Geoffrey Turnovsky, "Crying into Print: Sentimental Reading, Spiritual Exaltation, and Typographic Standardization"


This article revisits the 18th-century trope of “sentimental reading,” as described in the famous fan-mail sent by readers to Rousseau and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. It reinterprets the accounts offered by these readers of the emotional, exalting experiences generated by La Nouvelle Héloïse, Paul et Virginie, and other key works, in light of the contradiction presented by a book historical context which shaped these experiences – by delivering to the readers the texts in question, for instance – and yet was defined by attributes ostensibly antithetical to them. The sense of intimate communication with an author taken to be a personal friend whom the reader could imagine hearing or seeing was mediated by an expanding, commercialized trade and by an increasing standardization of typographic forms and methods, allowing more and more individuals to read the same work and respond in the same way. This article contends that, as a representational exercise more than a real reading practice, sentimental reading was a function of this paradox. I am delighted that it is included in a volume of contributions dedicated to celebrating the life, work and influence of Gita May, in whose seminar on Diderot, as a first year graduate student, I first really discovered the endlessly enriching intellectual culture of the 18th century.

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