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# Precarious Alliances

## Cultures of Participation in Print and Other Media

**[transcript]** Cultural and Media Studies

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## **Touched by an Author: Books and 'Intensive' Reading in the Late Eighteenth Century**

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GEOFFREY TURNOVSKY

Rolf Engelsing famously characterized the late 18th century as a transformative moment for the history of reading, the context of which, in the German-speaking world, was a massive rise in the numbers of books published after 1760 (946-1002). Assessing this notion of a "Reading Revolution," (302) Reinhard Wittman points to increases manifest in the catalogues of the Leipzig book fair, which advertised 1,384 titles for 1765; 2,713 for 1785; and 3,906 for 1800, making for an almost threefold expansion in the short span of 35 years. These figures may not match the post-Gutenberg textual tidal wave of 1450-1500 for unprecedented explosiveness,<sup>1</sup> but they certainly showed a marked enough escalation of the presence of the printed word in day-to-day life to catch the eye of many contemporaries who described the shift, often in terms of anxieties about a 'reading mania.' Such a

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1 The first 'printing revolution' started, of course, from a lower baseline. Yet, with appropriate skepticism about the exactness of the numbers (especially in reference to manuscripts copied, which has certainly been enormously underestimated), Elisabeth Eisenstein highlights Michael Clapham's evocative observation: "[a] man born in 1453, the year of the fall of Constantinople, could look back from his fiftieth year on a lifetime in which about eight million books had been printed, more perhaps than all the scribes of Europe had produced since Constantine founded his city in A.D. 330" (1:45).

diagnosis sought to account not just for the surge, but also for the new behaviors it seemed to elicit among new readerships accessing new kinds of materials. “[C]lasses who otherwise did little or no reading,” in the words of one commentator cited by Wittmann, dropped their old devotional manuals in order to devour novels and periodicals (whose numbers increased at a higher rate than did books as a whole),<sup>2</sup> which they lapped up for news about the world, useful information, gossip, and above all for entertainment (300).

‘Extensive’ was the term Engelsing applied to the reading practices adapted to this rapidly expanding print culture, in which an individual chose from a plethora of texts and consumed many of them, scanning each one just once to absorb its message before throwing it away and moving on to the next item. Engelsing contrasts this pattern with an older, traditional mode—‘intensive’ reading—, which was shaped by scarcity rather than abundance, and by the sway of powerful institutions—the Church, universities—that oriented reading in a conservative, stabilizing manner. To read intensively was to focus on a small set of works, *rereading* each one over and over, not for original ideas, new information, or surprising amusements, but as part of a ritualistic re-affirmation of faith, understanding, or inclusion in a recognized community. If skimming a daily newspaper for the latest current events and chatter emblemizes modern reading as it was transformed after 1750, the liturgical recitation of biblical passages under the watchful guidance of a priest symbolizes that from which this new form departed. In this respect, the move from intensive to extensive reading also reflected secularization, along with the triumph of the individual over the collective.

Engelsing’s *Leserevolution* has been influential in articulating the significance of the late 18th-century moment for the development of reading in Europe. Yet it has attracted its share of critics who question the overly reductive opposition on which the periodization rests. In particular, the explosive arrival on scene of the novel in this same period has stood out for many as a reflection not of the sudden prevalence of casual speed-reading but the evolution of a deeply-focused reading that appeared to reflect the continuity of traditionally religious textual practices in the modern era

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2 According to Blanning, the numbers of new periodicals appearing in the German states rose from 64 in 1701-1710 to 260 in 1741-1750 to 1,225 in 1781-1790 (5-14).

rather than a sharp break from them. In his “Éloge de Richardson,” written on the occasion of the English novelist’s death in 1762, Denis Diderot describes an absorptive, emotionally charged experience that was a far cry from the distracted, overloaded, indiscriminate approach that, in Engel-sing’s account, characterized ‘extensive’ reading. Readers of Richardson, Rousseau, Goethe, and other 18th-century novelists cherished their copies of *Clarissa*, *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and *Werther*; they pored over the texts obsessively, perusing them many times, attaching themselves to the fates of their characters. Wittmann sees in this new literary fashion a “‘revolution’ in reverse” (296). Similarly, examining the fan mail that these novelists famously received from their impassioned readers, Jean Goulemot and Didier Masseau describe an “intimist [intimiste]” style that calls for a “major nuancing” of the reading revolution thesis (39).<sup>3</sup>

Part one of this essay considers ‘neo-intensive’ reading in contrast not with extensive reading, but rather in the context of a broader evolution in reading practices characterized by dematerialization. The latter represents a long-term tendency, over the course of centuries, to conceptualize reading as a purely intellectual or spiritual process, the material aspects of which—represented, for instance, by books and their physical manipulation—are seen as extraneous to the reading experience, and as such, to be downplayed and ideally forgotten. In this framework, neo-intensive reading is not a throw-back to older reverential styles but an articulation of the textual modernity represented by dematerialization.<sup>4</sup> Part two returns to the notion of an ‘intimist’ reading through a reflection on the motif of ‘touching.’ Readers had frequent recourse to this trope as they endeavored to put into words experiences of the text that were built on an intensely personal author/reader relationship. At first glance, such a bond seems anything but precarious; but we will see that the framework of dematerialization reveals this intimacy to be a more intricate and delicate construction than we might realize.

