Identifying reading emotions: computer-assisted analysis of a corpus of letters from French contemporary readers

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Abstract: The present study aims to provide an empirically grounded definition of "reading emotions", understood not as the spontaneous reactions that arise during reading, but as the result of the process by which readers grasp these reactions retrospectively and turn them into language. To this aim, the study designs a tailored analytical framework and applies it to a corpus of several hundred letters written by contemporary French readers applying to be part of the jury of a well-known literary prize. The framework relies on two assumptions stemming respectively from reading studies and emotion research: the first one is that reading constitutes a dynamic interaction between text and reader, relying on universal neural mechanisms and shaped by historical, psychological, social, and individual factors; the second one is that emotions play a vital role in human cognition and evaluative processes. To validate these assumptions empirically, a computer-assisted analysis of the corpus is implemented, combining close reading, manual annotation and text-mining.

Keywords: Reading studies, emotion studies, empirical approach, digital humanities, ordinary readers

1. Introduction

Over fifty years of existence of a multidisciplinary field devoted to studying reading leave no doubt on the fact that written texts, and especially literary texts, trigger a complex web of cognitive, affective and sensory responses. As Robert Darnton has pointed out (Darnton 1986, 7), these responses are difficult to study, as they cannot be observed directly. Indeed, the reader's inner experience of reading remains inaccessible; we can only infer it from the traces it leaves - impressions, memories, and interpretations – in an oral or in a written form.

To contribute to the understanding of this experience, between 2020 and 2024, as part of the research project Reading Europe Advanced Data Investigation Tool (READ-IT), a team from Le Mans University explored several hundred letters written in 2010 and 2011 by a group of ordinary readers, reflecting on the role of reading in their everyday lives. These letters were submitted to the *Prix du Livre Inter*, a French literary award. This paper presents some of the results of the analysis, focusing specifically on the expression of reading-related emotions in the letters.

Both reading and emotions are widely explored across a range of scholarly disciplines, including literary studies, history, sociology, (computational) linguistics and cognitive studies. Yet, despite the centrality of emotions in the reading experience, reading studies and emotion studies have, for the most part, evolved independently of one another (Ouvry-Vial and Richard 2022, 127). This can be partly attributed to the fact that, as some literary scholars have noted, literary studies — which originally laid the foundations for the study of reading — have traditionally been reluctant to engage with methods and concepts drawn from research on emotions (Gefen 2016). In order to contribute to the understanding of "reading

emotions", this paper suggests to bring these two fields into dialogue, developing an analytical framework specifically designed at their intersection and testing it against a corpus of testimonies from actual readers.

2. A tailored analytical framework for reading emotions

The analytical framework employed in this study draws on and combines several major findings stemming from reading studies and emotion research. A brief overview of the development of these two fields will allow to point them out.

In the 1970s, reading-response criticism established reading as a dynamic interaction between a text, which doesn't have a fixed meaning, and a reader, who brings it to life by interpreting and appropriating it (Iser 1978, Jauss 1982). By designing analytical models based on abstract figures of readers - such as Wolfgang Iser's implied reader (1974) and Umberto Eco's model reader (1979) – reading-response criticism first opened up the possibility of rethinking the study of texts through the lens of reading. The historical, anthropological and sociological approaches to reading that have emerged from the 1980s in Europe and beyond have brought to attention the fact that reading is a situated activity, that strongly varies according to historical (Cavallo and Chartier 1997), socio-economic (Bourdieu 1979) and even individual factors (Lahire 2004). Around the same time, some literary critics began urging their fellow scholars to move beyond abstract readers in favour of the *real* reader, one who reads with their body, their mind and their emotions (Picard 1986). However, the real reader emerging from this body of work is not an *actual* reader grasped in the specificity of their reading experience (Parmentier 2017, 125), but a *possible* reader imagined by the critic.

Over the past three decades, crucial insights into the physical and cognitive activity of *actual* readers were provided by cognitive sciences (Dehaene 2007). Building on these discoveries, a new empirical approach has progressively taken shape within literary studies (Kuiken and Jacobs 2021). Its aim is to observe and measure how the reader's brain and body are activated during the act of reading, resorting to technologies such as eye-tracking, EEG, and MRI, as well as qualitative methods such as questionnaires about reading experiences. The work emerging from this empirical approach to reading has the great merit of having revived a proposition already put forward by several sociologists and historians: that of studying reading through the *traces* it leaves behind. The range of traces left by actual reading practices is both broad and varied: it includes data accessible through brain imaging, quantitative data gathered via surveys and questionnaires, and, above all, qualitative data drawn from reading testimonies (correspondences, reviews and comments posted online, interviews, etc.).

