On Reading, Readers and Authors

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Abstract

Reading is such a common activity that, apart from the literary critic, one hardly considers its nature or reflects upon its purpose or uses. Yet it is through an encounter with a literary work that we gain access to new worlds and make contact with imaginary people and places; and, also, although indirectly and unconsciously, enter into a dialogue with the implied author – a figure both familiar and unfamiliar who is our invisible guide. The paper thus reflects on the nature of reading and the role of literature in contemporary life.

Keywords

reading, George Eliot, *Adam Bede,* modernism, critic

The reading contract

Since our first encounters – usually mediated by parents – take place in our early childhood, reading soon becomes a familiar experience which we take for granted. Fairy tales, stories, poems which we consume, sometimes indiscriminately, easily become a part of our daily fare. We travel back in time, enter foreign lands, encounter foreign people, to depart after a while and to return once again. L.P. Hartley in the opening line of his famous novel *The Go-Between* put it aptly: "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there". Yet this difference attracts: one easily makes adjustments to the foreignness which inspires curiosity and vicariously extends our range of experience.

Later we may reflect upon the nature of reading which, despite being strongly integrated into the framework of our existence, is a complex process which engages our faculties not only of understanding but also our imagination, memory and empathy, and finally, requires an emotional and ethical response. Even though we engage in reading as a matter of course, we do not pay much attention to the nature or conditions of this process. And since reading is, predominantly, a silent and solitary activity, we remain unaware that it does involve a dialogue: with the past and the present, with the characters and the author, and, finally, with ourselves. Our degree of involvement, our reactions and responses, require concentrated attention and an active attitude, and, primarily, our unspoken (and purely intuitive) acceptance of the paradoxical nature of reading based on what Coleridge calls a "willing suspension of disbelief". Without this temporary suspension of our natural reluctance to accept fiction as truth, to obliterate the gap which lies between the written word and the world of our experience, a successful reading and the ultimate response which we take for granted would not be possible to achieve. Once we shut off the pressures of daily reality, the literary representation, temporarily, takes precedence over empirical life, and the complex process of participating and indeed becoming immersed in the fictional world goes on until the final moment (of epiphany) which Joyce, after Thomas Aquinas, calls "claritas", and which Aristotle, in the context of his discussion of tragedy, refers to as "catharsis'. To Aristotle, achieving catharsis depends on the success of mimesis, whereby the link between the two is firmly established.

Aristotle's *Poetics* made clear the paradoxical nature of both writing and reading and of potential dangers inherent in the mimetic practice, but it rarely interfered with the writers' task; there have been, however, exceptions, like Laurence Sterne, who felt obliged to communicate this awareness by compromising verisimilitude and employing

a metafictional level of narrative in *Tristram Shandy*. Nineteenth century novelists were particularly concerned about getting their meaning across, and often sacrificed technical nuances in order to highlight whatever they considered a priority, namely, the ethical dimension and the moral appeal.

As regards making contact with the reader, this clarification of intention was all-important. Apart from a direct contact through public readings, there were also Prefaces to the novels in which the author could explain his purpose; and authorial intrusions giving instructions to the reader inserted within the text itself were an established practice.

The problem of "deception" was also tackled, although less frequently. One of the most famous examples of confronting this by addressing the reader from within the story, to inform him of the transaction and ask him to accept its conditions, is the opening of *Adam Bede*:

> WITH a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799.[1]

The process of transforming, by means of a pen and a drop of ink, a material setting as imagined by George Eliot into an image that can be visualized by the reader is likened to a magician's practice. The metaphor makes use of the elements involved in a mimetic act: the author, reader and the object of representation, familiar to both the author and reader, yet subjected to a transformation. The object, originally perceived by the author, is being retained as an image in memory, then retrieved for the purpose of description in the language shared by both parties, and then, after being de-coded by the reader, produces a relevant visual image which will, in the course of further reading, contribute to a concretization of the fictitious universe. The metaphor of a drop of ink, in which the workshop might be reflected, evokes another well known metaphor of "the mirror held up to nature", and thus helps familiarize the analogy.

Another example from the same novel (the opening of Chapter 17) is framed as a response to imaginary criticism from a reader both eager to receive a more edifying view of human nature and complaining about the deficient character of a clergyman, the Rector of Broxton. The clergyman fails in his duty to correct Arthur Donnithorne's wicked ways.