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3 In his study of Rousseau’s readers, Robert Darnton writes about one of his primary case-studies, Jean Ranson, a Protestant merchant from La Rochelle obsessed with the author and who “devoured everything he could find” by him, “[o]ne could hardly find a more intensive reader [...], and his reading became more intense as he did more of it. If anything, it illustrates a ‘reading revolution’ in reverse” (228, 250).

4 I will therefore use the term ‘neo-intensive’ rather than ‘intensive.’

It does seem important to distinguish absorptive, neo-intensive novel reading from the hurried, distracted scanning of periodicals. There are, though, some commonalities between the two modes that might help us to better define a broader concept of the evolution of reading post-1750, without having to over-rely on Engelsing's polarity. In particular, in both extensive and neo-intensive versions, reading is increasingly viewed to be, in its essence, a purely mental or psychological experience. That is, reading is pointedly not conceived, in either case, as a physical or mechanistic activity; indeed, it does not appear to have any kind of concrete sensory valence at all, or more precisely not one that is not exclusively metaphorical. This idea needs to be quickly clarified given that neo-intensive reading is often associated with powerful physical effects: swooning, hyperventilating, "violent flailing" (Chartier, *Inscriptions* 111), and especially, with crying.<sup>5</sup> Yet it is important to emphasize that these effects are almost always distinct from actual reading; and inasmuch as they grow stronger, far from being continuous with the reading process, they tend to interrupt and impede it, as suggested by the report of one prominent reader of *Clarissa*, Lady Bradshaigh. Reacting to Clarissa's death, she writes: "Would you have me weep incessantly?... I long to read it—and yet I dare not—in Agonies would I lay down the Book, take it up again, walk about the Room, let fall a Flood of Tears, wipe my Eyes, read again... throw away the Book crying out... I cannot go on" (qtd. in Pearson 28).<sup>6</sup>

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- 5 Roger Chartier highlights this "somatisation" of reading, citing a passage from Diderot's "Éloge" (46) where Diderot describes the reader's physical response on reading the passage from *Pamela* in which the protagonist's old father, having walked all night, arrives at the chateau in which his daughter's virtue was to be comprised, in order to save her: "[W]e cannot hear him presenting himself to the valets of the house without experiencing the most violent flailing."
  - 6 Jacques Perneti writes to Rousseau on behalf of Jean-Vincent Capperonnier de Gauffecourt, to thank him for the gift of his book, relating that, "the movements of his [i.e., Gauffecourt's] heart were so strong on the reading of your novel that he was obliged to interrupt this reading, and to read only a few lines at a time" ("Perneti to Rousseau, 26 February 1761." Letter #1328. *Electronic Enlightenment*, ed. Robert McNamee et al., University of Oxford. [www.e-enlightenment.com](http://www.e-enlightenment.com)). Examples of this type could be multiplied. Throughout this

Compare this with the physicality described in the 11th century by St. Anselm in his *Meditation on Human Redemption*, which offers a guide to monastic reading: "Taste the goodness of your redeemer... chew the honeycomb of his words, suck their flavour which is sweeter than honey, swallow the loving and rejoicing" (Clanchy 42). Here, the bodily exercise of reading and the reader's internalization of the meaning that the text conveys are not opposed but consistent, as they are, similarly, in medieval and early modern conceptions of reading that underscore the aural experience of hearing the words pronounced aloud. Michael Clanchy cites a reference in the 12th-century *Estoire de Waldef* to Wace's versed history of Britain, *Brut*: "If anyone wants to know this history / Let him read the Brut, he will hear it there" (42). Clanchy notes that a modern reader would expect either to *find* this history in Waltheof's story—thereby substituting an experience of abstract intellectual discovery for one of sense perception—or alternatively, to *see* it there.

The shift from oral to visual reading marks, of course, a hugely significant moment in the history of literacy, one that has been extensively analyzed. That such a shift has taken place has proven less contestable than when and how it occurred. Paul Saenger points to 7th- and 8th-century Irish monastic culture in which scribes introduced word-spacing into their copying, thus liberating the reader from having to voice the syllables in order to recognize the words and sentence structures. Others highlight the persistence of voiced, out-loud reading not only in the late Middle Ages, but well into the modern era.<sup>7</sup> A detailed investigation of this issue is obviously well outside our purview; yet we might stress a few points. First, however we might want to nuance Engelsing's concept of extensive reading, the post-1750 reading revolution was in any case an evident triumph of visual

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essay, I refer readers to this extremely useful database, abbreviated as *EE*, both for all letters addressed to Rousseau and a number addressed to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. The texts of Rousseau's letters are based on the definitive edition of his correspondence, edited and annotated by Ralph A. Leigh: *Correspondance complète de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. R.A. Leigh, 52 vols (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1965-1998). Within each parenthetical reference, I will include the correspondents, date, and the reference number assigned by Leigh's edition. Translations of all the letters are mine.