Readers' testimonies have been at the heart of several research initiatives which—like the Remembering Literature in Everyday Life (EROL) project—are often marked by a distinctive collaborative and interdisciplinary approach. Among these, one may cite the pioneering Reading Experience Database (UK RED), as well as the Reading Europe Advanced Data Investigation Tool (READ-IT), which supported the present work. This project, led by Brigitte Ouvry-Vial at Le Mans University, aimed to provide researchers with a dedicated tool for analysing and exploring European readers' testimonies, in order to better understand how reading has been experienced from the eighteenth century to the present day (Benatti et al. 2023).

Over time, all these various strands of research have made it possible to better apprehend the full complexity of reading, both as a creative process that contributes to the construction of textual meaning, and also as a socially, historically, and individually situated practice. While cognitive sciences show that reading engages universal neural mechanisms, we are also aware that its impact on readers' lives and their interpretation of texts can only be fully understood through the lens of individual, lived reading experiences.

Let us now turn to the other phenomenon at the heart of the analysis carried on in this paper: emotions. While we can all intuitively define emotions based on our personal experiences—joy, sadness, confusion, and so on—there is, in fact, no consensus among experts on what emotions are, nor on how to distinguish them from other mental states such as passions, perceptions, or cognitive processes. Emotions lie at the heart of a rich and evolving multidisciplinary field, which began to take shape over a century ago with William James' pioneering experimental research into the physiological manifestations of emotions, such as tears or shivers (James 1884).

Early works in cognitive psychology (see Sander and Scherer 2014), followed by contributions from anthropology and linguistics (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990), paved the way for a broader investigation that now spans contemporary philosophy (Tappolet 2022) and history (Rosenwein and Cristiani 2018), marking emotions as a growing concern in the humanities and social sciences.

Rejecting the dichotomy between emotion and reason, that dominated Western thought until at least Romanticism, current research on emotions is almost unanimous on one essential point: emotions are not only physiological, but also cognitive, playing a complementary role to reason in decision-making processes and contributing to knowledge acquisition (Lemaire 2021). While a

comprehensive review of this vast field is beyond this paper's scope, the present section will briefly introduce a theoretical position that appears to be particularly relevant for thinking about emotions experienced during reading—that is the evaluative nature of emotions. Introduced by Canadian psychologist Magda B. Arnold (1960), this view posits that emotions are not directly triggered by an object (for example, a large and aggressive dog), but rather by the value that an individual attach to this object (in this case, the assessment that the dog may pose a physical threat).

Building on this proposition, a range of theories has emerged in philosophy and psychology to explain the evaluative processes underlying emotional responses (Candiotto 2023). Among these, cognitive theories hold that emotions are rooted in cognitive appraisals—what Martha Nussbaum (2001) describes as "upheaval of thoughts". In contrast, perceptual theories (Prinz 2004, Tappolet 2016), while also emphasizing the evaluative dimension of emotions, argue that this evaluation is non-cognitive in nature: emotions are not seen as judgments, but as a distinct class of perceptions whose origin is rooted in the body.

Despite their differences, both positions converge on two fundamental ideas that form a robust analytical framework—a framework already employed in philosophical analyses of the emotions elicited by various art forms, including literature (Nussbaum 1992, Robinson 2005): first, that emotions involve a form of evaluation; and second, that they are intimately connected to cognition. When applied to reading, especially literary fiction, these insights prompt to explore whether the emotions readers experience and articulate are shaped by the value they assign to various textual elements—such as style, rhythm, character actions, or narrative events—and whether readers can retrospectively trace this evaluative

process. Furthermore, we may ask whether, and to what extent, these emotions contribute to the interpretation, understanding, and overall impact of the text.

To sum up, the analytical framework underpinning the present study draws on two key insights from reading studies and emotion research, respectively. The first one is that reading is a dynamic interaction between text and reader, grounded in shared neural mechanisms yet shaped by historical, psychological, social, and individual factors. Readers' testimonies provide privileged access to the affective, cognitive, and bodily dimensions of the reading experience, as well as to its variations across time, space, communities, and individuals. The second insight is that emotions play a central role in human cognition and serve an evaluative function.