The writer defends herself by declaring her absolute commitment to truth-telling:

> Certainly I could, my fair critic [put different words into the clergyman's mouth], if I were a clever novelist, not obliged to creep servilely after nature and fact, but able to represent things as they never have been and never will be. Then, of course, my characters would be entirely of my own choosing, and I could select the most unexceptionable type of clergyman, and put my

1 George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood and Sons, undated edition), 1.

own admirable opinions into his mouth on all occasions. But you must have perceived long ago that I have no such lofty vocation, and that I aspire to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed; the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you, as precisely as I can, what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath.[2]

Not unlike George Eliot, who declares most solemnly her commitment to truth, even at the expense of incurring criticism or dissatisfying her readers, Thackeray in his Preface to *Pendennis*, comments, although in a much lighter tone, on his often unflattering depiction of human character by referring to the same argument:

Many ladies have remonstrated and subscribers left me, because in the course of the story, I described a young man resisting and affected by temptation [...].You will not hear what moves the real world, what passes in society, in the clubs, colleges, mess rooms – what is the life and talk of your sons. A little more frankness than is customary has been attempted in this story; with no bad desire on the author's part, it is hoped, and with no ill consequence to any reader. If truth is not always pleasant; at any rate truth is best.[3]

And, with regard to the reading contract, Thackeray, in his surprisingly postmodern conclusion to *Vanity Fair*, abandons his characters and abruptly releases the reader from the constrictions of the reading contract:

Ah! Vanitas Vanitatum! Which of us is happy in this world! Which of us has his desire? Or, having it, is satisfied? Come children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out. [4]

The reader's immersion in the world of fiction is abruptly terminated, as at the end of a theatre performance. He is left with a reflection on the improbability of achieving happiness, yet the need to accept the quest as a part of life. The analogy with a puppet show is mockingly self-disparaging, Thackeray was well aware of the extraordinary power of his novel, yet he likens his extended masterful performance to a simple popular entertainment to emphasize the paradox of revealing a general truth and its relevance to common human experience by means of make-believe.

For the un-Victorian Thomas Hardy, who did not worry about the reversals and controversies involved in the storytelling, an indictment of Victorian legal system and other institutions was the crucial message to convey. His explicit and often un-subtle comments leave no doubt as to his intentions, exemplified by his well known summing up of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* with the following comment on her execution:

2 Eliot, *Adam Bede*, 149.

3 William Thackeray, *The History of Pendennis* (London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1879), 3.

4 William Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (London, Edinburgh and New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, undated edition), 784.

"'Justice' was done, and the President of the Immortals, in the Aeschylean phrase, has ended his sport with Tess". Given the emphasis on the undeserved betrayal of Tess's "simple faith" throughout the whole narrative, the commentary seems more than redundant; yet Hardy, through his heavy-handed intrusion, easily sacrifices an ethical response and aesthetic effect inherent in subtlety of the unsaid.

Despite frequent and often clumsy metafictional interventions, no doubt annoying to many readers, the popularity of the novel was growing, the writers were promoted from mere entertainers to a higher status of teachers and educators and finally, even artists. Most of them took their task seriously and felt under obligation to provide both a superior pastime and enlightenment. A good example of this awareness is the opinion expressed by George Eliot in her essay "Leaves from a Note-book". Stressing the writer's responsibility, a key term of the Victorian ethos, she makes it clear that the author

> who publishes writings inevitably assumes the office of teacher or influencer of the public mind. Let him protest as he will that he only seeks to amuse [...] – he can no more escape influencing the moral taste and with it, the action of the intelligence, than a setter of fashions in furniture and dress can fill the shops with his designs and leave the garniture of persons and houses unaffected by his industry.[5]

The consensus about the novel's role as the most effective tool in stimulating the moral imagination was not seriously or effectively questioned until the arrival of Modernism. Regardless of the novel's artistic value, writers and critics would agree with the comment made in 1950 by Lionel Trilling that "the nineteenth century novel's greatness and its practical usefulness lay in its unremitting work of involving the reader himself in the moral life, inviting him to put his own motives under examination, suggesting that reality is not as his conventional education has led him to see it."[6]

