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Writers as Readers

What is your book?

‘What is your book, Old Jane?’

‘Something light, love, as it’s holiday.’

‘*Pascal ...*’

Ronald Firbank, ‘The Flower Beneath the Foot’

First of all, let me excuse myself: I am not going to produce any list (or shortlist) of my favorite authors, books, poems etc. I am not going to tell you *what my book is*. The reason for that is very simple. There are few more boring things, I believe, than stories about what the storyteller has read, what he or she reads or, in the most pathetic version, what she or he intends to read in the future. Of course, names and titles may be, and in fact are, a convenient currency in relations with our neighbors. When you meet somebody who, as it reveals, is a fan of, say, James Schuyler rather than Robert Frost, or Mickey Spillane instead of Georges Simenon, it is useful information. And it might be a nice point of conversation as well, of course, as brands of alcohol or cars, as children, dogs, sex, drugs and politics would be.

But this is not a mere conversation. This is a public panel discussion concerning, let me quote, *what does a professional writer read, and why?*, and I am supposed to deal with the so-described subject. So, we are not in Kansas anymore.

The very first problem is the definition of a professional writer and, subsequently, the non-professional writer. Let me skip it, however. Not only for the reason that I would prefer to draw a distinction (which obviously lacks scientific purity) between bad, mediocre and good writers. The more important reason is that this Linneus’ kind of work has nothing to do with the subject of the present panel. Why? It’s simple. In my opinion, there is no direct connection between value (which not always means: reputation) of a particular writer and the list of his or her readings. In many cases, as it appears, there is no connection at all. I am sure that everybody knows dozens or even hundreds of cultured, well educated writers who have read everything that the well educated writer should read, but who simply cannot write anything interesting.

Thus, we are happily approaching the most important and most mysterious element of a writer’s work and world. What, I figure, is this virtual black box which transforms every external and internal signal, every input of language, written or spoken, every registered, consciously or not, adventure of language into a piece of art.

What matters, then, is only the output: novel, poem, whatever. It may have sources, simultaneously, in philosophical treatises, street conversations, works of great masters of the past, cheap bestsellers, bills of law, ads, manuals, books of instruction, maps, cartoons etc. Every pattern, if any pattern really exists, is entirely unique.

Of course, one can trace these inspirations or inputs in the final work of a particular writer. But every such attempt is, only literary discourse. Interpretation can never be an exact explanation. Thank heaven.

On the other hand, of course again?, writers are not robots. (Or maybe they are?) Anyway, they seem to make choices, to shape their readings, to have their likes and dislikes, their plans, so called intentions, interests, intuitions, idiosyncrasies. But you never know (and probably will never know) which of these were or are useful for their work. In fact, there is no need to care about it. “By their fruits we shall know them.” Holy words indeed.

Finally, two last questions. Why do they or why do we read what we read? Well, it is like asking a wolf why it seeks its prey. A childish problem. The more interesting question is, how does it do it? So, how do writers read? There is no easy answer – in many different ways and modes – but there is something in common. It is a strange and problematic situation when a writer is at the same time also his or her haunting ghost, a mythical, legendary beast – the Reader.

What then? Troubles. And probably this is the very moment I should start to weep. But let me get back to Ronald Firbank and his ‘Flower ...’: ‘Above, a sky so blue, so clear, so luminous seemed to cry out: <<Nothing matters! Why worry? Be sanguine! Amuse yourself!! Nothing matters!>>’.

Be sanguine, then. Let writers read whatever they want and however they want. Anything goes.