This interdisciplinary framework enables the articulation of the three research questions guiding the investigation into the expression of reading-related emotions within the *Prix du Livre Inter* corpus, to which the next section of this paper is devoted:

1. How do readers recount their reading experiences, and what role do they assign to emotions within these experiences?
2. To which aspects of the reading experience do they associate their emotional responses?
3. What effects—whether consciously or unconsciously—do they attribute to these emotions?

3. An exceptional archival material for exploring reading emotions

The *Prix du Livre Inter* corpus constitutes a rare material, largely unexploited, for investigating reading experiences. Launched in 1975

on the airwaves of the renowned cultural radio channel France Inter (part of the national public radio broadcaster Radio France), the *Prix du Livre Inter* is a literary prize awarded each year to a recently published French novel by a jury of readers. What sets this prize apart is its commitment to giving ordinary readers the opportunity not only to take part in the public process of literary consecration, but also to speak out about what reading means to them. In fact, as required by the organizers, individuals who wish to join the jury must submit a letter of application to Radio France, in which they are invited to speak about themselves and their relationship to reading. The jurors are then selected from among the applicants by a committee composed of France Inter journalists, who evaluates the letters based on their sincerity and originality. The candidates are also asked to indicate their gender, their profession, their age and their place of residence. This unique literary prize relies on a popular jury of twenty-four readers, whose composition must meet a number of specific criteria. First and foremost, gender parity is required. Additionally, the jury must be geographically balanced, with members representing the various regions of France and, if applicable, the overseas territories and abroad. Each year, several thousand letters of application are received and evaluated by the editorial team of Radio France. Once the jury is formed, it is placed under the presidency of a well-known writer, who guides and oversees the deliberations. Each jury member commits to reading ten novels published over the course of the previous year, all of which are pre-selected by the prize's organisers. The final deliberations take place in June, in Paris, at Radio France headquarters, following discussions among the jury members and a secret ballot vote.

In 2020, members of the READ-IT project were granted permission to digitise and use for research purposes linked to the project's development a portion of these letters, originally handwritten and typed, deposited in paper format at the National Archives in Paris. The authorisation covers both accepted and rejected applications from the years 2010 and 2011, amounting to a dataset of approximately 3,000 letters. From the outset, it immediately appeared evident that these testimonies from ordinary readers could serve as a very peculiar and promising lens through which to examine the inner experience of reading in contemporary France.

Indeed, the candidates offer well-crafted yet intimate narratives of their personal relationship with reading. These accounts are presented with apparent spontaneity, yet with the awareness that the letters will be read and evaluated by a jury of experts and intellectuals. Ultimately, they are self-portraits in which personal identities are inextricably linked to books.

Constructing a digitised corpus suitable for analysis required several months of work. Under the direction of François Vignale (Le Mans University), the entire collection was first photographed on-site, after which the typewritten letters were digitised using two distinct Optical Character Recognition (OCR) programs (ABBYY Finereader and OCR Feeder). Additionally, a speech recognition protocol was developed to transcribe the handwritten letters. Nevertheless, the procedure proved exceedingly time-consuming, and the constraints imposed by a doctoral contract's timeline further limited our capacity. Consequently, only a small subset of the handwritten letters was digitised, amounting to approximately 5% of the total. All transcribed letters (typewritten and handwritten) were anonymised: names, addresses, and any other information that could potentially identify the sender were removed. In total, 1,532 letters were converted into

text and manually corrected. In what follows, this dataset will be referred to simply as "the corpus".

Following the transcription phase, a database was constructed and populated, with each letter being assigned a unique identifier. For each letter, when available, the transcription was included alongside a range of metadata pertaining to both the letter and its sender. These metadata encompass the letter's form (handwritten or typed) as well as various details about the sender, such as gender, profession, age, and place of residence.

A statistical analysis of these metadata, conducted with the programming language R (R Core Team 2024), yielded insights into the profile of the readers who applied in 2010 and 2011. First and foremost, it is important to note that the candidates are listeners of Radio France—a public broadcasting network known for its cultural programming and for attracting an audience generally considered to be intellectual and bourgeois. Moreover, these candidates are not casual readers: they are dedicated and passionate, voluntarily undertaking the challenge of reading and evaluating ten novels within eight weeks. In this sense, they constitute a distinct, self-selecting group—neither representative of the general population nor of the average lay reader.