7 See, for instance, Petrucci 275-82; Chartier "Loisir" 127-47.



modes; and in this respect, the neo-intensive styles characterized by Goulemot, Darnton, and others were ultimately quite distinct from the medieval *lectio divino* described by St. Anselm. As ritualistic and deeply focused as novel reading became in the 18th century, it was almost always silent, solitary, and undertaken only with the eyes. This is the case despite powerful images of the time celebrating—nostalgically, I would suggest—reading *en famille* or in the salon. Relative even to the 17th century, let alone the Middle Ages, far fewer individuals would have accessed the work of prose fiction by *hearing* it enunciated aloud. In fact, it seems likely that the characteristic absorptive effects of such reading hinged on the mute, internalized nature of the process. For the intensity of the novel reader's experience lay in an ability to be drawn into the scenes that the words conjured, whether fictional scenes populated by characters—as she reads Walter Scott, Emma Rouault, future Mme Bovary, “dream[s]” of “old manor[s],” “guard-rooms,” and “troubadours” (Flaubert 32)—or the authorial scene in which the reader visualized the writer in the act of expressing—often in his own voice—his genius. The purely optical nature of 18th-century reading thereby opened up an *imaginary* auditory (and visual) experience, through which the reader felt close to the author: “I believe sometimes that I see and hear you exhorting me to wisdom and encouraging me to virtue,” writes one appreciative reader in a letter to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, referencing the pivotal dialogue from *Paul et Virginie* in which the old man who narrates the story consoles Paul after his beloved Virginie has left Île de France (today's Mauritius), where they had grown up together in the innocence of the tropical island's luscious nature, for decadent, civilized Europe (Degars to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, 1 April 1791, *EE*).<sup>8</sup>

Either scenario implies transport from an actual reading scene, and both seem a far cry from the rumination of the medieval monk “chew[ing],” in the sacred space of the cloister or abbey, the words of the Gospel. Indeed, the shift to visual reading rests on a stark disjuncture between the physical

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8 Under the direction of Malcolm Cook, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's correspondence is being edited for inclusion in the *EE* database. Not all the letters are as yet accessible. For those I cite that are not for now included in *EE*, I will refer to the relevant dossier in the municipal library of Le Havre, Bibliothèque Armand Salacrou, where the manuscript letters I discuss—those especially that Bernardin de Saint-Pierre received from his readers—are archived.

act of reading and the intellectual experience of it, reflected, for one thing, in an optical vocabulary now used solely as metaphor. As applied to reading, the verb 'seeing' almost never referred to the literal perception of printed letters on the page, but pointedly to what the reader could only see in his or her mind's eye: an image, a truth, a sentiment, an individual (including the author) that the text more often 'painted' than it 'de-scribed.' Another Bernardin de Saint-Pierre fan named Gavoty admired the "marvelous and simple art that you possess to paint nature" (Gavoty to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, 15 January 1788, *EE*). In turn, this disconnect took root within a new material culture which integrated reading into the comforts and habits of 18th-century social and domestic life. The bare, often backless wooden stools and large parchment tomes of the Middle Ages, maneuverable only with two hands, combined with the conventions of oralization, made it difficult to forget that reading was, at a basic level, a physical activity as much as a purely cognitive one, requiring an exertion of the body as well as a good amount of bodily coordination as preconditions for accessing the text.

Upholstered reading chairs countered such an effect. Mimi Hellman analyzes a 1783 engraving by François Dequevaullier showing an elegantly appointed Enlightenment-era French salon, with groups of individuals engaged in card games and conversation; on the left of the panel, a woman—the only solitary figure in the tableau—sits apart by a large window, nestled in a chair with legs crossed, absorbed in the silent reading of a book (her mouth is closed) that, like so many painted female readers from this era, she effortlessly holds up in one hand (421).<sup>9</sup> To be sure, smaller format books, especially the highly portable duodecimos of the age, further allowed for the seamless incorporation of reading into the normal rhythms of the

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9 Images of novel reading from the 18th century often depict young women sitting in comfortable chairs or sofas, mouths closed (i.e., reading silently), holding a small book in just one hand. The most famous is perhaps Fragonard's "La Liseuse" from about 1770, in which a young girl in a bright yellow dress leans back against a plush cushion. An etching from the 1790 issue of the *Taschenbuch zum Nutzen und Vergnügen* portrays a melancholy-looking woman leading back on a sofa, with a small dog sleeping next to her. Again, she easily holds in her left hand a small book, while her right arm leans against a cushion and props up her head. A caption underneath reads: "Da sitzt sie schon, die arme Frau, / Und liest in Werthers Leiden" (Hanebutt-Benz 121).

everyday, where its particular exertions were easily disregarded. When, following standard book-gifting protocols, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre proposed to have a copy of his *Etudes de la nature* elegantly bound [*relié*, probably in leather] for one of his correspondents, Mme de Boisguilbert, the latter refused the offer, asking him instead to send her the volumes simply sewn [*broché*, with just a paper cover]; a heavy leather binding, she explained, is too hard to keep open, requiring “two hands [...] to hold the book which always wants to close.” Moreover, binding is good for “a library book and yours, Monsieur, is not yet destined for that; it must first roam the woods with me, see the banks of my pretty river, go into a small valley to search for the source of a spring; for wherever I stop on my walks, reading must help me spend my hours agreeably” (Mme de Boisguilbert to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, 21 March 1786, *EE*).