For this involvement to occur, the fictional world needs to come to life through the active reading process; the question of how to achieve this preoccupied especially the nineteenth century writers, many of whom were troubled by the paradox of "fictional truth". The invitation to the reader to examine his own motives could be effective on condition of mutual trust, a pact of confidence between the writer and the reader. The conditions of the pact came to be more refined, and aesthetic satisfaction became recognized as a welcome component. With the growing popularity and prestige of the novel, finally freed from the stigma of being mere entertainment, more reflection on writing was being voiced, and the absolute priority of the moral purpose came to be questioned, as well as a causal link between verisimilitude (understood as faithful representation) and the persuasiveness of the moral message. In his 1888 essay "The Profitable Reading of Fiction", Hardy accuses didactic novels of being so devoid of verisimilitude that the only lesson they teach is about the dangers of sacrificing the truth to promote dogmatic opinions. Which is not to say that Hardy himself was blameless in this respect, only that his dogmatic opinions advanced at the expense of probability sprang, first of all, out of his fatalism, and not merely from commitment to a moral purpose.

5 Essays of George Eliot. Edited by Pinney and Thomas (London: Routledge, 1968), 440.

6 Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 223.

Towards the end of the century the predecessors of modernism devoted much time and attention to the technique of writing – though still in the service of truthful representation. Conrad reflects on his priorities as a writer, which he defines addressing the reader directly: "My task which I am trying to achieve, is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you *see*. That – and no more, and it is everything."[7]

Despite some scepticism on both sides, for much of the eighteenth and practically the whole of the nineteenth century, the mutual faith existing between the writer and the reader was maintained. A growing interest in and popularity of the novels, growing markets, circulating libraries, in existence from 1786 when the first one was set up in Edinburgh, proved that the status of reading as a rewarding activity had become unrivalled, and generally considered as the first crucial step in the process of education to be continued throughout life, as well as as a source of enlightenment and comfort. Martin Tupper, by now an almost completely forgotten minor writer, is the author of a well known adage: "A good book is the best of friends, the same today and forever". And the motto of the Everyman's Library (Dent's publishing house) taken from the English morality play *Everyman*, reads: "Everyman, I will go with thee, and be thy guide, in thy most need to go by thy side".

The process of erosion of reading relations was initiated at the end of the century by the *fin de sičcle* artists and writers promoting the idea of "Art for art's sake" and challenging the accepted code of values and conventions of writing practice. Their emphasis on art's dissociation from morality was found shocking and unacceptable, because it invalidated time-honoured principles and priorities, and threatened the position and *raison d'ętre* of the author as an educator and moral authority. After a brief interval following the scandal of Oscar Wilde's trial and imprisonment, when *fin de sičcle* ideology was rapidly losing its appeal, the controversy was revived and the crisis gained momentum during the first quarter of the twentieth century.

The impact of modernism

The first crisis of faith on the reader's part, and loss of confidence in the writer, was a result of the modernist novel deliberately distancing itself from ordinary experience and ordinary concerns. The shift of emphasis and perspective from the objective to the subjective was naturally justified by a general change of intellectual climate and founded on influential ideas and analyses of processes of consciousness by Bergson, William James and Freud, and additionally stimulated by new anthropology. Another important inspiration came from Impressionist painting exhibited in Paris and London, which gave powerful visual evidence to the subjectivity of perception and to the illusive nature of attempts to catch and depict the real object. This referred, *a fortiori*, to representations of people. The two London exhibitions (in 1910 and 1912) delighted not only the English avant-garde painters but also writers, who now found a new argument in support of their impressionistic methods of writing. Yet these innovations were less obvious and less acceptable to a reader accustomed to conventional representation and expecting its familiar rewards. A contrast between the traditional assumption about the common ground founded by sharing the same or similar perceptions, i.e. seeing more or less the

7 Joseph Conrad, Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009).

same object, and the modern view reinforced controversy about the nature of reality and truth, and about a proper mode of representation.

A sense of alienation was also produced by the writer's (even implicit) calling into question the validity (or possibility) of mimetic practice. The effect, which did nothing to encourage readers, was inevitably a devaluation of literature's *raison d'ętre*, i.e. its essential connection with human experience.

