

Lunn-Rockliffe on Laisney (2017)

Laisney, Vincent. *En lisant, en écoutant*. Les impressions nouvelles, 2017, pp. 219, ISBN 978-2-87449-445-1

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This slim volume is a gripping and informative account of the practice of reading aloud in the nineteenth century. It explores the distinctive culture of oral performance central to successive phases of the avant-garde, from the Empire to World War I, and challenges the commonplace perception that this was a century dominated by print. Laisney is a specialist in the role of sociability and the collective dynamics of literary groups. He has written substantial academic studies on this subject: *L’Arsenal romantique* (Champion, 2002), *L’Âge des cenacles* (with Anthony Glinoe, Fayard, 2013). *En lisant, en écoutant* is an offshoot of those works and, although it has its roots in extensive and meticulous research, it wears its learning very lightly. Refreshingly, it explicitly rejects the conventional academic model, consisting instead of a series of short fragments, and incorporating anecdotes about the research process itself. These digressions are entirely germane to the subject, since evidence of oral practices is by definition elusive and the process of interpreting it a delicate one. Laisney draws on a wide range of sources, including letters, memoirs, book reviews, literary works, paintings, and sound recordings, and his weighing up of what can be learned from the different types of material is consistently judicious and revealing.

Laisney’s starting point is a painting by Théo van Rysselberghe entitled *Une lecture*, showing Émile Verhaeren reading to fellow writers in a private room. He distinguishes such readings “en petit comité” from public readings, and establishes the small group practice as the subject of his book. The painting emphasizes the differing reactions of the assembled listeners, and the book as a whole is as much concerned with listening as with reading. Laisney returns repeatedly to this image in the course of the book, sometimes to answer a question it had initially raised—such as whether Verhaeren is reading or reciting from memory, and what his voice sounded like—and elsewhere to underscore the contention that the notion of pure literature as a solitary activity is a myth.

The book adopts a broadly chronological approach, and begins with Romantic *cénaclés*. This part is the richest in anecdotes and brings to life the world in which Alfred de Musset made his name by reading to his contemporaries and even Alfred de Vigny enjoyed reading to an audience, contrary to his reputation as an ivory tower poet. It covers the responses of provincial poets to these performances, and examines accounts of the effusive oral reactions of audiences, including satirical ones by Honoré de Balzac. Laisney offers a convincing explanation of what was said to have been exaggerated flattery, suggesting that in this post-revolutionary age of individuality, poets were reluctant to blend into a passive audience and would reassert their singularity by interrupting a reader’s performance with excessive praise. As a result, the audience responses to these Romantic *cénaclés* no longer served a real critical purpose.

Laisney identifies the emergence of a more sober kind of reading in the group convened by Étienne-Jean Delécluze, frequented by Stendhal and Prosper Mérimée, in which reading aloud was less theatrical and offered a genuine opportunity for critical discussion. Fascinatingly, he also explores some spectacular failures, such as the reading of François-René de Chateaubriand’s only tragedy in Madame Récamier’s salon (Chateaubriand, it emerges, was in general highly responsive to oral suggestions made by his listeners), as well as dissecting the fictional scene in *Illusions perdues*, in which Lucien reads in Madame de Bargeton’s salon.

Laisney reminds us that both Charles Baudelaire and Gustave Flaubert gave compelling readings of their own works. These performances made some of the most striking poems of *Les Fleurs du Mal* well-known fifteen years before the first edition was published. Baudelaire was noted for building on the kind of non-declamatory reading style pioneered by Mérimée, and would often correct his texts in response to audience reactions. Similarly, Flaubert undertook epic readings of successive drafts of *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* to a range of listeners, including Louis Bouilhet, Maxime du Camp, George Sand and Ivan Turgenev, before publishing it.

In the sections devoted to the later nineteenth century, Laisney explores a variety of tensions. The Naturalists were worried about being plagiarized if they read aloud from unpublished works, and yet Guy de Maupassant’s embroidered account of how the *Soirées de Médan* emerged from a story-telling session reveals that the notion of confraternity remained important. An oratorical style of delivery persisted despite the fact that the more experimental poets privileged textuality by adopting understated speaking styles. Laisney suggests that it is probably in protest against an oratorical delivery that Arthur Rimbaud (known for his understated yet magnetic manner of reading) swore under his breath at a reader and as a result became involved in an altercation with Étienne Carjat. A more theatrical style was promoted by Paul Fort’s Théâtre d’art in the early 1890s.

Fort's approach enraged Stéphane Mallarmé, who refused to have poetry read at his *mardi* gatherings, although he did read aloud privately. The book ends with a discussion of early sound recordings, but concludes that even these are only a record of a voice in a particular context, and that a poet reading in public would not sound the same as if he were reading in private.

Throughout this study, Laisney wrestles with questions such as whether authors read their own verse or that of others, whether they read from books or by heart, and what it might have felt like to read at one of these occasions. He mobilizes a wealth of evidence to offer answers whenever possible and draws precise conclusions about what cannot be known for certain. *En lisant, en écoutant* is that rarest of things, a highly enjoyable work which succeeds in changing our perception of a number of canonic writers, and of nineteenth-century literary history more generally. We should be grateful to its author for having absorbed such a vast array of material, for selecting such illuminating slivers, and for offering such valuable insights.

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