



Passa Porta Seminar 2018 'The Reader'

Looking at paper

Kees 't Hart

Augustine describes in his *Confessions* how he learned language. Adults would look at an object, he explains, so that he too would then look at it. As they did so they uttered a sound, at which he understood that this sound belonged to the object. That is how he was gradually ushered into language. Much later, Wittgenstein would show in his *Philosophische Untersuchungen* that this image of language acquisition rested on a regrettable mistake. Language is not a question of naming, but of words inscribed in a network of meanings. The nice thing, in any case, is that Augustine concludes his theory of language by remarking that when he 'had gotten used to these signs, he could also express his desires with them.' Language as the ultimate vehicle for the fulfilment of desires, right up the alley of Freudians, especially when they consider that Augustine addressed his *Confessions* in their entirety to God the Father.

I've sometimes asked myself how I was initiated into the world of literature after the world of language. First there was language and then came the stories. Or did the stories come first and language only later? But how did it happen with those stories? How did I learn them? Who or what did I associate them with? At home it was my mother who read them out loud, putting on a solemn air as she did so, I remember, though these were curious stories involving giants, dwarfs, frogs and false queens. All her life long my mother was a voracious reader. She was a particularly quick reader, sometimes reading three books per day, which she generally got from the library or had me pick up. Later I did ask her why she read so much, but I didn't get many satisfactory answers: it relaxed her, for a moment you could forget everything around you, you learned a lot from reading. I didn't often see my father reading, or have I forgotten? Before I went to bed he did tell stories about cyclists who had won the Tour de France. Wishful stories, therefore, to which I was apparently quite sensitive.

Why did I start reading so much? Because my mother read so much? I won't exclude anything in this respect but it doesn't seem very likely to me. Something must have happened that led me to suddenly read a lot. I once described this greedy reading of mine as a disease I contracted and never got rid of. Because you never get over reading and you can't unlearn it. Just like sex. Once you know how to do it, you'd rather not be doing anything else, even though there are practical objections to be raised. Things are different with religion, you can unlearn it, I know this from experience. According to W.F. Hermans, you can even decide from one day to the next to no longer be Roman Catholic or

Protestant: you just need to stick your head in a bucket of cold water and then say out loud that you are no longer so. But it doesn't work like that with reading, I know that for sure, even though I've never tried it. From about age 6 it's suddenly part of your nature, it seems, even though strangely enough you did have to learn it. Learning to read is even a high point in a human life, there is great enthusiasm for it in educational literature. At first you can't and then you can, and then you can finally enter the world of stories and books. Just as Indian boys, before they can become adults, at least if I'm to believe Karl May, first have to spend three nights without food or drink on a mountain and kill a dangerous bear with their bare hands. Learning to read, like the learning of sexual acts and rituals, belongs to the most important initiation rituals of the young: you have to learn it and once you know how it works, you fully belong. Some learn faster than others, do it better than others, develop a far larger repertoire than others or do it a lot more often than others. That goes without saying, each individual simply goes through his or her own reading and sex career. Reading is good for you (like sex), so everyone claims, according to reading experts it seems it can help you to develop noble and empathic feelings, even to become a better human being, which in turn is good for society. I find that a bit of an exaggeration, if that were true I should be particularly noble and empathic after all that greedy reading of mine, but things are rather disappointing in that regard. Reading is highly thought-of in any case, much more highly than looking at an iPhone or watching Netflix. We readers furthermore try to kid ourselves, and others especially, into believing that readers cannot be evil. We prefer not to be reminded in this regard that Stalin and Hitler were also neurotic greedy readers.

These past few years I've asked myself more and more questions about that greedy reading of mine. How did it all come about? Whatever happened to me? What trauma am I trying to work through? And where did it happen? Because reading is not something you learn to do only at school, there too of course, but above all in the family circle where, as a child, in my case as a boy, if all goes well, or not, depending on how you look at it, you suddenly come across your parents sitting very quietly in an armchair. What are you doing there? We're reading. What a strange phenomenon! The poet Arjen Duinker told me about how his daughter once saw him reading and then spoke the immortal words: 'Daddy, me too I want to look at paper.'

In any case, as a child Augustine did not have a positive view of reading. He admitted that he didn't want to learn to read at all. 'At that I was sent to school', he writes, 'to learn the letters whose purpose, poor me, I failed to see.' He's right, I believe, it is through reading that you enter the adult world, and that world is not something to write home about. A bit further in the *Confessions* he makes an extremely telling outpouring: 'Many of our predecessors in life had travelled these troublesome roads [i.e. learning to read] which we are forced to go down and which increase the burden and suffering of the children of Adam.' Augustine therefore clearly perceived the inexorable and unhealthy nature of reading. Francis of Assisi was also unable to see the good in reading, he found greedy reading to be a form of pride, since one should not seek the Lord in linguistic signs but in good deeds. His method of reading the Bible is well known: just open the Holy Scripture at random since God's word is simply ubiquitous in that book.

