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The 21st Century Reader: A Pioneer Or a Victim?

A reader today is under an increasing pressure from different media while his freedom of choice is being narrowed down. Some read not what they think they ought to read but what they are being made to read. The weak readers are victimised by needs of a market. That is why it is not only important to make reading popular but to create an infrastructure for life long reading improvement. Knowing why and how to read is more important than reading a lot - all the time.

It appears to me the golden age of relaxed approach to learning how to read is far behind us. In the Sarawak Jungle of Borneo, during the 1930s, the native women lying in bed and known as the "sleeping dictionaries" taught the English the indigenous Iban language. The close reading was gradually declining so that, already in the 1970s, Geoffrey Hartman defined the type of reading as "girl watching".(1) This kind of reading, as a "primitive waste of intellect", was a forerunner of the searching and browsing types of reading.

In the 21st century reading will be exercised by the assistance of the computer mouse, turning the whole process into a navigation through the Internet hypertext. Jacques Attali who, in the preface to his book *Dictionnaire du XXIe siècle*, claims that "in the future reading will resemble navigation" also makes similar predictions. However, the "navigational" reading will be just one of numerous types of reading to master in one's lifetime.

The German genius Johann Wolfgang Goethe realised a long time ago it had taken him 80 years to learn how to read. And yet, he was still unable to say that he had fully accomplished the task. The thing is, one shouldn't spend one's lifetime only reading, but also learning how to read. Every stage of life, as well as personal growth, requires different types of reading. Nevertheless, regardless of what we read and how pointless it seems, we should always have our brain engaged in the process.

Reading is primarily a neurological ability and cerebral grace. Christopher Stancomb, grandson to the sister of the famous Croatian sculptor Ivan Meštrović, was so dyslexic that he never mastered reading. Some recent experiments have proved he could have succeeded had he started learning at the right time. That is, regardless of a difference between the inborn and acquired dyslexia, the neurological reading mechanisms remain intact in both cases. This important discovery creates a boundless world of opportunities for a dyslexic person. If activated promptly, this rudimentary mechanism could improve the reading skills. Sally Shaywitz of the Yale University, the author of the differentiation study between the genetic and more environmentally type of dyslexia, maintains: "If you can provide these children early on with effective reading instruction, these children can really learn to read." (3)

What was not possible in the past century, now becomes a reality owing to the benefits of present-day technology. There is such a thing as the Reading Pen for Dyslexia that reads the written words out loud. The hope that anyone can master reading skills is founded in modern science, technology and education. Still, no one can guarantee a person will keep his or her skills in perfect condition right till the very end. The Irish writer and philosopher Iris Murdoch, at the age of 80, couldn't follow in the footsteps of Goethe and verify the thesis on the life-long duration of the reading acquisition process, since as an Alzheimer victim, she'd forgotten how to read. Her reading mechanism was irrevocably damaged, with the methods of its stimulation and recovery still unknown. So, for each and every one of us there is a unique and optimal reading period in life that we have to seize in terms of greater and longer reading freedom.

Children encounter reading before they actually learn how to read, usually through the goodnight stories read by their parents. The small illiterate readers always want to hear the

entire story, without skipping details let alone whole passages. This child-associated communal reading period is also found among the grown-ups at the start of literacy. Listening to the priest delivering his sermon has always been an integral part of religious faith. Thus was in the case of American President Woodrow Wilson, the only son of severe Presbyterian minister. Wilson did not decipher the alphabet until the age of nine, and did not read until the age of eleven. But he was fond of reading aloud in modulated tones and he liked to read the same books over and over.

This is typical religious reading. Such determinist reading has grown into the logic of scripturalism. The Bible or the book and the Qur'an or the reading book as holy writings, require reading inspired with holiness. Jehovah specifically ordered Moses what to read. In the Holy Qur'an Surah 75, Ayat 17 warns us that reading belongs to Allah. As for St. Bonaventura, he considered the reading without inner consecration to be without substance.

When he was about to commence reading, Niccolò Machiavelli used to put on papal vestments. The multi-faceted profane reading gradually rivaled the unambiguous sacred reading, for a long time considered a heretic and subversive activity. As late as nowadays, the Roman Church still proscribes certain books, albeit without burning them or their authors. And yet, if there is still a belief that one should read only in the prescribed way, isn't it a clear proof we haven't completely outgrown the determinist type of reading?