The modernist writer's "ivory tower" posture, assumed in contrast to conventional novelists, was hardly an asset in terms of establishing contact with readers. The paradox of the inverse relation between sophistication and 'prestige' - often merely imagined or desired - and its concomitant low sales and lack of rapprochement with readers, which was enjoyed by more accessible writers, like Arnold Bennett, and, especially, John Galsworthy, or Rudyard Kipling (both of whom were Nobel Prize winners), did not go quite unrecognized by the highbrow elite; yet they were either unwilling or unable to do much about it. This recognition was especially disturbing to Woolf: despite the persistent advertising of the superiority of Georgian writers over the Edwardians, she did express doubt about her own ability to create characters about whom the readers would care. "Caring about how the characters sort themselves out" as she put it, was tantamount with the immersion in the created world, and, consequently, a condition of successful reading experience and final response.

Yet despite occasional doubt or a temporary loss of self-confidence, by no means limited to Woolf's self analysis, the attempts to win back and to re-establish communication with the readers, so important to the nineteenth century writers, were not properly resumed until after the Second World War.

Post-war years

In contrast to the developments on the Continent, post-war writing in England was marked by a conscious retreat from alienating experiments and a return to the Victorian commitment to mimetic practice. As Margaret Drabble famously declared in her BBC radio interview in 1967: "I'd rather be at the end of a dying tradition which I admire, than at the beginning of a new one which I deplore". This attitude was shared and expressed by many of her contemporaries, particularly by Angus Wilson, a writer much older than herself, whom she greatly respected and to whom she devoted a critical study. Wilson's own admiration for what he calls the adult quality of Victorian fiction, which consists in its seriousness and responsibility, naturally coexisted with his antipathy towards modernism, which, as he put it, had been, after the Second World War, rightly consigned to oblivion. In his famous attack in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1958 on Bloomsbury novelists he vocally condemned their "verbal experiments or Freudian analysis [which] could not atone for the frivolity of ignoring man as a social being, for treating personal relationships and subjective sensations in a social void."[8]

In another early attack on modernism, published in *The Listener* in 1949, Pamela Hansford Johnson commiserated with the contemporary reader "frustrated by literature without plot or characters."[9] What these successful and in most cases, respected authors had to say about their predecessors, they naturally followed in their writing practice. In addition, not unlike the nineteenth century authors, they enjoyed public readings,

8 Angus Wilson, "Diversity and Depth," *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 August 1958.

9 Pamela Hansford Johnson, "The Sick-room Hush over the English Novel." *The Listener* 42 (11 August 1949): 235-36.

meetings with readers as well as BBC radio and TV interviews, all of which gave them a chance to establish good relations with their readers. Margaret Drabble, an attractive and articulate young woman who for a short time considered an acting career, was both highly persuasive and much appreciated in her frequent meetings with readers. Her first class Cambridge degree in English gave her solid knowledge and self assurance, but it had nothing in common with the arrogance and ostentatious superiority of the male Cambridge graduates of, say, the years 1903 to 1906, who had been the founders of the Bloomsbury group. In addition to her wit and talent, she was also pleasant and friendly; and in this respect, she was fairly representative of her generation. The climate of confidence and mutual respect which was possible to create over the years thanks to the deliberate policies of such institutions as the BBC, the Arts Council, the British Council and other agencies, all of which supported cultural and educational initiatives, and promoted young writers, literature, theatre and art in general. This atmosphere was conducive to a restoration of faith on both sides, and to increasing mutual confidence between the reader and the writer, as confirmed by the great success of neorealist novels and the new wave films based on them, a number of them directed by Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson.

However, this happy mood of confident equilibrium could not last for ever, even though England was surprisingly immune to the new trends which prevailed on the continent, especially in France – the cradle of the *nouveau roman* and new critical theories.

One of first post-war novelists and critics to notice a new crisis of confidence was Nathalie Sarraute. In her *L'Čre de Soupcon* (translated into English as *The Age of Suspicion*) she observes that:

> not only has the novelist ceased to believe in his characters, but the reader, too, is unable to believe in them, with the result that the characters having lost the twofold support may now be seen to vacillate and fall apart:
>
> It shows, on the part of both the writer and reader, an unusually sophisticated state of mind. For not only are they both wary of the character, but, through him, they are wary of each other. [...] Today's reader is suspicious of what the author's imagination has to offer him. [10]

She concludes that the conventions at the writer's disposal are outmoded and therefore the reading public's preference is for facts, not for invention. And this preference is more readily satisfied by visual media. The writer therefore has to move forward so as to avoid his "most serious crime: that of repeating the discoveries of his predecessors."[11]

