

The European Novel Readers in the Texts

‘The great occupation of provincial women in France is to read novels . . . Since they cannot make a novel out of their lives, they take consolation by reading them.’ (Stendhal, Letter, 1832)

‘My wife rarely gardens,’ said Charles; although she’s been advised to take exercise, she much prefers to stay in her room and read.’

‘So do I,’ said Léon; ‘indeed what could be better spending the evening by the fireside with a book, while the wind beats against the window panes and the lamp glows brightly?’

‘Yes, yes, you’re right!’ she said, gazing at him with her great dark eyes open wide.

‘You empty your mind,’ he went on, ‘and the hours fly past. Without stirring from your chair, you wander through countries you can see in your mind’s eye, and your consciousness threads itself into the fiction, playing about with the details or following the ups and downs of the plot. You identify with the characters; you feel as if it’s your own heart that’s beating beneath their costumes.’

‘That’s true! That’s true!’

‘Have you ever had the experience,’ Léon continued, ‘of finding in a book some vague idea you’ve had, some shadowy image from the depths of your being, which now seems to express perfectly your most subtle feelings?’

‘Yes, I have,’ she replied.

‘That’s why I particularly love the poets,’ he said. I find poetry more affecting than prose, it’s more likely to bring tears to my eyes.’

‘In the long run, though, poetry can be rather wearying,’ Emma answered; ‘Nowadays, actually, what I really love are stories that keep you turning the pages, stories that frighten you. I loathe commonplace heroes and temperate feelings, the kind of thing you find in real life.’

Madame Bovary, II, II

This existence of a mass of lower-class readers was a new and troubling social phenomenon. Together with the prospect of an increase in untutored female reading, it was a source of anxiety for clerics, educators, liberals and politicians. France, it was thought, was reading too much, in the sense that a mass of inexperienced consumers was reading indiscriminately and without guidance. They were considered innocent readers, potentially easy prey for unscrupulous publishers and ruthless propagandists. Workers and peasants could be lured by undesirable ideas such as socialism, legitimism or Bonapartism – the name of the demon changed according to the faith of the polemicist. The problem was defined not only in terms of *what* the new readers read, but also in terms of *how* they read. They would read unwisely, it was feared, unable to distinguish falsehood, truth from fantasy. They might be tempted (in the case of women) by erotic desire and impossible romantic expectations. They would read superficially instead of purposefully without mediating and digesting their texts. The dangers, both moral and political, posed by new readers consuming a mass of cheap popular literature, were disturbing. In the debates on these issues, the social neuroses of the bourgeois were revealed. The anxious dreams of the nineteenth century bourgeois were peopled by all those who threatened his sense of order, restraint and paternal control.

Martin Lyons, *Readers and Society in Nineteenth-Century France* (Palgrave, 2001, p.11)

When M. de Rênal was in town, which was a frequent occurrence, he plucked up the courage to read. Soon, instead of reading at night, taking care at that to conceal his lamp inside an overturned vase, he felt able to indulge in sleep. During the day, between the children's lessons, he would come to these rocks with the book which alone ruled his conduct and was the object of his delight. It was at once a source of happiness, ecstasy and consolation to him in moments of discouragement.

Certain things which Napoleon says about women, and a number of passages discussing the merits of novels fashionable during his reign, now gave Julien for the very first time the kind of thoughts that any other young man of his age would have long since been entertaining. [...]

One evening, Julien was talking excitedly, deriving intense enjoyment from the pleasure of expressing himself eloquently, and to young women too. As he gesticulated, he touched Mme. de Rênal's hand which was resting on the back of one of those painted wooden chairs which are often put in gardens.

The hand was withdrawn very soon; but Julien decided it was his *duty* to ensure that this hand would not be withdrawn when he touched it. The idea of a duty to carry out, and a risk of suffering ridicule or rather a feeling of inferiority if he failed in it, immediately removed all pleasure from his heart.