There’s a hint of irony in the notion that a reading so rooted in a stark disconnect between the material and intellectual experience of the book, and in the eclipse of the former in favor of the latter, would at the same time collapse the boundary between life and text in the way Mme de Boisguilbert suggests, with reading viewed as a seamless add-on to daily activity rather than as a discrete exercise in and of itself. Wittmann begins with a quote from a German observer in Paris, noting that, “[e]veryone, but women in particular, is carrying a book around in their pocket. People read while riding in carriages or taking walks; they read at the theatre during the interval, in cafés, even when bathing” (285). In this perspective, reading appears more as a mindset or attitude than any particular action; in the formulation that Rousseau employs when he reflects on reading in *Rousseau Juge de Jean-Jacques*, it is a “way of seeing,” one, of course, that had nothing to do with the ocular perception of alphabetic symbols on a page, as we have noted.<sup>10</sup> Needless to say, not all saw the intellectualized effects of vi-

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10 The *Dialogues: Rousseau Juge de Jean-Jacques* stages a conversation between Rousseau and a Frenchman over the morality of Jean-Jacques, about whom the Frenchmen had heard terrible things. Rousseau convinces him to read the author’s works rather than believe the scurrilous rumors being spread. The Frenchman finally heeds Rousseau’s advice; he reads the texts and reports back: “I found in them ways of feeling and seeing that distinguish him easily from all the other writers of his time” (Rousseau, *Collected Writings*, 1:212; *Oeuvres complètes*, 1:933-944).

sual reading in a positive light. Chartier, for instance, considers *Don Quixote* to be a satirical take on the spread of silent reading in the 17th century, expressed through Cervantes' central comic motif of the reader who can no longer distinguish fiction from reality (cf. Chartier, "Loisir" 146). The anxieties through which a 'reading revolution' was perceived almost two centuries later stressed a lot of the same themes.

Many readers, however, stressed the beneficial effects of a life/text conflation that silent, visual reading seemed to facilitate. Individuals were not, in this view, led to neglect reality for the more exciting, exotic worlds celebrated in texts. Rather, their experiences of the 'real world'—of, say, nature, in the case of Mme de Boisguilbert—were enhanced through an intensification of feeling and sensibility that reading enabled. Above all, reading imposed moral clarity and direction on everyday life. In the "Éloge de Richardson," Diderot relates the example of a married acquaintance who had been involved in a flirtatious correspondence with another man. On reading *Clarissa*, "horrified at Clarrisa's fate," she immediately broke off the compromising exchange (42). The letters to Rousseau and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre offer numerous analogous cases of readers reporting how they were able to adapt the lucid moral viewpoints they found in the works to the circumstances of their own lives: "Your book is a true treasure of wisdom. I have never seen virtue so pure or so brilliant," writes one reader to Rousseau (Louis-François to Rousseau, 24 March 1761 [#1379], *EE*). Another, Jean Louis Le Cointe, tells the same author that reading *La Nouvelle Héloïse* with his young wife helped both spouses understand their relationship in a new and profound way: "what had seemed to us as a simple attachment by habit [...] was the most tender Love" (Jean Louis Le Cointe, seigneur de Marcillac to Rousseau, 5 April 1761 [#1387], *EE*).

Readers had recourse to quite a number of expressions and tropes in order to articulate the benefits of a reading that, by collapsing life and text, helped them find meaning and value in their circumstances. One, though, stands out for us in this context, namely the trope of 'being touched.' Diderot opens his "Éloge de Richardson" by suggesting we find a term other than the discredited *roman* for moralistic prose narratives such as *Clarissa* that "touch spirits and inspire throughout a love of goodness" (29). While capturing the characteristic emotional experience of neo-intensive reading, 'being touched' is also a motif that conjures the paradoxes of dematerialization

we have been considering. Much like the visual metaphors discussed earlier, and in contrast with medieval images of rumination, 'to be touched,' as an effect of reading a text, specifically does not imply any physical contact with the book considered as an object, but on the contrary, mobilizes a vocabulary of sense perception in order to define an experience with no concrete sensory dimension at all, at least not insofar as the senses were activated by reading itself (sitting in a chair, holding a book, optically scanning printed symbols on a page). Thus, a brief analysis of the commonplace can help us better understand how the context of dematerialization shaped neo-intensive reading. It will, in particular, call attention to the intricate mix of spiritualized sentiment, personal desire, commercial interest, and material constraint that set the framework for the spread of this type of reading.

