work by a major critic, like Pontmartin, Nisard, or Sainte-Beuve, reveals the range of personal biases and animosities that clearly intruded into his or her reviews.[38] The small, almost intimate world of letters, especially in Paris, meant that few critics could completely exclude extraneous consideratons from their reading of a work by an author known to them. Because of the rapid growth of the publishing industry in the modern period, reviewers were often hired to publicize titles they had not even read, or worse, the very titles they had written. Balzac, Dumas fils, Sand, Hugo, and Zola, among others, are known to have prepared review copy of works by close personal friends, thereby contributing another complexity to the sources in the history of reading.[39]

A less obvious source appropriate to this study poses similar kinds of problems: the fan mail sent to authors about their work. Thousands of letters received by prominent members of the Académie française have been collected and preserved in the Bibliothèque nationale; the correspondence of still more writers may be

[37] See [Jean-Roch] Coignet, *Les Cahiers du capitaine Coignet (1779-1815)*, . . . (Paris, 1885).

[38] E.g., Armand de Pontmartin, *Causeries du samedi* (Paris, 1875); Désiré Nisard, *Etudes de critique littéraire* . . . (Paris, 1858); and C.-A. Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du lundi,* 15 vols. (Paris, 1851-62).

[39] E.g., the evidence of Balzac's revision of Félix Davin's critical introduction to Balzac's own *Etudes de moeurs* (1834): Balzac, *Correspondance,* ed. Roger Pierrot (Paris, 1962), 2:590, n. 1. The actual manipulation of reviews was common in nineteenth-century Paris, as Balzac's correspondence shows.

found in the Bibliothèque Spoelberch de Lovenjoul in Chantilly. These and other archival collections provide enormous stores of largely unexamined documents in the history of French readers and reading since the eighteenth century.[40] But the range of insight into these responses of a far larger audience suffer from another kind of bias. Besides the self-selecting nature of the correspondents, these letters express the selective retention of the recipients, the heirs to the authors' papers, and, of course, the libraries that acquired them. Many anonymous letters that seemed of no apparent value have been lost out of carelessness or lack of interest. The remainder were written in disproportionate numbers by friends and family of the authors inclined to like their work for obvious reasons. And most of the correspondents unknown to the writers generally had some ulterior motive in writing that very likely interfered with their account of reading the authors' works. All too many of the letters were by aspiring authors requesting help in joining the ranks of professional writers.[41]

To be sure, no one was a born reader; everyone had to learn this complex skill. Thus records of the way children were taught to read constitute another troublesome, though important source. As religious and state institutions, schools left ample documentation of pedagogical methods at all levels of scholastic achievement—from grade school, when children first learned to decode the written word, to the university, when candidates for higher degrees defended their reading of appropriate texts. Beginning in the July Monarchy, at least, circulars, directives, and instructions drawn up by school officials effectively complemented the textbooks, "readers," and exercise books used by instructors and their students.[42]

[40] E.g., the letters addressed to Sue concerning *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842-43), in BHVP Fonds Eugène Sue, discussed in Atkinson, *Eugène Sue et le roman-feuilleton*, 67-77; A.-M. Thiesse, "Écrivain/Public(s): Les Mystères de la communication littéraire," *Europe* 60 (November-December 1982): 36-46; and James S. Allen, "The Moral Universe of Nineteenth-Century Parisian Readers," *Proceedings of the Tenth Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History*, ed. John F. Sweets (Lawrence: The University of Kansas, 1984), 362-72.

[41] E.g., about four percent of the correspondence received by Anatole France resembles the letter from young Irving Dilliard of Collinsville, Illinois, who praised the author profusely before requesting advice about a career in letters. See his letter dated 13 February 1922 in BN, NAF 15433, fol. 241.