Stendhal, *Le Rouge et Le Noir* (1830)

[Binet] was really very good-natured, even raising no objection one day when the pharmacist advised Charles to take Emma, for a change, to the theatre in Rouen, to see the famous tenor Lagardy. When Homais, amazed at this restraint, asked for his opinion, the priest declared that he considered music less dangerous to morality than literature.

But the pharmacist leapt to the defence of letters. The theatre, he claimed, helped attack prejudices, and, under the guise of pleasure, inculcated virtue.

'*Castigat ridendo mores*, Monsieur Bournisien! Take, for example, the majority of Voltaire's tragedies; they're very cleverly sprinkled with philosophical reflections, which make them an invaluable resource for instructing the common people in morality and diplomacy.'

'Well,' said Binet, 'I once saw a play called *Le Gamin de Paris*, where there's this character – an old general – that's absolutely tip-top! He really gets the better of a rich young fellow who's seduced a working girl, and in the end . . .'

'Of course!' went on Homais, 'there's bad literature just as there's bad pharmacy; but to condemn in its totality the most important of the fine arts is in my opinion a dreadful blunder, a barbarous idea, worthy of that infamous age that imprisoned Galileo.'

'I quite agree', rejoined the priest, 'that there are some good writers who produce good works; nevertheless, simply the fact that people of opposite sex are gathered together in a charming auditorium that's ostentatiously decorated with worldly luxuries-and then there's the heathenish costumes, the greasepaint, the footlights, the effeminate voices-all these things cannot fail in the end to engender a certain degree of free-thinking, and encourage licentious ideas and impure desires. Such, at any rate, is the opinion of the Church Fathers. After all, 'he added, his voice suddenly assuming an exalted tone, as he rolled himself a pinch of snuff, 'if the Church has condemned theatrical shows, it is because she knows best.

Madame Bovary, II, XXIV

Being not very well versed in these matters, beyond a certain point [Binet] wrote to Monsieur Broulard, bookseller to the archbishop, asking for *something decent for one of the fair sex with a good head on her shoulders*. The bookseller [...] threw together a parcel of everything recent in the way of pious literature. There were little question and answer manuals, dogmatic pamphlets in the style of de Maistre and various novels in pink bindings and a sugary style, churned out by troubadour seminarists.....

Madame Bovary II, XXIV

[Emma] often suffered from giddy spells, and one day she even spat up some blood. As Charles was fussing over her, obviously worried:

‘Bah!’ she said; ‘Whatever does it matter?’

Charles retreated into his study where, seated in his office chair under the phrenological head and leaning his elbows on the table, he wept. Then he wrote begging his mother to come and they had long discussions together, about Emma.

What ought they to do? What could they do, since she refused any kind of treatment? ‘Do you know what your wife really needs?’ resumed Madame Bovary senior. ‘What she needs is hard work, manual labour. If she was obliged to earn her living like so many have to do, she wouldn’t suffer from these vapours, which come from all these ideas she fills her head with, and living such an idle life.’

‘Still, she’s always busy,’ replied Charles.

‘Huh! Busy! But doing what? Reading novels, wicked books, books against religion, full of speeches from Voltaire that make fun of priests. This is no laughing matter, my poor boy; someone who has no religion always comes to a bad end.’

So it was decided that Emma was to be prevented from reading novels.

Madame Bovary, II, VII

The control of the imagination is umbilically linked to the history of the novel. Insofar as the question of control is a formal one concerning when fiction is acceptable and what its relation may be to factual history, it also becomes an epistemological one [i.e. concerned with what knowledge is, what constitutes knowledge] concerning the nature of truth and the real with which “serious” discourses would be obliged to correspond.

Costa Lima, ‘The Control of the Imagination and the Novel’ in Franco Moretti (ed.) *The Novel, Vol I: History, Geography and Culture*

“There are bookish dreams here” (Porfiry)

“In his article all men are divided into ‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary.’ Ordinary men have to live in submission, have no right to transgress the law, because, don’t you see, they are ordinary. But extraordinary men have a right to commit any crime to transgress the law in any way, just because they are extraordinary. That was your idea, if I’m not mistaken?”