Examples from correspondence and other sources are rife and can be cited at length, with the term used to describe either a scene, image, or discourse—Rousselot writes Rousseau to thank him for the "touching portraits of virtue" he discovered in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (Rousselot to Rousseau, 15 March 1761 [#1361], *EE*)—or their effects on the reader. Referring to the tragic deaths of Paul and Virginie, Louis Debreuil confides in Bernardin de Saint-Pierre that "their deplorable end touched me more than any circumstance in their lives" (Debreuil to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, 8 July 1796 [dated 20 messidor, year 4 in letter] Bibliothèque Salacrou, MS134, f.33v). The motif posits the reading experience to lie in a pure emotional or spiritual sentiment that the text generates: "your touching book," writes L. de Vignerat to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre referring again to his best-known work, "will leave in my soul an enduring impression" (L. de Vignerat to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, 5 April 1788, *EE*). This sensation results from an intuition of moral clarity that a 'touching' image triggers in the reader who beholds the struggles of virtue against the forces of vice. The latter may be externalized in the form of venal merchants or cruel fathers tormenting innocent children, lovers, or artists; or alternatively, they consist in the carnal desires of the individual who heroically resists them within him or herself. The abbé Cahagne effuses to Rousseau how "touched" he was by the "peril of the promenade on water," invoking the scene in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* in which Julie and Saint-Preux, former lovers resolved to live innocently as friends (Julie is married and dedicated to her duties as wife and mother), suddenly find themselves alone in a boat that was blown off-course in a storm. With their old feelings welling up, they reaffirm their commitment

to their chaste attachment, and to the virtue that it embodies (Abbé Cahagne to Rousseau, 27 February 1761 [#1331], *EE*). "There, my friend," writes Saint-Preux as he relates the event to his English confidant, Milord Edouard, "you have the detail of the day of my life in which without exception I have experienced the most powerful emotions. [...] I will tell you that this adventure has convinced me more than all the arguments, of the freedom of man and the merit of virtue" (Rousseau, *Collected Writings*, 6:428 and *Oeuvres complètes*, 2:521-22).

To be touched meant, for the reader, to identify with Saint-Preux's self-elevating emotions as he reflects back on the adventure. The peril that moved Cahagne was represented by the lovers' surging desire not by bad weather, meaning that the reader did not identify with the adventure *per se*, but with Saint-Preux's lucidity as he internalizes the lessons of the incident after the fact and 'sees' the necessity of their virtuous choice. Nicholas Paige shows that the sentimental identification considered so typical of Rousseau's readers, and often defined in terms of a naïve desire to believe in the authenticity of the letters and characters, must be understood as an experience of spectatorship rather than participation. That is, the fans who wrote to Rousseau, even as they inquired whether or not Julie was a real person, did not do so because they were, like Don Quixote, so completely lost in the novel that the scenes it depicted appeared more real to them than their own lives. To be sure, bemused contemporaries worried that novel readers would abandon their 'real world' responsibilities in order to adopt the more appealing lifestyles of romance heroes. Such anxieties were misplaced, however, at least as far as those readers who conveyed their admiration for *La Nouvelle Héloïse* were concerned. None betrays any desire to live Saint Preux's life in place of his or her own; their pleasure was not that of escapism. Their interest in Saint-Preux was based exclusively on the ability of the character to mirror a clear vision of their own lives back to them. It was this observer's clarity that they sought, along with the personal elevation associated with such a privileged, knowing perspective. They were, as a result, prone to identify with attendant characters, friends and confidants who empathized with the protagonists, rather than with the suffering figures themselves. Paige cites a representative letter from the Marquise de Polignac who writes after reading volume six in which Julie dies:

"[T]his dying Julie was not an unknown being; I thought I was her sister, her friend, her Claire" (140).<sup>11</sup>

Of course, the very existence of fan mail addressed directly to Rousseau or Bernardin de Saint-Pierre suggests, in the end, that it was to the person of the author that readers looked for the source of the vision that 'touched' them. Diderot's portrait in the "Éloge de Richardson" of the "femme de goût" obsessed with Richardson's *Grandisson* who asked one of her friends travelling to London to "visit on my behalf Miss Émilie, M. Belford, and above all, Miss Howe, if she is still living" (42), may support a view of 18th-century sentimental reading as an exercise in naïve immersion. But an examination of relevant letters reveals that whatever benefits readers drew from the novels, they quite deliberately ascribed them to their authors; and their interest in the novels' characters was rooted in a conviction less of the characters' 'real-life' existence, than of their reliability as prisms for the author's insights and ethical clarity and as faithful models that readers could then apply to their own lives. In other words, as Paige argues, the authenticity they craved lay not in the historical veracity of the letters or their fictional writers, but in a belief that the moral vision and exalting sentiments that these letters articulated, and that the characters embodied, were the sincere expression of a *living* author's vision and experience: "rare and happy man," writes Le Cointe to Rousseau (5 April 1761), "you, who have all the sentiments that you describe, and who must therefore be the happiest mortal that the Heavens have seen born."

