



Passa Porta Seminar 2018 'The Reader'

Readers' readers?

Christophe Van Gerrewey

Is there such a thing as a *writers' reader*? A reader who is the writers' favourite because he or she reads (and reports on his/her reading) not only with an adventurousness founded on some knowledge of the writing process but also with the sort of exemplarity and versatility that can ideally be expected from a reader? Roland Barthes can serve as an example – what can be a higher distinction than featuring as a novel and as a hinge in a thought process in an essay by Roland Barthes? – although Barthes himself only always longed to write novels.

Another example is Italo Calvino, who, as an editor at a publishing house, spent years reading professionally and who in that capacity read the manuscripts of, for instance, Leonardo Sciascia, the author of philosophical crime novels and a *writers' writer* if there ever was one. In October 1974 Calvino wrote a letter to Sciascia about the latter's latest novel, *Todo Modo*. Calvino offers five possible interpretations – five possible culprits. At the same time, he grants Sciascia's book a political undertone and great social importance. 'In fact', writes Calvino, 'this really was the novel we needed to explain what Christian Democrat Italy has been and still is and no one has been able to do this before you.' At the end of the letter he writes: 'Whatever the case, I am sure that like the last time, you will neither confirm nor deny any of my hypotheses.' Just as *writers' writers* – the term says so already – are writers who are admired by other writers, so too a *writers' reader* can be called a *readers' reader* – a reader who can serve as an example for each reader, simply because he or she is so good at it.

When writers become each other's reader, they don't have to agree with one another of course. One of the most famous author correspondences is that between Gustave Flaubert and George Sand, two writers with opposite literary and political perspectives. Flaubert saw Sand as a writer of sentimental and all too emphatic novels, in which the author's socialist beliefs and moral principles were unambiguously and programmatically visible, while Sand believed that Flaubert made it too difficult for his readers by remaining absent from his books, thereby providing the characters and events with a naturalness that was both difficult to interpret and paradoxical. This reveals itself most sharply in the letters exchanged in the wake of the publication of Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale* (1869), a difficult, frustratingly unresolved and virtually plotless novel, in which the characters bear history's tumultuous consequences without in any way influencing that history – they don't even try.

Flaubert was deeply disappointed by the lack of response to *L'Éducation sentimentale*. The book was misunderstood by critics and hardly sold, especially in comparison with the romantic, exciting and forward-rushing *Madame Bovary* from 1856. Standing among the ruins of Paris in the summer of 1871, after the violent murder of the Communards and of the egalitarian hope they represented, Flaubert went so far as to claim that if the French had understood his novel, such death and destruction could have been avoided. Not only did he feel misunderstood, he also avenged himself retroactively by suggesting that his readers, precisely because of their faulty reading, had brought such misery upon themselves!

Sand sympathized with Flaubert's feeling of being misunderstood and wrote one of the few positive reviews of *L'Éducation sentimentale*. Yet in a letter she stressed that Flaubert should not be too surprised by the lukewarm reception his latest novel had received since he had made it too difficult for the reader. 'To withdraw one's soul from what one does, what pathological fantasy is this?! To hide one's own opinion about the characters one stages, and as a result to leave the reader in a state of uncertainty as to the opinion he must have of them: it amounts to not wanting to be understood, the result being that the reader takes his leave from you; because, if he wants to hear the story that you are telling him, it is on the condition that you clearly show him that here is a strong one and there a weak one.'

According to Sand, Flaubert had overestimated his readers and so it was childish or naive to get depressed if the book did not become a bestseller. '*L'Éducation sentimentale* was a misunderstood book', she writes. 'I told you so insistently, you didn't listen to me. It needed either a short preface or, as the case may be, a word of warning, or at the least an aptly chosen epithet to condemn evil, characterize the flaw, underline the effort.'

Flaubert disagreed. Although he did not put it in so many words, he believed that if George Sand could understand and appreciate *L'Éducation sentimentale*, then everyone could. 'You can counsel me all you want, but I cannot have a temperament that is other than mine, nor an aesthetic than that which is the result thereof. (...) As to showing my opinion about the people I stage, no, no, no – a thousand times no! I am not entitled to do so. If the reader fails to draw the moral from a book that must reside therein, it is because the reader is an imbecile or the book is *false* in terms of exactitude. Because, from the moment something is true, it is good. Obscene books are even only immoral because they lack truthfulness. Things don't happen "like that" in life.'