“What do you mean? That can’t be right?” Razumikhin muttered in bewilderment.

Raskolnikov smiled again. He saw the point at once, and knew where they wanted to drive him. He decided to take up the challenge. “That wasn’t quite my intention,” he began simply and modestly. “Yet I admit that you have stated it almost correctly; perhaps, if you like, perfectly so.” (It almost gave him pleasure to admit this.) “The only difference is that I don’t contend that extraordinary people are always bound to commit breaches of morals, as you call it. In fact, I doubt whether such an argument could be published. I simply hinted that an ‘extraordinary’ man has the right . . . that is not an official right, but an inner right to decide in his own conscience to overstep . . . certain obstacles, and only in case it is essential for the practical fulfilment of his idea (sometimes perhaps, of benefit to the whole of humanity). You say that my article isn’t definite; I am ready to make it as clear as I can.

(*Crime and Punishment*, part 3, Ch. 5)

“He murdered, and he murdered two people for a theory” (Porfiry)

“Under his pillow there was a copy of the New Testament. Mechanically, he took it out. This book was hers, was the same one from which she had read to him of the raising of Lazarus. At the outset of his penal servitude he had thought she would torment him with religion, talk about the New Testament and press books on him. Much to his great surprise, however, she never once offered him a New Testament. He himself had asked for it not long before he had fallen ill, and she had brought him her copy in silence. Until now, he had never opened it.

Even now he did not open it, but a certain thought flickered through his mind: “What if her convictions can now be mine, too? Her feelings, her strivings, at least...?”
(*Crime and Punishment*, Epilogue, Chapter 2)

Further Reading...

Margaret Cohen, ‘Women and fiction in the nineteenth century’, in Timothy Unwin (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to the French Novel: from 1800 to the present*, (CUP, 1997)

David Coward, ‘Popular fiction in the nineteenth century’ (see Unwin, 1997, above)

Fairlie, Alison, *Flaubert: Madame Bovary* (London: E. Arnold, 1962)

Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader: 1837-1914* (Clarendon: Oxford, 1993)

Ann Jefferson ‘Reading *The Red and the Black*’, in Roger Pearson (ed) *Stendhal* (Longman, 1994)

Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932)

Costa Lima, ‘The Control of the Imagination and the Novel’ in Franco Moretti (ed.) *The Novel, Vol I: History, Geography and Culture*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 37-68.

Martin Lyons, *Readers and Society in Nineteenth-Century France* (Palgrave, 2001)

Walter Siti, ‘The Novel on Trial’ in Franco Moretti (ed.) *The Novel, Vol I: History, Geography and Culture*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 94-123.

Geoffrey Wall, ‘Reading and Writing’, a section of his ‘Introduction’ to his Penguin Classics translation of *Madame Bovary*.

'Well, it's all over, and thank God!' was the first thought that came to Anna Arkadyevna when she had said good-bye for the last time to her brother, who stood blocking the way into the carriage until the third bell. She sat down in her plush seat beside Annushka and looked around in the semi-darkness of the sleeping car. 'Thank God, tomorrow I'll see Seryozha and Alexei Alexandrovich, and my good and usual life will go on as before.'

