

**An essay on the work of artist Jeannie Lucas, published in
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A Woman Reading

I

Dear Jeannie,

Sometimes my history of art is nothing more than a history of women reading. You will know these images already. There is a woman reading a letter by the light (one assumes) of an open window. The letter is lifted slightly above the level of her waist and it seems rather crumpled, as though it has been read several times already, then smoothed out and read again. This is a painting by Vermeer, now in the State Collection in Dresden. My chronology is without logic for much later, two centuries in fact, I am thinking of a woman reading a letter in a painting by Corot. She is seated in an armchair, her right arm resting lightly on the arm of the chair, and the letter has slid down the skirt of her dress, partially obscured by her left hand. It would be more accurate to say that she has been reading this letter and has now withdrawn from its contents, for her eyes appear to be closed. In the eighteenth century La Marquise de Pompadour sits in a mannered way in her boudoir, depicted by Boucher. It is not a letter this time, but a book that falls from the lap of her exquisite dress. It is not if it may be a book or a letter that concerns me (though I will return to the letter later - when I next write to you), but I will nonetheless remark on the difference between the subjects. The women reading or no longer reading or once again reading their letters are oblivious to the regard of the viewer, who may also be the painter. Madame de Pompadour, however, is completely conscious that she is seen; indeed, she has arranged herself as spectacle.

In the France of the eighteenth century (which is, as you know, of particular interest to me, not least for the richness of literary rhetoric as much as for its revolutionary events establishing a new form of subjectivity), two kinds of seating arrangements were preferred for reading. Depending on the subject matter of one's chosen texts and one's particular relation to it, one chose either a straight-backed *bergère*, which could of course be made more comfortable with cushions, or a *duchesse*, a kind of sofa in one or more parts on which the reader could stretch out. The choice, one might say, was between two feminine figures: the shepherdess and the duchess. One might be more likely to be found in the bedroom than in the library. In one of two paintings commissioned from Chardin, titled *Amusements of the Tranquil Life*, a woman sits in an armchair, her hand resting on her lap, holding a book. Her feet are raised on a small footstool. She is painting wearing a flowing sort of dress, like Madame de Pompadour's, a dress known as a '*liseuse*', both a dress for reading in and a woman reader. Once again, in the history of art as in any history, woman and object are infinitely interchangeable. At the time of its exhibition in 1778, contemporary descriptions speak of her languor, her abandonment to the text she is reading which appears to have aroused feelings and images inducing a romantic reverie. Its theme was 'Gentle, Insinuating Education', while the second painting, in contrast to the first, shows 'Strict Education', a woman balancing her household accounts, sitting up at a writing-table. Some connection is made between the reading of novels (for that it is a novel is assumed by the same contemporary commentators), and states of abandon, intimacy and pleasure. I am reminded, not only of your recent paintings, also titled '*Les Liseuses*', but also of earlier paintings, such as the beauty in the *medaillon*, first seen in the museum in Lyons and now, in another version, hanging on the wall of my bedroom.

Je te salue.

Sharon

II

Dear Jeannie,

I was prompted to turn to another letter, another method of reading. It is not a real letter of course, any more than this is. While I appear to be writing to you, it is simply a conceit, an affectation of address. Yet the epistolary style is not my own, and may equally be found in any number of texts (let us call them novels). The letter is the fond device of the libertine, whose project, after all, is that of education, twining eroticism with enlightenment, in the licentious ways of the aristocracy in decline. The 'libertine' novel proposes an interesting model of desire. While it is founded in phantasy (the condition of desire), women also become desiring subjects, whatever they have been taught to the contrary. If there is a chorus of women (the term is Michel Feher's, not mine), then the men – the *petit-maitres* – are also dispensable. Actually, I am thinking of two letters and will return to phantasy when I write again. The first makes its appearance in Book XX of the seminars of Jacques Lacan (my own master): On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge. While psychoanalysis does nothing except talk about love, some might say, Lacan is determined to produce a discourse that binds love and knowledge. He writes it as '*une lettre d'amour*', and takes up in that eponymous chapter Freud's famous question, '*Was will das Weib*'. Well, Lacan asks, if there is only masculine libido, as Freud claims, what this might mean for all beings who take on the status of woman. Incidentally, he also says that it is quite improper to call a woman *la Femme*, because she is only enunciated as barred, not whole. In fact, she cannot be said; nothing may be said of her and she is doubled. Woman (which one cannot say and must cross out) is differentiated right from the beginning: '*on la dit-femme*' and '*on diffâme*'.