These last sentences reveal an attitude to life and to writing, and bring the issue of the reader into focus. What can an author expect from his or her readers? Flaubert seems to realize that Sand is a *writers' reader* – his personal *writers' reader*, someone who reads with great intelligence and who identifies both problems and possibilities. Sand immediately makes clear that she cannot be a *readers' reader* – that not everyone can read Flaubert's work in the same way and that it is best never and nowhere to *overestimate* readers. For Sand, Flaubert has two choices: either he must adapt, and provide his novels with a handbook or an introduction; or else he must accept that his books (or at least *L'Éducation sentimentale*) remain misunderstood and unread. The choice that Flaubert sees reserved for him is more tragic or, if one wishes, more neurotic: either the reader is an idiot, or else the author is a traitor because he has stretched reality, and in doing so has seen the reader from the start

already as an idiot, on the assumption that the latter will not only accept the reduction of reality, but will even get reading pleasure out of it.

Less sympathetic reactions than Sand's can be imagined to Flaubert's complaints. If the writer is seen as an entrepreneur and a trader in texts, then Flaubert is a big zero – at least, again, as regards *L'Éducation sentimentale*. Whingeing about the deficient talent of readers and the need to be guided by the author is in that case above all simply pretentious – and unjustly pretentious to boot. A writer with few or no readers (or who knows himself to be understood or praised by a handful of fellow authors only) is a bad writer. A *writers' writer* is not necessarily a good writer, but whoever only depends on *readers' readers* had best buzz off.

It is often said that the spiteful challenging of the reader – precisely by 'postponing' identifiability and understanding and by 'withholding' clear reading signposts – is a postmodern strategy that belongs to the last decades of the twentieth century. The above quotes from Flaubert and the reception of *L'Éducation sentimentale* disprove this. The continued offering of reading as a confusing adventure – together with the assumption that the reader is not an *imbécile* who will take to his heels at the drop of a hat – is a *modern concern par excellence*, while always wanting to avoid misunderstanding or obscurity can be called *post-modern* in the literal sense of the word – beyond the modern, and beyond the hope, the illusion or neuroses of Flaubert.

That is why it is also enlightening to look back in this context to a text from 1980 titled 'Modernity: An Incomplete Project', in which Jürgen Habermas writes about the role that art can play in people's lives and therefore about what an author can expect from a reader (and vice versa). In this text, which is a plea for the preservation of a modern poetics, Habermas gives two examples from Peter Weiss's novel *The Aesthetics of Resistance*. The issue is that a character or a group of characters *change* their life, no matter how minutely, thanks to an artwork. The explicit condition, and this is emphasized by both Weiss and Habermas, is initially incomprehension – and therefore by definition the absence of *a short preface* or *a word of warning* as Sand recommended for Flaubert. Habermas quotes a fragment from Weiss's novel in which a group of young workers in Berlin in 1937 discovers European painting. 'Our view of a culture', they say self-consciously, 'only rarely corresponded with what posed as a gigantic reservoir of goods, of accumulated inventions and insights. As unpropertied people we at first approached what was collected full of fear, full of respect, until it became clear to us that we had to fill all this with our own appreciations, that the total concept could only become useful if it told us something about our living conditions and the difficulties and peculiarities of our thought processes.' For Habermas this is an aesthetic experience – of painting, of music, of literature – that is and remains essentially modern, one that emancipates readers because they themselves have to find their own way in a text that is strange and *different*, and out of which, precisely for that reason, bits can be appropriated and applied to their own life situation.

It is important to realize that for an author, as for Flaubert, this can never lead to (immediate) success. The opposite is true: recognition comes later, is incidental, unorganized and never massive. Perhaps today – in a world in which the incompleteness of the modern project and the accompanying modern aesthetic experience seem to have been replaced by the obligation to offer readers a grip mainly to confirm existing, often moral judgements – it is more difficult and even more absurd than ever to keep working like Flaubert, to keep writing as if all readers were *readers' readers*, while over

and over again it has been proven that they are almost obliged unfortunately to be and to remain *imbéciles*. Perhaps it is impossible to continue working like Flaubert and there is only one conclusion to draw from all these considerations. Just as Roland Barthes dreamed of becoming a novelist, perhaps there is also a dream reserved for novelists: no longer to write novels, but only to *read* novels – and to write about that kind of reading. Rendering intelligible all those brilliant, existing, initially incomprehensible novels from the history of literature – to become a *writers' reader*, or, who knows, ultimately a *readers' reader*. It will not bring in any more money, but it might be the only way to avoid that the number of writers will one day amply exceed the number of readers.

© Christophe Van Gerrewey, January 2018

English translation by Patrick Lennon

Text commissioned by Passa Porta, International House of Literature,
for the 2018 Passa Porta Seminar 'The Reader'.