Still in the same preoccupied mood that she had been in all day, Anna settled herself with pleasure and precision for the journey; with her small, deft hands she unclasped her little red bag, took out a small pillow, put it on her knees, reclasped the bag, and, after neatly covering her legs, calmly leaned back. An ailing lady was already preparing to sleep. Two other ladies tried to address Anna, and a fat old woman, while covering her legs, made some observations about the heating. Anna said a few words in reply to the ladies, but, foreseeing no interesting conversation, asked Annushka to bring out a little lamp, attached it to the armrest of her seat, and took a paper-knife and an English novel from her handbag. At first she was unable to read. To begin with she was bothered by the bustle and movement; then, when the train started moving, she could not help listening to the noises; then the snow that beat against the left-hand window and stuck to the glass, and the sight of a conductor passing by, all bundled up and covered with snow on one side, and the talk about the terrible blizzard outside, distracted her attention. Further on it was all the same; the same jolting and knocking, the same snow on the window, the same quick transitions from steaming heat to cold and back to heat, the same flashing of the same faces in the semi-darkness, and the same voices, and Anna began to read and understand what she was reading. Annushka was already dozing, holding the little red bag on her knees with her broad hands in their gloves, one of which was torn. Anna Arkadyevna read and understood, but it was unpleasant for her to read, that is, to follow the reflection of other people's lives. She wanted too much to live herself. When she read about the heroine of the novel taking care of a sick man, she wanted to walk with inaudible steps round the sick man's room; when she read about a Member of Parliament making a speech, she wanted to make that speech; when she read about how Lady Mary rode to hounds, teasing her sister-in-law and surprising everyone with her courage, she wanted to do it herself. But there was nothing to do, and so, fingering the smooth knife with her small hands, she forced herself to read.

The hero of the novel was already beginning to achieve his English happiness, a baronetcy and an estate, and Anna wished to go with him to this estate, when suddenly she felt that he must be ashamed and that she was ashamed of the same thing. But what was he ashamed of? 'What am I ashamed of?' she asked herself in offended astonishment. She put down the book and leaned back in the seat, clutching the paper-knife tightly in both hands. There was nothing shameful. She went through all her Moscow memories. They were all good, pleasant. She remembered the ball, remembered Vronsky and his enamoured, obedient face, remembered all her relations with him: nothing was shameful. But just there, at that very place in her memories, the feeling of shame became more intense, as if precisely then, when she remembered Vronsky, some inner voice were telling her: 'Warm, very warm, hot!' 'Well, what then?' she said resolutely to herself, shifting her position in the seat. 'What does it mean? Am I afraid to look at it directly? Well, what of it? Can it be that there exist or ever could exist any other relations between me and this boy-officer than those that exist with any acquaintance?' She

smiled scornfully and again picked up the book, but now was decidedly unable to understand what she was reading. She passed the paper-knife over the glass, then put its smooth and cold surface to her cheek and nearly laughed aloud from the joy that suddenly came over her for no reason. She felt her nerves tighten more and more, like strings on winding pegs. She felt her eyes open wider and wider, her fingers and toes move nervously; something inside her stopped her breath, and all images and sounds in that wavering semi-darkness impressed themselves on her with extraordinary vividness. She kept having moments of doubt whether the carriage was moving forwards or backwards, or standing still. Was that Annushka beside her, or some stranger? 'What is that on the armrest - a fur coat or some animal? And what am I? Myself or someone else?' It was frightening to surrender herself to this oblivion. But something was drawing her in, and she was able, at will, to surrender to it or hold back from it. She stood up in order to come to her senses, threw the rug aside, and removed the pelerine from her warm dress. For a moment she recovered and realized that the skinny muzhik coming in, wearing a long nankeen coat with a missing button, was the stoker, that he was looking at the thermometer, that wind and snow had burst in with him through the doorway; but then everything became confused again . . . This muzhik with the long waist began to gnaw at something on the wall; the old woman began to stretch her legs out the whole length of the carriage and filled it with a black cloud; then something screeched and banged terribly, as if someone was being torn to pieces; then a red fire blinded her eyes, and then everything was hidden by a wall. Anna felt as if she was falling through the floor. But all this was not frightening but exhilarating. The voice of a bundled-up and snow-covered man shouted something into her ear. She stood up and came to her senses, realizing that they had arrived at a station and the man was the conductor. She asked Annushka to hand her the pelerine and a shawl, put them on and went to the door.

'Are you going out?' asked Annushka.

'Yes, I need a breath of air. It's very hot in here.'

Tolstoy

Anna Karenina