Learning to read is not something that leaves you unaffected. Reading – and especially greedy reading – is best understood as a strange obsessive-compulsive neurosis, often accompanied by the oddest symptoms which you can never rid yourself of for as long as you live. Just like sexuality of

course. In his biography of Percy Bysshe Shelley, Richard Holmes relates that as a young boy Shelley would proudly recite all sorts of stories which he had just read. His father wanted him to learn Latin poetry by heart and the young Percy would recite it from memory in the drawing room after tea, swaying his arms wildly. These are nice Oedipal details, of course one should never believe biographers, but still: an order given by father, after tea, in the drawing room and with swaying arms. A telling image of the reading madman who wants to tell the whole world about his madness.

In his wonderful and witty *Les Mots*, Jean-Paul Sartre gives a detailed account of the launch of his reading career. He sets his reading initiation in a sexually and neurotically tinged context. It would take us too far to give an account of it here in detail, it comes down to the fact that for him reading happened in the context of the imitation of his grandfather and the conquest of his mother. His grandfather had a lot of books and he saw what crazy rituals accompanied the reading of books. 'Every day', he writes, 'I witnessed ceremonious uses whose meaning escaped me.' With amazement he would watch his grandfather, who always pulled a book off the shelf with great certainty and opened it 'at the right page'. Sartre says that he himself once opened such a 'box', he means a book, to have a good look inside: 'then I discovered the nakedness of their internal organs, pallid and musty organs, slightly bulging pages, covered with black little veins that drank ink and smelled of mushrooms.' I don't want to stir up overly obscene ideas among readers but Sartre's metaphor of the box, the naked organs, the bulging pages, the smell of mushrooms and the mushrooms themselves is suspiciously reminiscent of the sexual symbolism of male and female genitalia described by Freud.

In his biography *De Jeugd van een Dichter* (1948), Maurits Uyldeerts associates the reading career of poet and man of letters Albert Verweij in the first place with the latter's mother. She was often sick when he was a boy, he only knew her for a few years, but she did read to him in bed. In the Verweij household, reading was something the father did rather. He later composed the following lines about his parents:

*Mijn vader was graag dichter,
Graag priesteres mijn moeder,
Hij in het leven lichter
Zij in 't geloof verwoeder.*
(My father liked being a poet,
My mother a priestess,
He – lighter in life,
She – fiercer in her belief.)

Did Verweij become a poet because he wanted to outdo his father in this regard? Is that why he read endlessly? And later wrote? Verweij recalled memories in a book-magazine about his passionate reading and lets transpire that his father did not always approve. A taboo atmosphere reigned in the house of Verweij, in a sense, too much reading was not good for you as a boy. Verweij senior probably thought it was just like masturbation, I then think immediately, but that tells me more about me than about the prohibitions set out in the Verweij family. But that Verweij associates the reading of literature with burgeoning eroticism appears from the following anecdote. 'I remember quite well', he

writes, ‘when my homework was done, that, in the evening in the living room, I was reading one of those Aimard novels, with a glowing head, up to my ears in it. At last my father said to me: Albert, it is time to go to bed. Naturally I still had to finish a sentence or a page or a chapter and then I would stand up, but I held the book stiffly under my arm: I slept with it. I still remember how, as though groggy, with a vague stare in a warm face, I crossed the room and gave goodnight kisses to my family. I did so entirely mechanically. Once, I remember – I was a bit of a lanky boy at the time already, who didn’t just give out kisses to anyone – that, going around like that, I gave a kiss to the friend of a young aunt of mine who was visiting.’

What a wonderful story and how tellingly does Verweij express the whole neurosis of reading! It’s not just about the kiss that Albert accidentally gives his aunt’s friend, even though that in itself is very nice: accidentally kissing a beautiful woman when you’re reading a good book. It is dripping with confusion. I must also have been such a boy, even though I don’t know whether I ever *accidentally* kissed a beautiful lady. What is particularly striking is the staggering image that Verweij here constructs of himself as a greedy little reader. Whoever has read descriptions of the seriously mentally disturbed in institutions knows at once what I mean. Verweij uses images that are borrowed from those descriptions. He talks about stiffness, about a striking desire to want to sleep with a dead object, a book, about ‘grogginess’, a ‘vague’ stare and even about ‘mechanization’. There’s nothing more I need to add, Verweij clearly sees the start of his reading career in a pathological context.

Some become greedy readers, like me, and against their better knowledge achieve a high status as a result, others never read a book and pretend to be innocent. But we have all a screw loose. For hours on end we readers sit in silence in a room or we lie on a bench, we passionately turn the pages, we blush bright red, our movements slow down, we don’t want to be disturbed, we sigh now and then like terrible fools and when the book is over we remain seated in silence for a few minutes, staring before us. Just think of the picture that Cervantes once gave of the greedily reading neurotic.

There was a time when I didn’t read and when I was presumably very happy, I regularly think to myself nowadays. And then I learned to read, just like that, out of nothing, I hadn’t asked for it. I was forced by my father and mother and the social environment and I ended up in a world that was unfamiliar. Why did I even become a greedy reader? According to the Freudian essayist Adam Philips, it has to do with the possibility of being able to withdraw completely from the world: no one bothers you when you’re reading. I myself sometimes think that reading offers me the chance to be able to have better, more ornate dreams. I don’t read to become a better or more empathic person, that isn’t going to work, but to be able to produce better dreams. Nicer illusions. But even then. What am I trying to hide when I read? Why do I always carry out the same reading rituals? Why do I always find the same books beautiful? What symptoms do I employ to keep up my reading neurosis? It must be possible to find some kind of explanation.

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