The reader's appreciation and more saliently, his or her self-affirming appropriation of these authorial perspectives, was then reflected in the intimacy which the reader came to believe he or she shared with the writer. Neo-intensive reading certainly rested, as Goulemot and Masseau showed, on a firm belief that the text offered the means for such a close, personal bond with its writer, expressed in the epistolary sharing of private details, in a propensity to assume, in those letters, the role of friend or family—L. Debreuil begins his letter to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre by addressing him as "my father (for what more tender name should I call you, you who have filled my heart with joy and hope [...])" (f.33r)—and in assertions of a pri-

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11 Paige cites the letter from Marie Louise de La Garde, marquise de Polignac to Marie Madeleine de Brémond d'Ars, marquise de Verdelin, 3 February 1761 (#1258), *EE*.

vileged intellectual connection with the writer: "How virtue would be obliged to you, Sir, if all your readers paid both to you and your unequalled work the same justice as I do!" writes one reader to Rousseau (Unknown to Rousseau, 5 February 1761 [#1263], *EE*). All this in spite of the fact that reader and writer had, in many if not all cases, never met personally. Robert Darnton's description of "Rousseauistic" reading as a "communication between two lonely beings, the writer and the reader" suggests an affectionate familiarity that, despite being cultivated exclusively through the circulation of the printed word—or maybe because of this fact—seems a long way from a precarious alliance (249, 231).

We should, however, consider a number of key points. For one thing, this reader/author intimacy existed primarily—if not to say exclusively—in the mind of the reader, and was not reliably shared by the writer. In the example cited above, the reader's assertion of his privileged connection with Rousseau needs to be relativized by the fact that he remains to this day 'unknown,' his identity a mystery not only to us two centuries later but to Rousseau as well. Moreover, it was not from a modest desire to remain anonymous that this person's identity remained hidden to Rousseau—some readers did, in fact, withhold their names intentionally, for a variety of reasons<sup>12</sup>—but simply because Rousseau could not decipher the handwriting.<sup>13</sup> Such a mundane technicality of early modern epistolary exchange places this 'intimate' relationship in a far more uncertain light than that anticipated by the reader, whose belief in the bond was fundamental to his or her ideal experience of the text. And let us recall that the letters from delighted fans were not just unsolicited by Rousseau, but actively unwanted by him. A

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12 For instance, a soldier, confiding to Rousseau that the Julie of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* recalls his own "Julie," whom he had to leave behind, tells the author, "I must hide my name from you, and it is another sacrifice I make to my Julie" (Unknown to Rousseau, 6 April 1761 [#1389], *EE*).

13 See Unknown to Rousseau, 5 February 1761 [#1263], editorial note 1. Rousseau mentions his inability to decipher the correspondent's name in a letter to his friend François Coindet, dated February 13, 1761. He is able to identify this reader as a "fermier général"—i.e., a private tax collector—and sends a response to this correspondent to Coindet, asking Coindet to fill in the name and address if he is able to determine what they are. See Rousseau's letters to Coindet (letter #1286) and to Unknown (letter #1287), both dated 13 February 1761, *EE*.



February 1762 letter to his publisher, Marc-Michel Rey, complains that “[a]ll the idle of France and Europe write me through the mail, and what is worse, expect replies” (Rousseau to Rey, 4 February 1762 [#1664], *EE*). In the April 1762 issue of the *Mercure de France*, he placed an announcement asking “Messieurs les Beaux-Esprits” to stop sending him “letters of compliment [...], not being in a state [...] to answer so many [of them].”<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, while the image of a “communication between two lonely beings” conjures a relationship that would seem to be established outside of any structure or social order—one that might have its true place in, say, nature, a small provincial village, or in a realm of celestial beings—in fact, the deep connection between reader and author was a highly structured, hierarchical one. The transitivity of ‘toucher’ conveys the seemingly unidirectional nature of the exchange, with the author as an active subject, the reader invariably a passive object, and their interaction one that was decidedly *not* between equals. The author stood as a fount of wisdom, truth, moral clarity; the reader’s role was to subordinate him or herself before this transcendent figure in the hopes of partaking of his knowledge. The author was a spiritual guide, a teacher, or a kind of lay priest, according to the influential account of Paul Bénichou (1996). The reader was a disciple or student, and to read meant to be opened up to this position of subservience, as Debreuil had done when he assumed the role of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s son, submitting to the authority of the father.

That said, if the grammar of ‘toucher’ implied the reader’s passivity, it did so by hiding a context of remarkable and multi-layered assertiveness on his or her part, which not only stood in strong contrast with the submissive role ostensibly assigned to the reader by the conventions of neo-intensive reading, but which, I would suggest, established the very conditions of possibility for this new textual practice. In fact, more than any particular reading style, it is this assertiveness that lies at the heart of the 18th-century

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14 *Mercure de France*, April 1762, 209. In both the letter to Rey and in this announcement, Rousseau complained about authors who sent him “brochures” and “beaux-esprits” who sent him letters. In addition to the time and effort required to respond, he also objected to the expense this unasked-for correspondence imposed on him, given the Old Regime postal conventions that generally required the recipient to pay for the service. Rousseau estimated that such mail cost him 500 livres a year.

reading revolution. Michel de Certeau's famous chapter, "Reading as Poaching," is often cited by historians arguing for the active role of readers in the production of a text's meaning, against a tradition of literary historical research that has predominantly focused on the figure of the author, and in so doing has assumed the reader to be no more than clay to be molded: "What has to be put into question," de Certeau writes, "is [...] the assimilation of reading to passivity" (ch. XII).<sup>15</sup> Of course, oriented by its authorial obsessions, neo-intensive reading might seem to call for just such a characterization, and certainly many important studies of it have tended to play up the 'power' of a particular author to elicit the relevant experiences in readers, which presumably they would otherwise not have known. In Darnton's study, it was Rousseau "who broke the barriers separating writer from the reader." He goes on to describe his famous case-study, the Protestant merchant from La Rochelle, Jean Ranson, as reading "exactly as Rousseau intended," "[a]bsorbing the texts as Rousseau taught him" (234, 241, 252).

