



# Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction

*Professor Garrett Stewart*

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"Ready now, reader? Easy then. That should put you in the right historical frame of mind, put you in mind of the right historical frame. For it did seem easier then, certainly more relaxed. Like the addressed and otherwise rendered nineteenth-century reader who is my subject of study, you are invited to take it slow while we back our way into the last century. We do so by moving from an unexpected modernist send-up of Victorian direct address, an early twist of phrase in E. M. Forster's 1907 *The Longest Journey*, to the underlying aesthetic of classic realism on which even this one rhetorical irony is by no means intended to pull the plug. On the way back to the nineteenth century, certain realist assumptions help mark out our course."--from *Dear Reader*

With the "great tradition" from Austen through Dickens and Eliot to Hardy read here for the first time alongside the non-canonical best-sellers of the period, we get a revised picture of an evolving readership narrated rather than merely implied, the mass audience conscripted, written with, figured in. Redirecting response aesthetics away from the a priori reader function toward this reader figure, Garrett Stewart's *Dear Reader* intercepts two tendencies in the recent criticism of fiction: the blanket audience determinations of ideological critique and the thinness of historicizing discourse analysis when divorced from literary history's own discursive field.

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