Thinking of defamed women, I am reminded of Dumas' *Filles, Lorettes et Courtisane*, and all the women (not the woman, as you see) about whom one tries to fix the distinctive character of their talent. Colette is good on this, but no

one seems to read her these days. There is the whole array, you've sent me some: Cora Pearl, described as one of 'the most brilliant stars of her age', Liane de Pougy, her image reproduced on postcards symbolising a certain vision of Europe, or 'La Belle Otero'. There is 'Nana', too, over whom we met in a way, in the Theatre de Variétés. Do you remember when we first see her in Zola's novel? The crowd is restless, awaits her impatiently, begins to murmur:

At that very moment the clouds at the back of the stage parted, and Venus appeared. Very tall and well built for her eighteen years, in her goddess's white tunic, and with her long fair hair hanging loosely over her shoulders, Nana came down towards the footlights with quiet self-assurance. Greeting the audience with a laugh, she launched into her big song:

'When Venus roams at eventide . . .

She manifests herself as a commodity, or has the form of commodity, only in so far as she has two forms, a physical or natural form, and a value form. She is a woman and a goddess, and the fact that she can't sing doesn't worry anyone. She is an object and a bearer of value and no one knows how to have her. Nana eludes possession, escapes the grasp, no matter how much is paid to her, for her. She has value in that she can be exchanged, passed on. She has value in that another has had her, and now has lost her. Nana inhabits the world of the *demi-mondaine*, and while the prostitute is explicitly condemned by the social order, she is implicitly tolerated. Nana, or any like her - there are proper and improper names - is valuable because she has been used. Her use is not merely potential, but already realised, and so subject to a finely calibrated system of valuation.

I have written more than I intended, overtaken by a lineage of women. I don't have time to get to the second letter.

A plus tard.

Sharon

III

Dear Jeannie,

My friend D., a psychoanalyst, says there is quite a difference between men and women's relation to desire. It is as though a woman aims not at the object but rather at the desire of another. Thus, he says, women aren't usually collectors, as what interests them is desire not possession, and desire is undone by having. I suppose any courtesan worthy of her name, 'Nana' for instance, understands that. On the other hand, I am struck that women so frequently keep letters, even when their own are discarded or remain unsent, giving themselves in place of a letter when writing is not enough. Correspondence then, is often fragmentary and one-sided, when a man and a woman write to each other. One knows what Diderot wrote to Sophie Volland or Flaubert to Louise Collet, but not what the women said. One has to read between the lines. One has to supply one's own scene of recognition.

The letter I did not get to in my last letter to you is a fictional letter. It circulates as both written document and a metaphor for the signifier in Edgar Allan Poe's story *The Purloined Letter* and gives a peculiar position to whoever holds it. Both the letter and writing (a book perhaps) are connected, and both have a quality of being without meaning, assuming it only as it is assigned or interpreted. The precise contents of the letter are never revealed yet something is produced as the effect of the written. The poor *Prefect* has to find something that has been hidden, and resorts to employing a certain Dupin to get him out of trouble - a letter is stolen and a letter is recovered, and each scene is one of duplication or repetition.

When you show me your paintings, I have to take them quite literally, as the letter, in fact. I have to take them one after another and all together. And in my

relationship with them, something always escapes anything I may have to say about them.

Je t'embrasse,

Sharon

IV

Dear Jeannie,

Lacan uses Poe's short story to demonstrate circuits of desire, exchange and repetition. He proposes that 'a letter always arrives at its destination', and I suppose one must assume this to be the case even if the letter is not sent. In Corot's painting, the woman closes her eyes, drops the letter. In Vermeer's, the woman stands, seemingly focussed upon it yet, I suspect, reading it in memory. Madame de Pompadour turns her gaze to her right, away from her book. Your little readers are hardly reading at all any longer, neither letters nor books, lost in a strange field of inscription. I may look everywhere, but they still do not come forward to meet me. Perhaps this is because they are nowhere, but that is a question for you to answer in your letters that are not published here because they, too, are nowhere. There is nothing behind your paintings, in the sense that an object - say, a letter - may be hidden; everything is manifest, and everything, in the words of Lacan again, 'which could serve to define the characters as real (...) has nothing to do with the story'.

Did you know that Freud had a habit of reading in a very peculiar and uncomfortable body position? He used to lean in a chair, in a sort of diagonal position, one of his legs slung over the arm of the chair, the book held high and his head unsupported. In 1911 he warned his students not to pay too much attention to the dreams of his hysterical patients, who even brought notebooks full to their sessions. In 1905 dreams and hysteria reveal the most secret and repressed wishes of his patients, but by 1911, dreams, especially those of

hysterics, have to be handled quite differently. The psychoanalytic method of 1911 is unable to master what is presented in the same manner in 1905. It is both a matter and a method of reading, and where one stands or how one sits cannot be matters of indifference. It may even be important what one is wearing. I am wearing old striped jeans, a shameful black cotton sweater, canvas pumps, pearl earrings. I hope no one calls on me while I am writing. Last time we met, you were wearing a light summer dress, red with white dots. Marina Tsvetaeva wrote to Anna Teskova, asking if she had, by chance a simple washable dress, as she had spent the whole winter in one woollen frock. It may be the other way round, of course. As with any painting, a text knows nothing of one, and yet one is persuaded that one must see oneself there, in a drama of one's own construction. I look forward to your reply.

Love and respect,

Sharon