A significant turn came with the emergence of the *nouveau roman*, of which Sarraute was one of most important practitioners. It was Alain Robbe Grillet who rigorously applied the implications of the modernist claim about the absolute inaccessibility of the consciousness of the other, as well as produced novels which registered what may be observed from an exclusively external perspective. This technique additionally places objects on a par with human characters, thus bringing into question the time-honoured habit of privileging the human world and the practice of anthropomorfization. *La Jalousie*

10 Nathalie Sarraute, *The Age of Suspicion* (New York: George Braziller, 1963), 57.

11 Sarraute, *The Age*, 57.

published in France in 1956 came out in English translation in 1960, but neither the technique nor its theoretical foundation found a willing eye or ear in England.

Interestingly, in England, a comparable awareness of the inadequacy of established narrative conventions and of a need for innovation came nearly 15 years later. B. S. Johnson, while still committed to the concept of representation (however modified), emphasizes the impossibility of "embodying present-day reality in exhausted forms."[12] But the project of inventing or putting into practice those new forms did not necessarily appeal to the English reader, except perhaps for the success of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, largely due to the film by Karel Reisz.

With time, though, English attitudes were beginning to change, partly owing to the arrival of a new generation of academics, eager to get beyond traditional English provincialism and become familiar with postmodernist writing and theories. Since some of them were also writers of fiction, they often embraced three roles: teacher, literary critic and, increasingly, popular creative writer.

The role of the critic

One more factor, so far missing from my discussion of reading and of relations between authors and readers, is the critic, another influential figure who can affect the reading process. My only reference to critical commentary so far has been selected comments made by the writers themselves on their own work.

Yet throughout the twentieth century the role of the critic has become far more prominent and prestigious. The change, although gradual, has been fundamental, and consists in a transition from a modest role of a guide and commentator whose task is to explain and make the novel more accessible, to someone for whom the work in question is merely a pretext for his own creative performance. Even though Oscar Wilde in his essay "Critic as an Artist" talked about criticism as art, he certainly would not have anticipated the arrival of academic criticism or the extent to which this form would develop and flourish, eclipsing the work it was supposed to elucidate. The critics often live off creative writing more successfully than the authors whose work keeps them in business. Their often abstruse speculations have less to do with the work under consideration than with the critic's own academic career. As a writer depends on readers, so he depends on critics, who in turn depend on both for survival. Without writers, there would be no critics *sensu stricto*; on the other hand, readers who are ostensibly the addressees of critical reviews or articles often seem to be left out, and the critic talks over their heads, addressing his academic colleagues, so that an argument can be initiated, sometimes without a clear link to what originated it in the first place.

The postmodernist literary experiment was additionally stimulated by the proliferation of critical theory and, apart from responding to a legitimate demand for re-thinking and replacing outmoded narrative conventions, resulted also in the growing alienation of the often disoriented reader. While structuralism privileged word over world, it did not deny the connection between the two. The essence of deconstruction, in its more radical form (as practised by Derrida and de Man, though not by J. Hillis Miller) consists in a refusal to make a connection with the world outside the text, and also, to refute a possibility of a reading that would not be at the same time, a misreading. This refusal, justified by Derrida in terms of his claim that Western culture has always

12 B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs* (London: Hutchinson, 1973).

(unduly) privileged the "metaphysics of presence", which assumed the existence of reality prior to language, does, for all Derrida's brilliance and originality of thought, take away the essential component of literature, which is its relevance to human experience, and reduces it to the level of an intelligent linguistic game. A subsequent shift from seriousness to game playing or frivolity has attracted some writers as well as readers, while discouraging the mainstream audience.

Together with severing the connection between language and its referents existing independently outside the linguistic realm, the concept of responsibility traditionally demanded of both the writer and reader (not to mention the critic) loses its relevance, since in a self-contained linguistic realm there is no one to be responsible to, or responsible for. The birth of the reader at the expense of the writer, as Roland Barthes has put it, means offering the text as a free-for-all training ground, and releases the reader, or player, from any particular obligation.