It is not hard to see why Darnton and others would frame Rousseauist reading largely in terms of authorial agency. *La Nouvelle Héloïse* was published with two prefaces by Rousseau, the second of which staged Rousseau himself in dialogue with an interlocutor. Both reflected at length on how the letters between the two Swiss lovers should and would be appreciated. Numerous readers referred directly to these paratexts in their letters: "Your book has had more or less the effect on me that you predicted in your preface," writes one (Unknown to Rousseau, 15 March 1761 [#1365], *EE*). Others appeared to emulate the models they offered, even if they did not specifically mention the texts. Le Cointe's account of reading with his "young wife," cited above, appears to be derived from a scene in the second preface:

I like to picture a husband and a wife reading this collection [i.e., of letters] together, finding in it a source of renewed courage to bear their common labors, and perhaps new perspectives to make them useful. How could they behold this tableau of a happy couple without wanting to imitate such an attractive model?" (*Collected Writings* 6:16 and *Oeuvres* 2:23)

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15 Chartier ("Laborers" 49-50) opens with a passage from this essay.

Yet to stop the analysis too abruptly at this dynamic defined by the author's singular power to shape his readers is to miss a number of important complexities. For one thing, we should not ignore the fact that Le Cointe, whether or not he is consciously imitating the model of marital perusal supplied in the preface, seems in any case to misinterpret its lesson, which entailed that the married couple realize, through their shared appreciation of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, not their *love*—in the novel, Julie and her husband do not, in fact, love each other; and in the preface, Rousseau goes on to note that the reading couple he envisions can learn to be happy with “the charm of conjugal union, even in the absence of love’s charm”—but their duties and responsibilities (*Collected Writings* 6:16 and *Oeuvres* 2:23).

As it turns out, Le Cointe took from the text less the message that Rousseau sought to inculcate in him, than the one he wanted to hear, one that affirmed his domestic content in terms that made sense to him. In this respect, a more dynamic role for readers should be discerned, in which they were able, decisively, to inflect the lessons they learned and determine the conditions of their reception. Indeed, if the neo-intensive reading of the late 18th century stands out as a noteworthy stage in the history of literacy<sup>16</sup>, it is due not just to the striking nature of the tears and moralistic emoting that typified it, but to the initiative that readers were able to take in order to have these experiences and to give expression to them. Of course, they did so most emblematically by seeking to communicate their transport directly to authors, a gesture whose daring they often underscored in letters which, despite their presumptuous claims to intimacy with the novelist, were nonetheless full of embarrassed self-consciousness about their assertiveness: “Although I don’t have the good fortune of knowing you,” writes Bruner in one example to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, “I know—and who doesn’t—your sublime works”; he continues, seeking the author’s views on whether or not society has a right to kill an individual (pertinent, of course, in the

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16 A number of recent collections devoted to the history of reading include chapters on the “reading revolution” of the late 18th century, with attention paid to the advent of what I am calling neo-intensive reading. See chapter 9 of Martyn Lyons’ useful *A History of Reading in the West* entitled “The Reading Fever, 1750-1830” and Reinhard Wittmann’s essay “Was There a Reading Revolution at the End of the Eighteenth Century,” in the equally useful *A History of Reading in the West* (Cavallo/Chartier 284-312).

latter months of 1792, when Bruner wrote), “[i]t will seem surprising to you, Monsieur, that a young man of 18 years would ask you a question” (Bruner to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, 1 December 1792, Bibliothèque Salacrou, MS132, f.109r-109v).

It is no doubt true that only a tiny subset of total readers reached out in this fashion; in the case of Rousseau, about sixty letters are normally identified as belonging to the archive of his fan mail, a number that needs to be appraised in light of the tens of thousands of copies of the novel that circulated in the decades after its first publication in 1761.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, many of these correspondents were not obscure individuals taking the unprecedented step of contacting a distant celebrity. Rather, if they were not already directly acquainted with the author, they were, more often than usually acknowledged, integrated into contiguous personal networks at just one or two degrees of remove from Rousseau.<sup>18</sup> But let us assume anyway that the gesture of writing the author, if not typical in and of itself, might nonetheless stand in for a broader array of dynamic behaviors that were, in fact, coming to define reading in the 18th century. As such, neo-intensive reading was not just the quiet absorption of a text’s moral lessons. It was also an effort, through these behaviors, of assertively defining for oneself and plac-

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17 McEachern (205) identifies 70 true editions of the *Nouvelle Héloïse* published before 1800, plus some 35 additional issues of an edition.