More than 70% of applicants are women. Among those who disclosed their age, all age groups are represented, although the 50–59 cohort is the most represented, comprising 27% of the total. The average age of candidates is 50. The letters were sent from all thirteen metropolitan regions of France, with a small number coming from the overseas territories and abroad. The Île-de-France region, which includes Paris, is particularly prominent, accounting for over 23% of the applications. The professional backgrounds of the applicants are highly diverse, ranging from healthcare workers and technicians to

employees in both the private and public sectors. Notably, a significant proportion—one in four of those who specified their profession—work in education, mostly as primary or secondary school teachers.

Taken together, these observations suggest that the group is largely composed of individuals from the middle and upper-middle classes, who invest considerable time and resources in reading. While some have backgrounds in literature and all are avid readers, they may nonetheless be characterised as ordinary readers, in the sense proposed by Robert Darnton (1985, 161): they are not professionally engaged in reading, writing, or literary criticism, as editors, journalists, or authors are. They engage with literature – for the most part, literary fiction - as part of their everyday lives rather than as a professional obligation.

4. Methodology

It is now time to get to the core of the analysis, which concerns the expression of reading-related emotions in the over 1,500 letters available in text format. A few theoretical and methodological problems presented themselves. The first one was a scale problem. What scale should be used when analysing something so personal and intimate, but also so widespread as reading emotions? Would it be better to perform a distant reading on the entire corpus, or limit the analysis to a sample of close-read letters? And how many?

The scale-problem is a real conundrum in reading studies, especially when examining articulated written and oral accounts of the inner experience of reading. As many scholars—particularly in the field of literary studies—have noted, reading is a fundamentally individual experience (Macé 2011, 27): it happens to individuals, is shaped by their personalities, and in turn, can shape those personalities. At the

same time, we cannot overlook the existence of both small and large reading communities, brought together by shared temporal, spatial, linguistic, personal, or socio-cultural affinities. These communities often attribute similar value to reading and articulate their experiences using a comparable vocabulary. To sum up, as Roger Chartier reminds us, when studying the inner experience of reading, it is essential to steer clear of a double pitfall: on the one hand, the risk of "falling into the endless collection of singularities," and on the other, that of "overlooking the originality of each individual appropriation" (Chartier 2020, 21, my translation).

In an effort to strike a balance between the singularity of individual readers and the broader group of 1,532 applicants to the *Prix du Livre Inter* jury, the present study adopted what might be called a multiscale analytical approach. This approach combines close reading and manual annotation of a small sample of letters with a macro-level analysis of the entire corpus, based on text-mining operations using TXM, a textometry-based tool for textual analysis (Heiden 2010).

This twofold method allows to account for interindividual variations and the lexical diversity through which emotions linked to reading are expressed, while still identifying recurring themes and lexicon across the letters. These recurrences are, in turn, symptomatic of a shared way of thinking about and narrating the inner experience of reading and its emotional impact. Indeed, while a first, comprehensive reading of the entire corpus already suggested notable similarities in how jury candidates retrospectively describe their reading-related emotions, it remains true that such an experience can only be fully understood at the level of the individual reader and the individual letter.

Firstly, a close reading was performed on a sample of application letters, evenly divided between those accepted by the jury and those

that were rejected. The sample comprises 48 letters—thirty-six submitted in 2010 and twelve in 2011. It was compiled through a random selection process implemented in R. The sample was annotated using the platform developed by the READ-IT project. As illustrated in the image below, the platform allows to annotate various aspects of a reader's experience as described in their testimony—ranging from information about the reader's identity and the material features of the reading resource, to the emotional responses that reading provoked.

Figure1 – Screenshot of the READ-IT annotation platform

To do this, the researcher assigns a selected passage of text to one of the platform's annotation categories and subcategories—such as "reader" and "age," "act of reading" and "date," or "effects" and "emotions". Within each subcategory, specific labels can be created manually —for example, "30 years old" under "age," or "romance" under "genre." Designed as a collaborative tool, the platform stores all previously entered labels, making them available for reuse by

263

other researchers. The platform proved to be particularly valuable for exploring the sample of 48 letters, especially for analysing the wide spectrum of emotions expressed by the candidates—ranging from joy to sadness, and beyond. This aspect will be discussed in more detail shortly.

5. Results

The insights drawn from the annotation were subsequently tested against the corpus of 1,532 letters through a series of text-mining operations, carried out using TXM. The following sections outline the results of this multiscale analysis, intended to provide some answers to the research questions guiding this study.

