Reading Bodies: Female Secrecy and Sexuality in the Works of Renoir and Degas

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This paper examines images of reading bodies as spaces in which nineteenth-century assumptions regarding gender distinctions are tested and transgressed. By staging an interplay between two types of reading (image and text), works by Auguste Renoir and Edgar Degas depict challenges to gendered reading practices and show how the body can function as a means of securing physical and intellectual privacy. As a result, traditional distinctions between public and private spaces are tested and the fashionably dressed female body is recast as a dual symbol of convention and transgression. It is argued that visual ambiguities triggered by depictions of secretive women readers undermine the ability of the spectator to impose a coherent framework on the works’ content. Attempts by the spectator to perform a voyeuristic role are shown to fail as the works defy placement of the female body within familiar social categories.

In his essay on reading, Roger Chartier claims that the act of reading is not just an operation of the intellect, but that it “brings the body into play, it is inscribed in a space and a relationship with oneself and others” (8). Given that solitary, silent reading is an essentially private activity that can take place in all manner of locations, it may seem odd to think that reading involves the body. In fact, in his history of reading, Paul Saenger describes an increasing intellectual involvement with texts at the specific expense of the physical. He argues that the development of silent reading, as a visual and intellectual experience as opposed to a physical one, was made possible by the introduction of word separation on the printed page: “The importance of word separation by space is unquestionable, for it freed the intellectual faculties of the reader, permitting all texts to be read silently, that is, with eyes only” (Saenger 13). According to Saenger, word separation on the page made the body less relevant to the reading process because texts no longer had to be read aloud in order to assist in the creation of sense. These views offer two contrasting ways of thinking about silent reading: one that gives primacy to the eye and intellect and one that emphasizes the body.

In this paper I will argue that these two aspects of reading are complementary and that they motivated important concerns regarding conceptions of women readers and their bodies during the nineteenth century. By analysing the depiction of the reader’s body in certain works by Auguste Renoir and Edgar Degas, I will show how visual art was used to thematise ideas concerning gendered reading during the nineteenth century and to reveal anxieties not just about what women read, but, more importantly, about
how they read. I shall focus on works that depict the female reader using her body to create a private space in which to read. I shall argue that the moment of intellectual privacy involved in the act of reading is mirrored by the way in which women used their bodies to create seclusion and to distance themselves from potential observers. This leads to a reconsideration of the relation between women and notions of physical and intellectual interiority. The depiction of the reading body raises questions not just about the interior of the reader’s mind, but also about the interior of the reader’s body. I will also argue that the structure of these works specifically invokes a notion of performance by extending to the spectator an invitation to play a role in relation to the visual fiction. In order to overcome the desire to understand what the reading women are doing in the private spaces they construct, the spectator is invited to perform the role of voyeur in relation to the depictions.

In Renoir’s *Green Reader* (*La liseuse verte*) of 1894 (fig. 1), the reader is depicted with her back turned to the spectator with the result that she is shown using her body to create a private space in which to read. We are not able to see what or where the woman is reading as details of the broader scene are omitted. Furthermore, we are not given any clue as to the woman’s response to the reading matter. Instead, the force of the painting is derived from the physical signalling of the reader that she does not wish to be observed. Instead of a retreat into a separate physical space, Renoir’s reader retreats into her own body in order to secure her privacy. The intellectual privacy involved in solitary, silent reading is matched by a desire for physical privacy that, in this case, can only be generated by the use of the body.¹

If, as Chris Shilling has suggested, the body is “our vehicle of being in, experiencing and creating the world in which we live,” Renoir’s work shows that the body is also a means of staging a relationship with the imaginary world of texts (69). In recent years, relationships between the body and written texts have come under increasing scrutiny, including analyses of parallels between actual and imaginary perception, the animation of texts through intellectual and physical identification by the reader, and the use of texts to structure or unsettle readers’ responses to their own physicality.² Renoir’s works form an important piece of evidence for these analyses as they focus attention on the body of the female reader both as an emblem of familiar social structures (in the conventional dress worn by the reader) and as a manifestation of individual privacy (by the way in which the reader uses her body). In light of the fact that women were accorded only limited citizenship and property rights during the nineteenth century, the depiction of women using their bodies to create a private physical and intellectual space becomes particularly poignant and the very concept of privacy all the more fragile.