[42] E.g., see Ministère de l'instruction publique, *Circulaires et instructions officielles relatives à l'instruction publique*, 12 vols. (Paris, 1875-1900); Louis Liard et al., *Instructions concernant les programmes de l'enseignement secondaire (garçons et filles)* (Paris, 1911). A good summary of instructional methods on the primary school level is provided by Ferdinand Buisson in *Dictionnaire de pédagogie et d'instruction primaire*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1882-83). For widely used textbooks, see Eugène Cuissart. *Méthode Cuissart. Enseignement pratique et simultané de la lecture, de l'écriture et de l'orthographie* . . . (Paris, 1882); A. Leclef and E. Bergeron, *Enseignement*

These materials suggest the nature of the reading experience and its development over time in schools everywhere in France. And yet none of these many institutional sources reveals exactly how students actually read texts, not only outside the classroom, but also inside the classroom. Pedagogical intentions do not always translate into educational achievement. What students learned during their schooling can be more adequately assessed only by a careful examination of student notebooks, a large collection of which from the nineteenth century is maintained by the Musée national de l'education.[43] Unfortunately, the notebooks that have been preserved are not entirely representative of the reading experience in French schools attended by many millions of more ordinary students whose notebooks have been lost.

Given the kind of sources available, like the ambiguous artistic image of readers that began this essay, the historian is severely handicapped in a global study of readers over the past two hundred years. None of the available evidence is entirely appropriate to the history of reading. Personal journals and diaries, the autobiographies and memoirs, the critical literary reviews and pedagogical materials, as well as the mail received by writers about their work, all pose significant problems that make them individually less than perfect for the purpose of examining the dialogic interaction between reader and text over a long period. Nevertheless, the sheer bulk of the available evidence, the collective insight offered by the thousands of different documents from different kinds of readers about a variety of texts, shed significant light on an otherwise obscure but important aspect of intellectual and literary history. When these sources are examined carefully using the tools of critics, theorists, and historians with closely related concerns, the possibility of sketching a genuine history of reading grows, however tentative the results must be until others pursue its particulars still further. The study of the reading experience, in modern France at least, thus seems far more plausible than the inadequacy of any single source would indicate.

primaire élémentaire. La Lecture au cours élémentaire (Paris, 1903); and Larive and Fleury, *Grammaire préparatoire, par demandes et par réponses . . .* (Paris, 1877). *Explication de texte,* the critical method of teaching literature developed in the Third Republic, is well explained in Gustave Radler, *L'Explication française. Principes et applications . . .* (Paris, 1902).

[43] Several dozen student notebooks, from all levels of study during the nineteenth century, are maintained by the Musée national de l'éducation in Mont-Saint-Aignan, a suburb of Rouen.

Issues

This project owes a tremendous debt to previous work done in a variety of scholarly disciplines. Concerning historical research, for example, studies have begun to explore many of the issues and sources discussed here, especially for the medieval and early modern periods. Within the context of Old Regime France, Roger Chartier, Daniel Roche, and Robert Darnton have identified the six most logical areas of inquiry in the history of reading: what was read, by whom, when, where, how, and why.[44] With so recent a definition of this field, however, social and intellectual historians have generally lagged behind social scientists who have already attempted serious answers to the same questions in a contemporary setting. Work by Robert Escarpit and Pierre Bourdieu, especially, can serve as equally appropriate models—subject to the significant constraints imposed by the problematic sources discussed earlier—for historical investigations into readers, readings, texts, and contexts in the modern period. Moreover, this work is a necessary corrective to the less empirical interests of reader-response theory and criticism. Despite substantial differences in perspective, methods, and sources, many literary specialists are exploring the interpretive implications of essentially the same issues.