5.1 Reading: a dynamic interaction between the text and its reader

First, the analysis suggests that most readers explicitly acknowledge the central role of their emotional, sensory, and intellectual engagement in conferring both existence and meaning upon the text. They describe their interaction not only with the content of the text, but also with its style and structure, its material features, and even the perceived personality of its author. In doing so, they demonstrate a clear awareness that reading is a creative, interpretive, and dynamic act. The following quote, drawn from one of the letters, illustrates this point.

That's more or less what I call a conversation with the text. And that's how the dialogue works for me: I respond with my sensibility to the form of the text, the style of the writing, the rhythm of the words and phrases, the sounds that can be heard.[1]

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[1] All the translations are mine.

Several text-mining operations confirmed the widespread dissemination of this perception of reading as a dynamic interaction with the text in the entire corpus. For instance, readers place considerable emphasis on their physical engagement with the book, as indicated by the frequency of lemmas such as "touch" (387 occurrences), "smell" (79), "peruse" (104), "sniff" (19), and "stroke" (62) across the corpus. Moreover, the hypothesis that these ordinary readers see themselves as legitimate and active interlocutors of the text and its author is supported by the 62 co-occurrences of the terms "encounter" and "author", as well as by the frequent appearance of the lemma "dialogue" (70 occurrences), which is often found in proximity to "text", "receiver", and "incessant". Finally, readers frequently describe situations of deep absorption in the fictional world, as evidenced by recurring expressions such as "to be pulled in" (122 occurrences), "to live vicariously" (8 occurrences, with 27 additional instances of "vicariously" alone), and "to be transported" (160 occurrences).

Their reflections—articulated in non-specialist language and grounded in personal memories and life experiences—remarkably align with the definition of reading as the actualization of the text, a concept first formulated in the 1970s by reader-response theorists and subsequently expanded and enriched by later developments in anthropology (de Certeau 1984) and literary studies (Macé 2011).

5.2 A wide array of reading emotions

The second finding is that this dynamic relationship with the text, as described by the readers, is associated with a wide array of emotions. To enable a more in-depth analysis of the nature, objects, and effects of these emotional responses, a systematic method for identifying and extracting them was required.

Accordingly, the sample of 48 letters was annotated by linking the emotions expressed by candidates to 21 pre-established emotion categories. These categories are derived from the *Aesthetic Emotion Measurement Scale* (AESTHEMOS), a system specifically developed to classify emotions elicited by artistic experiences—including reading—by a team of neuroscientists led by Ines Schindler (Schindler et al. 2017). This system is distinctive in that it encompasses not only the full spectrum of emotions typically associated with responses to the intrinsic qualities of artworks—such as admiration or the experience of beauty—but also includes categories commonly found in general emotion taxonomies, such as joy, sadness, and boredom. The annotation process was conducted using the READ-IT interface, following the procedure illustrated in the image below.
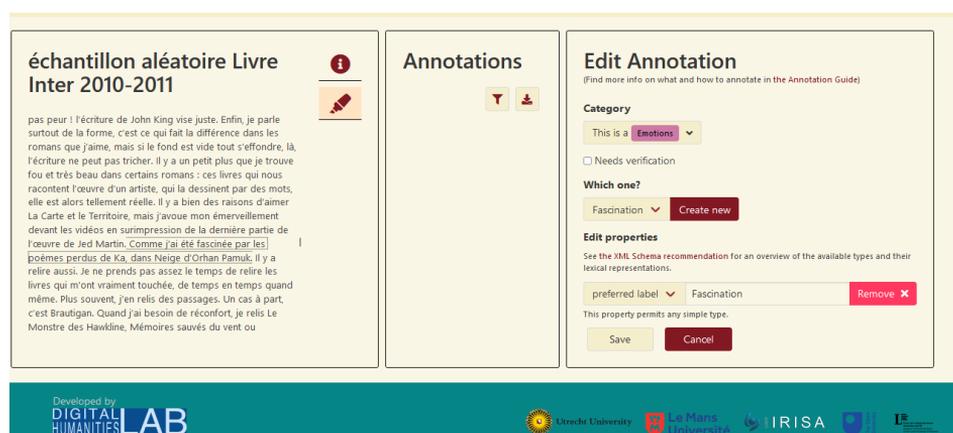

