The European Novel
Lecture Week 7: 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)

1. 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)

2. For Flaubert, writing in the 1850's, romanticism is part of a *modern* reality: it informs his thinking and feeling and being, his heart is with the 'good' generation of the 1830's; but it is also deeply problematic, ironised and attacked by him for its rhetoric, its illusions [...] What is now felt [...] is a distrust of romanticism as [modern writers'] expression, its dismissal as merely romantic convention, a false imagination that is deflated by the reality that the writer – that Flaubert – *knows*. Flaubert's romantic reading is displaced onto Emma, set at that remove, and *Madame Bovary* is a manifesto of post-romanticism, scalpel not dream, written in contempt of 'consumptive lyricism' with its cohort of 'phrase-mongers, poseurs, swallowers of moonlight'[Flaubert's words]. Stephen Heath *Flaubert: Madame Bovary* (1992)

3. The main character in this book is no 'heroine' [...] The character, the background and the very name of Emma Bovary, bring us down to earth. [...] Through the centuries, periods of heroic or sentimental literature have been followed by works of puncturing parody or earthy contrast. The theme of a deluded character naively attempting to apply in the world as it is the dreams inherited from works of fiction has flourished in many countries at different times [...] in *Madame Bovary* there is a strain of deliberate parody woven into the everyday detail that so rigorously refuses his adulterous heroine any vestige of grandiose circumstance.
Alison Fairlie (1962)

4. 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*

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)
Stirling Haig, *Stendhal: The Red And The Black* (CUP, 1989)
Heath, Stephen, *Flaubert: Madame Bovary*(Cambridge: CUP, 1992)
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)
Roger Pearson, *Stendhal's Violin: a novelist and his reader*, (Clarendon: Oxford, 1988)
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*.

(A)

His brothers' jealousy and the presence of a despotic and ill-empered father had spoilt Julien's enjoyment of the countryide round Verrières. At Vergy he had no such bitter memores, and for the first time in his life he found himself with no enemies. 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.

The summer heatwave arrived. They took to spending their evenings beneath an enormous lime tree just outside the house. It was totally dark there. 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.

THE RED AND THE BLACK
PT I, CH8

(B)

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 condemned the theatre, it was for good reason; we must submit to her decrees.'

'But why', enquired the pharmacist, 'does she excommunicate actors? In the past, surely, they took part openly in religious ceremonies. Yes, they used to put on kinds of farces right there in the choir; those mysteries, as they were called, often offended against the laws of decency.'

The priest merely groaned by way of comment, as the pharmacist pressed on:

'It's the same with the Bible, there's . . . well . . . quite a few details . . . juicy details, and some bits . . . that are really and truly you-know-what!'

MADAME BOVARY II, 14

(C)

The curé marvelled at these predilections, although he did feel that Emma's religion might, by its very fervour, develop into something that verged on heresy and even extravagance. But, being somewhat inexperienced in these matters, as soon as they went beyond a certain point, he wrote to Monsieur Boulard, the archbishop's bookseller, asking him to send 'something first-rate suitable for a very clever member of the fair sex'. Giving the matter as little thought as if he were sending off baubles to Negroes, the bookseller indiscriminately bundled together every work of piety then current—small manuals composed of questions and answers, pamphlets in the condescending style popularized by Monsieur de Maistre* and sentimental, sugary-sweet novelettes churned out by seminary poetasters or repentant blue-stockings.* There were such titles as: *Weigh It Well*; *The Man of the World at the Feet of Mary*, by Monsieur de***, Knight of***, Honorand of***; *The Errors of Voltaire, Designed for the Edification of Youth*; etc.

Madame Bovary's mind was not yet sufficiently clear for serious application of any kind; besides, she plunged into this reading far too impetuously. The regulations governing the ritual irritated her; the arrogance of the polemical tracts annoyed her with their relentless attacks on people she had never heard of; and the secular stories embellished by religion seemed to her to be written in such complete ignorance of the world that, by imperceptible degrees, they discouraged her from believing the very truths she longed to see proven. She persisted nevertheless; and, when the book fell from her hands, she believed herself possessed by the purest Catholic melancholy ever experienced by an ethereal soul.

MB II, 14

(D)

'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 than 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.'

'Yes indeed,' said the clerk; 'since works like that leave the heart unmoved, they seem to me to deviate from the true purpose of Art. It's so sweet, amid life's disillusionments, to let your thoughts dwell on noble characters, pure affections, and scenes of happiness. For me, living here, cut off from the world, it's my only distraction; there's so little to do in Yonville!'

'Just like Tostes, I suppose,' remarked Emma; 'which is why I always belonged to a lending library.'*

'If Madame would do me the honour of using it,' interrupted the pharmacist, who had caught Emma's last words, 'I myself can place at her disposal a library composed of the best authors: Voltaire, Rousseau, Delille, Walter Scott,* *L'Écho des feuilletons*, etc., and

MB II, 2

(E)

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.* The plan presented certain difficulties. The old lady undertook to carry it out: on her way through Rouen she would call personally at the lending library and tell the proprietor that Emma was cancelling her subscriptions. If, despite this, he persisted in disseminating his poison, would they not be justified in reporting him to the police?

MB II, 7

(F)

'Why? What made you?'

'I had to do it, my dear,' she replied.

'Weren't you happy? Is it my fault? Although I did all I could!'

'Yes . . . it's true, you did . . . you're a good man!'