Viewed from a different angle, we are also driven into such conclusions by the oppression of free writing. The President of the Kurdish Human Rights Committee, Osman Baydemir, according to the reports of the Kurdish Human Rights Project in London (September, 2002), used in his article some Kurdish alphabet signs. Instead of Turkish "Nevruz" he wrote a Kurdish version "Newroz". He was immediately arrested and, along with five of his fellow Committee members, charged with the abuse of the forbidden letters "w" and "o" in his brochures and leaflets. Readers can sometimes escape such charges by claiming dyslexic disorders characterised by mixed up lettering. That Turkish courts are busy with the "popularisation" of reading is further attested by a 2003 case, when the appeal court confirmed the verdict of a 15-year old boy sentenced to reading books.

Privishing vs publishing

Regarding the duration of reading life of the average man or woman, it's quite easy to agree with Leo Strauss: "We have to live with books. Still, life is too short to be spent but with the best of them." (4) It's much easier to accept the statement than to define what the best books are. When the illiterate king Charlemagne got satisfied of being read to from his own biography, he asked monk Alkuin to read the monk cuisine recipes for him. To read the best texts is not merely a quality but also a quantity issue. The weekend edition of *The New York Times* comprises more facts than the average person in the 17th century England could encounter in his or her lifetime.

Traditional approach, as a democracy of dead literary tastes, defines the best of books in a much more convincing manner than modernist, let alone post-modernist or even post-post-modernist approaches. Book publishing has become a global business trend, creating free market space not for the best but most profitable books. Publishing corporations generate not only mainstream writers but also mainstream readers. What is to be read is no longer prescribed by the religious, ideological or educational institutions. All the marketing power is concentrated at the hands of distribution companies.

The Nobel Prize winner Ivo Andrić wrote in the last century: "Regimes and governments of our time can do a lot, almost everything short of one thing: they cannot make people enjoy writers they don't like." However, what the 20th century ideology was incapable of, will be made up for by the 21st century consumerism. Guided by the compulsive global

reading trend, all of us seem to devour the same read at the same time: the young generation – *Harry Potter*, the grown-ups – *the Da Vinci Code* – we are persuaded to read what the mass-media tell us to.

Writers no longer write books they want, but ones that bring instant success and long-term profit. So writing is transformed into a quest for publicity, and reading into a sheer marketing echo. The former National Vice President and present Co-Chair of the National Book Division of the National Writers Union, Gerard Colby relates the self-imposed censorship to *privishing*, a phenomenon that marked its début in the 1970s, and is now a symbol of "wise" publishing. It is illustrative of the way the publishers "kill" book without the authorial knowledge or consent. This particularly refers to writers whose books contain truths unpalatable to the dominant ideological or marketing trends. Unlike publishing, open to the public eye, *privishing* is utterly dominated by private interests, even at the cost of financial failure. The publishers release a book that is not going to be read: "We *privished* the book so that it sank without a trace."

To that aim the following mechanisms are employed. First, there are cuts in the expenses that could prolong a book's life. From the very start of the process there is no profit-creating formula for the book in question. Furthermore, there are drastic cuts in the advertising segment. All the book promotions get cancelled, which makes the potential later editions virtually impossible. Instead of creating a fair market of ideas, instead "of giving books time to build a readership through good reviews and word-of-mouth recommendations, conglomerates and chain bookstores demand quick, high-volume sales and higher profit ratios, thereby shortening the books' lifespans." (5)

What readers want is an established value judgement instead of statistical information on circulation numbers. Traditionally, this type of judgement is provided by libraries, book award institutions and literary circles such as Chautauqua Literary & Scientific Circle (U.S.A.), which has been recommending some dozen books per year ever since 1878. The biggest Internet bookshop, Amazon.com, provides its titles with links referring to similar books and their reviews. It's getting more and more important to buy a book than actually read it, since the so-called ghost readers do that instead of us.

Yet, readers do the most honest evaluation themselves, without media agents and commercial interests involved. On the occasion of the World Book Day 2001, the Americans came up with the idea of "bookcrossing", that is, leaving your books in a public place to be found and picked up by others, with the idea of free and non-commercial reading. The trend was started by some people from the computer branch in order to, metaphorically speaking, transform the whole world into a huge library, perhaps the one Jorge Luis Borges dreamed about. Hundreds of thousands bookcrossers have so far released almost a million books from their shelves. In this way reading has become more important than possessing a book, and reading solidarity a new human standard.