Figure 2 – Screenshot of the READ-IT annotation platform

Each underlined text segment (displayed on the left side of the screen) is assigned to the annotation class "Emotions"—a subclass of the broader annotation category "Effects" already available in the READ-IT interface—and subsequently linked to one of the twenty-one

emotion categories defined in the AESTHEMOS framework. These categories are manually added as "preferred labels" on the right side of the screen. In the example above, the segment "How fascinated I was by Ka's lost poems in *Snow* by Orhan Pamuk" is first annotated as an emotion and then linked to the relevant AESTHEMOS category, in this case "fascination". The annotated segments vary in length, ranging from a few words to several paragraphs. Due to its high degree of flexibility, the READ-IT interface initially allowed for the annotation of text segments of diverse lengths—an essential feature given the heterogeneity of ways in which subjective reading experiences are articulated. Once annotated, the segments were exported in both .txt and .csv formats and compiled into an Excel file to facilitate sorting, grouping, and comparative analysis.

The annotation process inevitably entails a degree of ambiguity, which stems from the inherently elusive and subjective nature of the object under study: emotions. Without claiming objectivity or replicability, this process aims to produce a form of atlas mapping the emotions expressed by candidates to the *Prix du Livre Inter* jury. The goal is to capture the diversity of emotional responses articulated by readers and to begin formulating answers to the research questions concerning the objects, nature, and effects of reading-related emotions.

Two examples may serve to illustrate how the letters have been annotated according to the emotion categories defined in AESTHEMOS. In the first one, a reader describes their emotional response to the characters in the novels of the 19th-century author Stendhal: "And I've decided to leave Stendhal behind for good: I forced myself, I read *The Red and the Black*, then *The Charterhouse of Parma* [...] It's impossible—he and his characters irritate me. Too

much silliness kills romance…". This utterance has been annotated under the emotion category "anger."

A second example concerns *And Quiet Flows the Don* by the Russian author Mikhail Sholokhov (1928). A reader recounts the joy they experienced not only from the aesthetic pleasure of reading the novel, but also from the sense of posthumous connection it evoked with a departed family member: "Beyond the immense jubilation I felt devouring those thousands of pages, I had the impression of sharing, beyond death, the joy of reading with my grandmother—I saw her again, seated at the window, carefully deciphering those lines of tiny print." This extended and evocative reflection was annotated under the emotion category "joy".

The analysis suggests that the candidates to the *Prix du Livre Inter* jury articulate a remarkably broad spectrum of emotions, ranging from a sense of vitality elicited by the rhythm of a literary style to the joy provoked by a fictional character's achievements. It also indicates that certain emotional responses—such as joy and the feeling of beauty—are predominant, whereas others, including the feeling of ugliness and confusion, appear to be underrepresented. While this analysis does not capture the immediate, spontaneous reactions experienced during the act of reading, it nonetheless provides valuable insights into the ways in which ordinary readers retrospectively reconstruct and interpret these affective responses.

5.3 The objects of reading emotions and their evaluative nature

While some readers mention their emotional responses only briefly, many reflect back on the processes underlying these experiences. Their testimonies offer valuable material for formulating an empirically grounded definition of the nature, objects, and effects of emotions elicited by reading. The evaluative theories of emotions that

underpin this analytical framework had led to the hypothesis that reading-related emotions are not directed at the act of reading itself in a general sense, but rather at a range of intentional objects—characters, narrative events, particular sounds, rhythms, and so forth—to which readers ascribe specific value. The *Prix du Livre Inter* corpus can therefore be interrogated as follows: what are the intentional objects of the emotions expressed by the jury applicants? Clearly, not all readers explicitly identify the objects of their emotions; many are content to note that reading makes them feel happy, sad, or otherwise affected. However, when readers do attempt to specify the objects of their emotional responses, these tend to cluster into two main categories.

The first category comprises the situations and characters depicted in the literary work. The results of the annotation and text-mining of the emotions expressed in the letters indicate that candidate-jurors frequently report being deeply affected by the personalities and actions of fictional character. In the following example, a reader refers to Madame Bovary, the protagonist of the eponym novel by Gustave Flaubert (1857): "I suffered for this woman, deluded by her mawkish reading in the convent, who suffers from a life that is too conformist, a devoted but failed husband and illusory love affairs". Emotional responses are also often attributed to the places and events described in the texts. One reader, referring to the novels of Arturo Pérez-Reverte, writes: "I think I 'devoured' them all. I still remember the description of Seville, the smell of the orange trees, the lapping of the water…".