18 To take one example, in “Readers Respond to Rousseau,” Darnton cites the letters of about 24 readers who contacted Rousseau. It is possible to ascertain that at least 10 of these had some kind of prior personal connection with the author; they knew him directly, had previously been in correspondence with him, had received the *Nouvelle Héloïse* as a gift from him (sometimes via an intermediary), and/or had another kind of affiliation with Rousseau that might have made the gesture of writing a letter seem somewhat less presumptuous than it might otherwise be. For instance, Daniel Roguin (mentioned by Darnton on p. 243), writes on February 27, 1761 to thank Rousseau for, among other things, not forgetting his family. Either his father or his uncle, army officers in the service of the King of Sardinia, was actually mentioned in a postscript to one of Saint-Preux’s letters to Julie (letter 34 in part I), in which he tells her that he has been offered the command of a troop in the Regiment that “M. Roguin” is raising (Rousseau, *Collected Writings* 6:88 and *Oeuvres* 2:108). See R.A. Leigh’s editorial note 1 to Roguin’s letter (letter #1329) in *EE*.

ing oneself in the positions that made the appropriation of these lessons, along with the personal improvement and affirmation that this entailed, possible. That is to say, as a reading experience, being touched was not a passive disposition, despite the grammatical inflection. It was the articulation of concerted, purposeful activity on the part of an individual who resolutely sought, and knew how to bring about a desired outcome.

And it bears emphasizing that, in this light, the individual's purposeful reading started long before his or her eyes scanned page one. It began with his or her decision to become a reader in the first place and to turn to books for a particular type of emotional or ethical uplift. It continued with the search for the right books, which took the reader not into nature or a small alpine village, but into the hustle of the book trade. We should not forget that, before anything else, neo-intensive reading was a phenomenon with roots deeply planted in commercial print and that it developed, as a distinct style, from as commercialized a relationship to books as there had ever been in the history of reading. In the *Tableau de Paris*, Louis-Sébastien Mercier describes a young girl who was told by her mother that she didn't want her to read. This has the predictable effect:

The desire to read builds in her; [...] she goes out furtively, enters the store of a bookseller, asks him for *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, of which she's heard people speak; the man smiles; she pays and holes up in her room. What is the result of this clandestine pleasure? I owe my heart to my lover; and when I'm married, I will be everything to my husband. (1:1047)

The scene shows the absurdity of reading prohibitions and echoes the neo-intensive authorial claim that reading brings moral direction and purpose to the reader. It also, of course, highlights all the requisite efforts that called the experience into being, including the girl's determination to overcome whatever obstacles were put in her path.

Above all, though, it is her easy willingness and ability to navigate the book trade that allows us to reframe the question of neo-intensive reading and to understand it in a new light. Mercier's image raises questions about how uni-directional the textual exchange conceptualized in the fan mail, and in the studies based on this correspondence, really was. For the girl's sentimental education rested not simply on Rousseau's ability to speak to her and open her eyes to virtue. It rested no less on the girl's *a priori* long-

ing for a certain type of affective experience, on her assumption that a particular kind of book was the place to look for it. It relied on her access to this book and on her understanding, once she had acquired it, of how to use it (reading alone in her room...). Essential to the realization of this experience was, then, a developed market that comprehended her desire and was reliably able to channel and satisfy it. I find the bookseller's smile significant in this respect, because he has anticipated her demand and is rewarded for his acumen. The girl, in turn, shells out what the book, and the experience she gleans from it, are worth to her. At root, we have a commercial transaction that, I believe, is just as defining of neo-intensive reading than the penning of a letter to an author. In fact, we might surmise that it is precisely the context of the impersonal market that makes the 'intimist' connection between reader and writer so meaningful. In this respect, neo-intensive readers were not just lonely beings absorbing in quiet solitude the wisdom of an author; they were, in essence, book trade customers—we know of Jean Ranson's feelings about Rousseau from his ongoing correspondence with a friend from schooldays in Neuchâtel who had gone into the bookselling business and served now as one of his suppliers—and their venturing into the market was as much part of what defined them as readers as the tears they privately shed, or at least confessed to shedding in the letters that recounted these emotional reading experiences.

The reader/author relationship that defined neo-intensive reading was, as such, more precarious and less direct than its articulations imply, for it was mediated by the reader's presence in the commercial sphere of the book trade, and was dependent on a series of other relationships—with booksellers and go-betweens—that provided the necessary framework for an 'intimist' reading premised on the denial of any mediation of the experience of the text as pure communion with its author. Most precarious of all perhaps was the complex relationship that then prevailed between two seemingly distinct personae of this modern reader him or herself, that is, the obedient disciple who submitted to the author's moral vision and the paying customer whose demand for the validating experience of partaking in such a vision and whose initiative in seeking it out mobilized a publishing business to produce the desired books, marketing them as what the reader wanted: not an object that the reader would care to touch, but the pure sincere expressions of a transcendent authorial figure, by whom, of course, the reader would *be touched*. The feasibility of this 'communion' of two selves

was a key manifestation of the dematerialization of reading; for it was only by forgetting that one held in one's hands a commodity produced for the mass-market by a profit-seeking dealer that one could be 'touched' by the text and more saliently, by the author's vision that this text conveyed.

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