Scholars in the social history of ideas have made substantial progress on determining what people read in the past. Using the records of officials responsible for monitoring or censoring the book trade, historians have documented the material generally available to readers from the sixteenth century to the present.[45] Their research based on the *dépôt légal* and the *Bibliographie de la France* in particular has been complemented by the attention of other scholars

[44] See useful surveys of this work in R. Darnton, "First Steps Toward a History of Reading," *Australian Journal of French Studies* 23 (1986): 5-30; and H.-J. Martin, "Pour une histoire de la lecture," *Revue française d'histoire du livre* 16 (1977): 583-609. Note, however, these authors' almost exclusive concern for methods and sources appropriate to the early modern period. Neither article ventures past 1789 despite the important work by scholars concerned with the same issues in the later period. Moreover, other issues raised by Darnton and Martin, such as the influence of textual formats on reading practices, are much less central to the products of the publishing industry after 1800. For the modern period, see R. Escarpit, *Sociologie de la littérature* (Paris, 1973), 98-125; Bourdieu, *Distinction,* 440-51; *Le Livre français. Hier, aujourd'hui, demain,* ed. Julien Cain et al. (Paris, 1972), 205-46; and *Le Livre et la lecture en France,* ed. Jean Charpentreau et al. (Paris, 1968), 15-50.

[45] E.g., Robert Estivals, *La Statistique bibliographique de la France sous la monarchie au XVIII^e siècle* (The Hague, 1965); and "Histoire, sociologie et prévisions économiques quantitatives de l'imprimé," *Bibliographie de la France* (May-June 1969), supplement. An important archival complement to this work is the AN,F[18] II*1-183. Déclarations des imprimeurs—Paris—années 1815-1881.

to the book catalogues of many booksellers, public and private libraries, reading clubs, and estate auctions, among other sources of a less global nature. Although their well-documented findings have not always been consistent, they have assessed with some certainty, albeit indirectly, the mental world of the past, one very different from that inferred from the texts examined by the previous generation of intellectual and literary historians.[46] Similarly, sociologists using survey data continue to enrich this study of printed materials actually read;[47] they suggest a need for even greater precision in historical research in the modern period, especially when the publishing industry diversified its production considerably beyond the fairly simple categories of the early modern book trade. In this way intellectual history has much to learn from the sociology of literature, notwithstanding the distance many historians once kept from the social sciences.

Since the number of new titles grew by the thousands after the invention of printing, it is all the more necessary to specify which of these books were read by identifiable social groups. Scholars have attempted, with less success, to address this historical question, largely because adequate records have been more difficult to find. Fortunately, some subscription lists compiled by publishers of periodicals and new titles and the registers of books borrowed from libraries, however selective and incomplete, identified who the readers of specific titles were in the past. The study of these particular sources tend to support the hypothesis suggested by a German historian, Rolf Engelsing, who claims to have discovered a "reading revolution" at the end of the eighteenth century.[48] Engelsing saw a progressive movement among the well-heeled burghers of Bremen from "intensive" to "extensive" reading, even though he greatly oversimplified the historical reality of other literate groups in different circumstances elsewhere in Europe. Clearly, some people in

[46] Cf. the Enlightenment in Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 167-208; and Romanticism in Allen, *Popular French Romanticism*, 45-73.

[47] For recent data, see André Burguière, "Le Savoir-lire des français," *Le Nouvel observateur* 1157 (9-15 January 1987): 56-57. Similar kinds of data may be compiled for the nineteenth century from BN, NAF 21035-54 and from AN, F[17] 9146 and 10735-55, which contain prefect reports on the use of departmental school libraries in 1799-1830 and 1863-1896, respectively.

[48] See Rolf Engelsing, "Die Perioden der Lesergeschichte in der Neuzeit. Das statistische Ausmass und die soziokulturelle Bedeutung der Lektüre," *Archiv für Geschichte des Buchwesens* 10 (1969), 944-1002, an article elaborated in Engelsing, *Der Bürger als Leser. Lesergeschichte in Deutschland 1500-1800* (Stuttgart, 1974), 182-215. Cf. Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre*, 249-51.

the twentieth century, including the devout, the scholarly, the young, and the naïve, still read intensively. But the general trend deserves more careful exploration than it has received to date. Like the heuristic but flawed model of historical development offered by modernization theory, and for many of the same reasons, Engelsing's reading revolution can serve as a useful basis for comparison and refinement in a still largely unexplored field.[49]