However, readers' emotional responses are just as frequently directed toward the formal qualities of the literary work—emotions that arise not from engagement with fiction as such, but from the perception of the text as a crafted artefact. In such instances, readers often describe

affective reactions triggered by the discovery of a particular rhythm, sound, or linguistic playfulness within the narrative. One reader, for example, writes: "Prévert also moves me: I open *Paroles*, a simple paperback, which I leaf through to savor small and large texts that are sensitive, funny, surrealist, often challenging, and also play on words and sounds". Emotions are also commonly associated with the perception of stylistic mastery—how the literary style itself shapes and intensifies the reader's experience of the literary work. This is illustrated, among others, by a reader reflecting on the prose of Albert Camus: "From the very first pages, one sentence amazed, delighted, and won me over: 'I feel strange aches.' I must admit, I briefly visualized my own life, searching for strange aches... My enthusiasm remained steady throughout the book: the beautiful images, expressions, comparisons... How beautiful the French language is when seen through the eyes of Camus...".

Overall, the analysis empirically confirms the argument, made by literary scholar Vincent Jouve, that reading triggers two types of emotions: "situational emotions" – emotions whose object is the situation depicted in the literary work – and "aesthetic emotions" – emotions whose objects are the literary work's form and style (Jouve 2019, 107).

The second research question concerned the way in which readers elucidate their emotional process retrospectively. Why did this or that object trigger this or that emotion? Naturally, only a subset of participants engaged in this level of reflection, while others offered only superficial remarks on their reading emotions. Nonetheless, a thorough analysis of the testimonies from those who did engage in this introspection yields valuable insights, particularly concerning the relationship between emotions and values.

Consider, for example, the following citation: "I still have Hector Malot's *Sans famille* in the Bibliothèque Verte, and the discolored stains on the cover are due to the tears I shed over Joli-Cœur's death". In this case, the reader identifies the death of a character as the trigger for their emotion. Literary fiction features a theme (death) that belongs to the set of themes that Vincent Jouve calls "universal" (Jouve 2018, 303). These are themes that appeal to the value system shared by the vast majority of individuals: death is generally associated with sadness, fulfilled love with joy, and so on. In this case, the reader draws on a collective value system, which leads them to associate the death of someone, and therefore the loss of someone perceived as important, with sadness.

In other cases, it is by appealing to their individual system of moral values that literary works resonate emotionally with the reader. To illustrate this process, we can turn to the testimony of a reader who says they were "amazed" by Modesta, the protagonist of Goliarda Sapienza's *The Art of Joy* (1994) : "I was amazed by this heroine who assumes her paradoxes without guilt, dodges the lie of words and tells her epic story without altering anything". In this case, the reader confronts Modesta's actions and worldview with their own personal system of moral values. In this way, the reader realizes that the text appeals to them because it features something they apprehend as "amazing", namely the heroine's ability to assume "her paradoxes without guilt", to dodge "the lie of words" and to tell "her epic without altering anything".

In still other cases, readers call on their memories and life experiences to explain why a certain aspect of the literary work has touched them. Consider, for example, the case of this candidate, who states: "Needless to say, a few years ago Maryse Condé took me back to my African childhood in Ségou with much emotion". In this case,

the reader explains that Condé's novel *Ségou* has touched them because the places and events it depicts resonate with their own experience. The reader's real life becomes the criterion for evaluating and measuring the importance and interest of the literary work.

Such emotions can have actual consequences on readers' real life. Indeed, they can prompt readers to reflect upon their life experiences and moral values. Such as all the other emotions experienced in everyday life, they can orient individual choices and actions in the private, social and professional sphere. In the following example, a reader describes their admiration towards Cosimo, the protagonist of Italo Calvino's *The Baron in the Trees* (1957): " I admired this strength to leave a society that doesn't suit you by running off into a tree. This book raised a number of questions for me: how can we find a way to live in accordance with our values? How can we stay true to these values?". The reader explains that the admiration triggered by this character gave rise to moral questions. Inspired by the protagonist's decision of following his own ideal of freedom by taking refuge in the trees, this reader wonders how, in real life, one can live accordingly to their moral principles.