A direct tie between critic and writer or his work has been severed by much of postmodern criticism's insistence on the concept of textuality as central, at the expense of meaning and referentiality. This reduces the significance of the literary work whose real *raison d'ętre* has always been its essential connection with human life, and the criticism itself becomes an exercise in ingenuity, not infrequently pursued for its own sake. The application of a theory currently *en vogue* hardly brings the critic or the reader closer to the literary work; on the contrary, it sometimes results in obfuscation of its meaning. The role of a cultural context and conceptual framework relevant to the specificity of our time is allocated a superior position, and now it is the work that comes to serve and confirm the theory, and not the other way round.

In his seminal essay "Humane Literacy" written almost 50 years ago, George Steiner speaks of reading as a mode of action he calls "the great discourse with the living dead". By engaging in this discourse we allow literature "entry into our inmost", which places us at risk "by making vulnerable both our identity and our self-possession."[13] This unusually strong defence of the power of literature and its role in cultivation of our moral and intellectual awareness has implications for responsible literary criticism. To Steiner, its function is to recognize and explain the relation of the literary work to its time, secondly to make connections, which means placing it in relation to other works, and, finally, to make judgement on contemporary works.

The concept of responsibility, undermined and played down by much of contemporary criticism and theory, is reintroduced in the context of the critic's job, the main task of which consists in a fair attempt (by which I mean a focus on the text, not on one's preferences) to produce a concretization which would reveal both the interplay between constitutive elements of the represented world and a network of connections, so as bring out an integrated vision which becomes autonomous and can affect the reader, who originally co-produced through his involved and responsible reading. Interestingly, Sartre, a critic and writer of a different persuasion, agrees that

> If the author existed alone he would be able to write as much as he liked; the work as *object* would never see the light of day and he would either have to put down his pen or despair. But the operation of writing implies that of reading as its dialectical correlative and these two connected acts necessitate two distinct agents. It is the joint effort of author and reader which brings

13 George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 29.

> upon the scene that concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind. There is no art except for and by others.[14]

The notion of responsibility, which applies to the writer as well as to the critic and the reader, can retain its relevance only within the context of the mimetic project. Therefore the removal of the author, seen by Barthes as a condition for the emergence of reader ("the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author") and of suppressing the author in the interests of the writing, is another step towards a radical reinterpretation of what once was the reading contract, and towards replacing the imperative of reading in a way that respects the literary text and does justice to it by complete freedom and arbitrariness. Rather than intellectual and moral discovery combined with aesthetic joy, to be shared with others, the reader is promised a private excitement of *jouissance*, (an attractive though somewhat suspect pleasure), which replaces a dialogue, a crucial part of the reading experience.

Reading may, though need not, be a solitary activity. The origins of literature were stories transmitted orally, and the tradition of reading to others (emphatically including reading to one's children) is a long one, and not yet likely to disappear. This despite contemporary fascination with the extraordinary potential of computer civilization, which has essentially transformed not only the mode of both reading and writing in the technical sense, but also facilitated communication and exchange of opinion to an unprecedented degree.

Along with the enormous advantages of this, as is the case with most inventions, exist also perils, two of which are anonymity with the concomitant potential for evading responsibility and an essential notion in any analysis of reading relations. Another is the ease with which one can move between the real and a virtual world to the point when the two begin to merge with each other.

This experience, in fact, is not unlike traditional reading process, except that the computer makes no demands on its user, and offers an unlimited range of vicarious experiences together with freedom from responsibility.

Yet these two modes of contact with imaginary worlds need not be seen as mutually exclusive, but as two, possibly complementary, options. If there is an occasional undertone of scepticism in my account, then I am also aware there is a counterbalance to pessimism provided by everyday reality: bookshops are crowded, with copies of some books disappearing within one day. Despite predictions of the death of the author and the strong competition from the media, public readings, book fairs, interviews and meetings with writers are as popular as ever. The interest in the author as a human being who inhabits the same reality and shares much of the readers' experience has not waned, as evidenced by long lines of readers, books in their hands, awaiting to have them signed, in order to keep them as cherished possessions.

One of most vocal defenders of humanistic poetics, Daniel R. Schwarz defines the task of criticism as an attempt to "understand the essential experience of participating in imaginative world" – given that, despite the contemporary strong penchant for experimentation, books, as ever before, are written "by human authors, for human readers about human subjects, and a humanistic criticism is interested in how and why people think, write, act, and, ultimately, live."[15]

14 Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* (London: Methuen, 1986), 29-30.

15 Daniel R. Schwarz, *The Case for a Humanistic Poetics* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 21.

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