Answers to the other questions—the where, when, how, and most intractably why—have been the object of much less successful study for all periods and not just the Old Regime. Fritz Nies has charted the artistic images of readers in modern Europe to discover the liberation of reading from daytime social settings indoors to include private personal experiences outdoors during the day and indoors at night.[50] The very occasional reading at rural *veillées* during the Old Regime, for example, could only have occurred around a hearth providing light for the rare literate villager with a chapbook, whereas the reading of a modern suburban middle-class youth, alone at home or in the garden, could take place at almost anytime, weather permitting, when widespread literate skills, more portable books, and adequate domestic lighting were finally developed. But the problem of specifying the precise circumstances of the reading experience for all literate individuals must remain unresolvable, whatever the sources historians use. Those circumstances in a modern, differentiated society are much too diverse. As for elucidating actual interpretive practices and the reasons for their change over time in this new historical context—an important issue—few scholars have made any attempt. Beyond inferences from texts and their historical context, social historians generally neglect the how and why of reading.[51]

The patient scholarship of literary specialists on the reception of texts has been more significant. With adequate sources, appropriate methods, and well-defined issues, the history of criticism

[49] Note the role played by modernization theory in Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford, 1976), ix-xiii, 485-96; and the useful critique by Charles Tilly, "Did the Cake of Custom Break?" in *Consciousness and Class Experience in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, ed. John Merriman (New York, 1979), 17-44.

[50] See Fritz Nies, *Der Leser im Bild* (Darmstadt, in press), and Chartier and Roche, "Les Pratiques urbaines de l'imprimé," in *Histoire de l'édition française*, 2:403-29.

[51] E.g., Jean-Jacques Darmon, *Le Colportage de librairie en France sous le Second Empire. Grands colporteurs et culture populaire* (Paris, 1972), 183-212; Françoise Parent-Lardeur, *Lire à Paris au temps de Balzac. Les Cabinets de lecture à Paris 1815-1830* (Paris, 1981), 130-65; Michael B. Palmer, *Des petits journaux aux grandes agences. Naissance du journalisme moderne 1863-1914* (Paris, 1983), 11-21.

constitutes the first systematic scholarly effort to examine the way in which selected individuals read. There are numerous studies of how major works of important authors were received, and they have been complemented effectively by equally numerous intellectual biographies of leading critics whose interpretive practices influenced many of their contemporaries.[52] Consequently, literary historians, using the ample primary sources available to them, have documented in remarkable detail the principles, habits, prejudices, even the idiosyncrasies guiding the world of letters in modern France.[53] Although their attention may be limited to a critical canon, their discipline must constitute the core of any proper history of reading. Social historians are obligated to recognize their careful work and to adapt it to a much wider range of sources. In this way, one aspect in the mental life of more ordinary readers, who are after all only critics of another sort, may be explored within an appropriate field of scholarship.

The reader-response critics and theorists also share a related set of concerns.[54] However far removed their exclusive attention to the use of language in texts, these specialists have defined a number of central issues in the history of interpretive practices well worth serious consideration. Stanley Fish, David Bleich, and Norman Holland, among other American practitioners, argue the need to consider the nature, and limits, of readers' subjectivity in the literary experience, whatever its educational or psychological source.[55] French structuralists and deconstructionists emphasize the discursive plasticity of language, in and out of texts, that defines the way readers perceive their world as well as books. Whether or not the documentary interests of the historian can make sense of the read-

[52] E.g., Lander MacClintock, *Sainte-Beuve's Critical Theory and Practice after 1849* (Chicago, 1920); A. G. Lehman, *Sainte-Beuve: A Portrait of the Critic 1804-1842* (Oxford, 1962); and Pierre Moreau, *La Critique selon Sainte-Beuve* (Paris, 1964).