When the emotions described by the readers relate to the formal qualities of a text, it is particularly clear that these entail an evaluation of the text. Consider, for example, the case of an emotion whose object is the style of a literary work. In the following quotation, a reader declares their admiration for the "musical gaiety" of Christian Gailly's writing: "And then I came across the novels by Christian Gailly – with his humble and whimsical writing [...]. *Un soir au club*, of course, but also *L'accident, Dernier amour, Les oubliés* and, recently, *Lily et Braine*. I admire the musical gaiety of his writing". The reader identifies a feature of the literary work (the musical gaiety of Gailly's writing) that deserves to be admired. By expressing their emotion,

they also pass positive judgment on Gailly's writing ("I admire the musical gaiety of his writing"). Such an assessment obviously implies that the reader possesses a certain literary knowledge and an appropriate vocabulary, that they use to identify and express emotions linked to the perceived literary quality of the text. What is more, in this particular case, the reader also brings their sensory perception into play (they speak of "musical gaiety"): elucidating what makes a literary style strong and of high quality is a complex process, which seems to call on both the intellect and the body of the reader.

Another reader describes the "shock" and "upheaval" caused by the perception of the force of Yevgeny Zamyatin's writing in his novel *The Flood* (1929). By wondering about the reasons for their shock, the reader is able to explain precisely what the mysterious force emanating from this novel is all about: "Zamyatin ... (I owe him the shock of *The Flood*, which I read three times in a row until I could unravel the construction of the sentences to try to understand how, with such sobriety, it was possible to distil such an intensity of violence into such a short novel: shattering!)". Based on these and other similar examples drawn from the letters, it would appear that, by describing the emotions aroused by the form and structure of the text, the candidate-jurors are able to measure the aesthetic value of a literary work.

In conclusion, the analysis of the corpus provides some supporting evidence for the evaluative nature of reading emotions. If readers react emotionally to literary works, it is because they have assessed, even unconsciously, that something in these literary works has value: the reading emotions expressed in the application letters for the *Prix du Livre Inter* jury are the more or less accomplished result of the effort to consciously and rationally elucidate this instinctive evaluative process. It is by reconstructing their spontaneous reading reactions

retrospectively that the candidate-jurors are able to measure what, in their eyes, confers importance and value to a literary work.

Building on these findings, a preliminary, empirically grounded definition of reading emotions can be proposed, as possessing a dual quality: they are both "ordinary" and "aesthetic". On one hand, the emotions triggered by fictional characters, settings, or plot situations encourage readers to reflect on themselves and their surroundings, sometimes affecting their personal, social, or professional lives in tangible ways. On the other hand, when readers consider the emotions triggered by a text's stylistic and formal elements, they engage in an evaluation of its aesthetic value.

6. Conclusions and further research venues

Informed by Robert Darnton's argument that the inner experience of reading can only be explored indirectly through readers' testimonies, the present study examined the expression of reading-related emotions in a corpus of letters written by contemporary French readers. Given that "reading emotions" as a theoretical construct remain understudied, it was necessary to develop a dedicated analytical framework, positioned at the intersection of reading studies and emotion research, for identifying and analysing these emotions within our corpus. This approach yielded intriguing insights, contributing to an empirically grounded definition of reading emotions.

The findings can be summarised as follows. Readers perceive the act of reading as dynamic: rather than passively receiving the text, they bring it to life by mobilising their intellectual, affective, and sensory faculties. In recounting their past reading experiences, they articulate a wide array of emotions, both positive and negative, ranging from joy to boredom, from fascination to confusion. Moreover, these

emotional responses appear to be linked to a dual evaluative process: an appraisal of the text's form and style, on the one hand, and an evaluation of the situations, settings, and characters depicted in the text, on the other.

It is important to acknowledge that these findings derive from the application of a tailored analytical framework to a specific community of French readers—a group characterized by a genuine passion for reading and, in most cases, favourable socio-economic conditions. To assert the broader relevance of these findings, it would be essential to test this framework on testimonies from readers belonging to diverse linguistic, social and demographic backgrounds. Such accounts might include letters, essays on reading produced in educational contexts, and comments from online communities like Babelio and Goodreads. The challenge of studying literature through its reception has been central since the pioneering critical works on reading at the end of the 1960s. Today, new multidisciplinary contributions in reading studies, alongside major progresses in emotion research, are casting new light on this challenge by focusing attention on how texts are perceived, transformed, and reappropriated by actual readers. This study on reading emotions hopes to provide a small contribution to the exciting phase of research unfolding today. It is rooted in the conviction that, to truly comprehend the effects of literary texts, it is essential to examine how ordinary readers recall these texts and relate them to their identity and everyday life.

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