And, slowly, she ran her fingers through his hair. The sweetness of this sensation intensified his misery; he felt his whole being collapse in despair at the thought of losing her, just now when she was being more loving to him than ever before; yet he could think of nothing he might do—there was nothing he knew, nothing he dared try, the urgent need for immediate action having robbed him of his last vestiges of presence of mind.

They were behind her forever, thought Emma, all the betrayals, the infamies, and the myriad cravings that had tormented her. She did not hate anyone, now; a twilight confusion was settling over her thoughts, and, of all the world's sounds, Emma heard only the intermittent sobbing of that poor man, soft and faint, like the fading echo of an ever-more distant symphony.

MB III, 8

The square was packed right up as far as the houses. There were people leaning out of every window, others were standing in every door, and Justin, in front of the window of the pharmacy, seemed quite transfixed in contemplation of what he was watching. In spite of the silence, Monsieur Lieuvain's voice was lost on the air. It reached the ear in disconnected phrases, interrupted here and there by chairs scraping among the crowd; and you heard, suddenly, erupting from somewhere behind, the drawn-out bellowing of a cow, or else the bleating of lambs calling to each other at street corners. The cowherds and the shepherds had driven their flocks all this way, and they were clamouring every so often, as their tongues plucked at various bits of foliage dangling near their muzzles.

Rodolphe had moved in closer to Emma, and he was talking in a low voice, speaking rapidly:

– Don't you find this social conspiracy revolting? Is there one single feeling they do not condemn? All the noblest instincts, all the purest sympathies are persecuted and maligned, and if ever two poor souls should meet, everything is organized so that they cannot be joined as one. Yet they will strive, they will beat their wings, they will call out each to each. Oh! Come what may, sooner or later, in six months, ten years, they will be together, will be lovers, because Fate ordains it, because they were born for each other.

Accordingly, praise of the government played a lesser role; religion and agriculture were rather more in evidence. They were shown the relation between them, and how they had always contributed to civilization. Rodolphe, with Madame Bovary, was talking dreams, premonitions, magnetism. Reaching back to the birth of human society, the orator depicted for us the barbaric era when men lived on acorns, deep in the woods. They had shed their animal skins, put on clothes, ploughed the earth, planted the vine. Was this for the good? Monsieur Derozerays asked himself this question. Beginning with magnetism, little by little, Rodolphe had got as far as affinities, and, while the chairman cited Cincinnatus at his plough, Diocletian planting his cabbages and the emperors of China bringing in the New Year by planting seeds, the young man was explaining to the young woman that these irresistible attractions had their origin in some previous existence.

– Look at us, for instance, he said, why did we meet? By what decree of Fate? It must be because, across the void, like two rivers irresistibly converging, our unique inclinations have been pushing us towards one another.

And now he took her hand; she didn't take it back again.

– Prize for general farming! shouted the chairman.

– Just now, for instance, when I came to see you . . .

– To Monsieur Bizet of Quincampoix.

– Did I know that I would be escorting you?

– Seventy francs!

– A hundred times I wanted to leave, and I followed you, I stayed.

– Manures!

– As I shall stay this evening, tomorrow and the day after, all my life.

– To Monsieur Caron, from Argueil, a gold medal!

– For never before have I found anyone so entirely charming.

– To Monsieur Bain, from Givry-Saint-Martin!

– I shall carry with me the memory of you.

– For a merino ram . . .

– You will forget me, though, I will have faded like a shadow.

– To Monsieur Belot, from Notre-Dame . . .

– Oh! No, surely, I will be somewhere in your thoughts, in your life?

– Swine category, prize shared by Monsieur Lehérissé and Monsieur Cullembourg; sixty francs!

Rodolphe gripped her hand, and he felt it warm and trembling like a captive turtle dove that strives to take wing again; but, whether she was trying to disentangle it or whether she was responding to his pressure, her fingers moved; he exclaimed:

– Oh, thank you! You are not repulsing me! You are so sweet. You realize that I am yours. Permit me to see you, to gaze upon you!

A breeze that came in through the windows ruffled the cloth on the table, and, in the square, down below, it lifted the big bonnets of the peasant women, like the wings of white butterflies flitting about.

– Use of oilseed-cake, the chairman continued.

He was going faster.

– Flemish manure – cultivation of flax – drainage – long leases – domestic service.

Rodolphe was silent now. They were looking at one another. A supreme desire set their parched lips trembling; and soothingly, easily, their fingers entwined.

– Catherine-Nicaise-Élisabeth Leroux, from Sassetot-la-Guerrière, for fifty-four years' service on the same farm, a silver medal – with a value of twenty-five francs!

– Where is she, Catherine Leroux? repeated the councillor.

She did not appear, and voices were heard whispering:

– Go on!

– No.

– Over on the left!

– Don't be shy!

– Oh, isn't she silly!

– Well, is she here or not? shouted Tuvache.

– Yes! . . . There she is!

– Let her come up here!

Then was seen stepping on to the platform a little old woman, moving timidly, and apparently cringing deep into her shabby clothes. On her feet she had great wooden clogs, and, around her hips, a large blue apron. Her thin face, swathed in a simple hood, was more creased and wrinkled than a withered russet apple, and from the sleeves of her red camisole there dangled a pair of long hands, with bony knuckles. The dust from the barn, the soda for washing and the grease from the wool had made them so crusted, cracked, calloused, that they looked grimy even though they had been rinsed in fresh water; and, from long service, they stayed half unclasped, almost as though to set forth of themselves the simple testimony of so much affliction endured.

MADAME BOVARY Pt II, CH8 (trans. Geoffrey Wall)

XXIX

'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.[40] '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