[53] For insight into literary history as a field, see Gustave Lanson, *Manuel bibliographique de la littérature française moderne, XVI^e, XVII^e, XVIII^e, et XIX^e siècles,* rev. ed. (Paris, 1921); René Rancoeur, *Bibliographie de la littérature française du Moyen Age à nos jours* (Paris, 1953ff.); and Hugo Paul Thieme, *Bibliographie de la littérature française de 1800 à 1900,* 3 vols. (Paris, 1933). Good guides to archival work are *Les Sources de l'histoire littéraire aux Archives nationales,* ed. Danielle Gallet-Guerne (Paris, 1961); Gilbert Nigay, "La Localisation des manuscrits et correspondances littéraires dans les bibliothèques françaises," in *Missions et démarches de la critique. Mélanges offerts au Professeur J.-A. Vier* (Paris, 1973), 255-63; and the multi-volumed *Catalogue général des manuscrits des bibliothèques publiques en France . . .* (Paris, 1943ff.).

[54] See titles in notes 14, 26, and 30.

[55] E.g., the essays in Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?,* 1-17; David Bleich, *Subjective Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978), 213-37; and Norman Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (New York, 1968), 3-190.

ing experience, as Jacques Derrida would deny, any attempt to characterize it must recognize the indeterminacy of textual meaning. From this perspective, no one reading of a book, even the historian's, is necessarily privileged, an insight demanding attention to the trickiness of using texts to study a human activity as linguistically mediated as interpretation.[56] The answer to that conundrum, however, may lie in the *Rezeptionsaesthetik* developed by Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, among others in Germany.[57] These theorists have explored the philosophical foundations of reading underlying interpretive understanding. They make clear the necessity of establishing a model of textual reception derived from the reader's actual experience.[58] That their models have been invariably centered on their own experience does not in the least invalidate the models based on the responses of others, especially those of identifiable readers in another period and culture dealing with specific texts. Such self-consciousness is perhaps the ultimate value of all recent literary work, particularly the theory and criticism immediately relevant to the study of the subjective, linguistic, and theoretical assumptions of actual readers.

In light of this particular undertaking—one mapped out by literary theorists, social scientists, as well as Old Regime historians—the world of Fantin-Latour's portrait of his sisters takes on new significance. The history of reading seeks to give prominence to the experiences of people very much like the painter's subjects. Although a full history may never be possible, interpretive practices and their relevant contexts can be studied more fully than they have been. There can indeed be more informed answers to two fundamental questions: In what circumstances did literate people read in France from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries? What did their reading mean to them and why? Even partial answers to these complex questions promise some measure of progress in our knowledge of an important cultural activity that is too often taken for

[56] Deconstruction and related literary theory are generously surveyed by Culler, *On Deconstruction,* 85-225; Geoffrey Hartman et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York, 1979); and Josué Harari, *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism* (Ithaca, 1979), 17-72.

[57] See Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London, 1984), 53-106. Major practitioners are Hans Robert Jauss, *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation* (Frankfurt, 1970); and Iser, *The Act of Reading.* Cf. Roman Ingarden, *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art,* trans. Ruth Ann Crowley and Kenneth R. Olsen (Evanston, Ill., 1973).

[58] Ingarden, *The Cognition of the Literary Work,* 3-19. Cf. the important contribution to historical hermeneutics by Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York, 1975), 245-73.

granted. Moreover, this venture shares in the scholarly definition of an entirely new field in intellectual history, a field focused on readers and their interpretive practices rather than on authors and their texts. Reading, not writing, is its subject. The object of this new perspective is further clarification of the changing perceptions among ordinary men and women in the past that made possible many historical developments, from the acceptance of Napoleon's coup d'état in 1799 to the French appeasement of Hitler in 1938. A better understanding of collective perception thus promises a better understanding of these and other major historical issues.[59] But the history of reading must come first; discussion of its central issues constitutes a more manageable concern for the moment, however remarkable the implications for social and intellectual history.

[59] Cf. Goody, *Literacy in Traditional Societies,* 1-21; Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London, 1982), 31-77; Eric A. Havelock, *Origins of Western Literacy* (Toronto, 1976); and Jacques Derrida. *Disseminations,* trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago, 1981), 142-71. For France, see Michel Vovelle, *Idéologies et mentalités* (Paris, 1982), 19-79, with a good bibliography of related titles, 325-29.