Computer hackers push it even further forward, advocating a more active approach to reading. The Finnish scientist and philosopher Pekka Himanen calls for more freedom for the very act of educated reading: "Reading materials in a hacker-like way - reviewing and improving them, i. e. working on them as well as your own motivation – is of much more help to those who practice it than the present way of reading." (6) This, however, erases the line between the reading on one hand and content interpretation on the other, since, according to Jonathan Culler, to read is to play the role of a reader; to interpret is to postulate the experience of personal reading.(7)

The modern reader's refusal to continue playing a passive role by not allowing the text to dominate him or her, foregrounds the issue of reading quality. If the "right reading" is realised through the author's textual intentions, then all the readers departing from the norm are in the wrong. Harold Bloom thinks that nothing is achieved through the idealisation of

reading or inferior attitude towards the text. Therefore, the best thing to do is read in the wrong way, since only the wrong reading leads to new readings. Reading is wrestling with the text, a kind of war where the reader defends his own inner "self". (8)

Wasn't it that Michel de Montaigne himself confessed that regardless of the original language of books, he communicated with them in his own specially devised language? It's obvious that he too favoured the "wrong reading".

Media challenges come and go, the book stays

New technologies strongly favour the active reader. The electronic book is much more interactive than the old-fashioned book. However, the reader's hyperactivity does not abolish the need for a good book. The media complement rather than exclude each other, meaning the reader will have to be more independent and resourceful not only in choosing the right reading approach but also the right content. Umberto Eco, an Italian of "universal sensibility" is a bit less in favour of the electronic, than the old-fashioned paper book: "Books are still the best companions for a shipwreck or the Day After." (9) The author of the *Name of the Rose* considers the medieval cathedral a kind of permanent and constant TV programme, whose encyclopaedic role was abolished by Guttenberg's invention. The 20th century television was another assault on the book, threatening to replace the effort of reading by its receptive superficiality.

Jonathan Franzen, one of the most distinguished young American writers, describes in his essay collection *How to be Alone* (2002) this kind of TV temptation that stops him from reading. If he, as a writer, can't take off his eyes of the TV screen, how can he expect his readers to be any different? It was only after he got rid of his TV, that he managed to savour the joys of reading. In this respect he is much like Marcel Proust, who, while praising the silent communion of readers, found his true fulfilment in the actual conversation with his favourite authors. It is the very alienation of readers that's become a factor of "literary stability" and the freedom of choosing one's own favourite reads. As a TV buster, Franzen refused to participate in the Oprah Show, but is such radical attitude always necessary? Later on, he realised his mistake of ignoring the TV as a powerful reading booster.

Oprah Winfrey exerts a kind of suggestive power over her audiences, quite similar in its nature to that of ancient gods over their prophets. Last year, the Oprah's Book Club pronounced Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* one of the most beautiful love stories of our time, winning it a status of a favourite read in the States. The book immediately found its way to the best-selling lists of *The New York Times*, *USA Today* and *Publisher's Weekly*. Prior to its début on the Oprah, the novel had been published in pocket editions only, with poor selling prospects. After the show, millions of copies have been sold. In reality, however, the readers are often cheated into buying books unworthy of intellectual attention, due to the powerful TV propaganda. Sadly enough, popularity has become synonymous with quality. The good news is that neither positive nor negative reviews endanger the reading need of those who want to read. But what about those who don't want to read?

It seems that the very notion of reading has been threatened lately as non-book media is replacing the book. New and personal media, as proved by the Internet and mobile phone communication, determine the reading form and motivation. Guttenberg's reader had to read the full and unabridged text out loud (this option being quite unacceptable for the present-day Turkish Kurds), for this was the only way to decipher its true meaning. This type of book reader, raised on a similar tradition of manuscripts, couldn't just skip through the text and practice the nomadic reading described by Attali.

There is another thing too. The books have their own language that we refer to as literary language. New media bring along their own ways of communication. The Internet and mobile phone generation no longer uses the standard but rather a condensed and cryptic form

of language, with separate textual segments, denying in reality all the accepted notions of the text. There is no such thing as text structure any more, and no central text as such, only the independent message structure. With the text determining its reading method and public, and being more dominant than the message it carries, one may sooner talk about its recipients than readers may.

Contemporary tabloids and web publishers have paved the way to detextualisation of reading. One reads headlines, straps, sub-heads and callouts in bold fonts, while the text itself is being replaced by illustrations. The electronic age has turned writers into "texters", storytellers into commercial catch-phrase makers, text writing into filling the column space. Reading is a time consuming process. The media time is expensive and limited so the messages require fast reading. The communicational society of the past is being replaced by a society advocating commercial information systems of the mobile phone technology, such as SMS.ac. Mobile phones are acquiring a multimedia dimension, keeping us in touch with the world through its MMS and SMS services, whether it is of personal or global interest to us.

Telephone companies commercially back up this SMS-reading trend. A Slovenian mobile phone operator, for example, invests more money into the advertising campaign than the public libraries are allowed to spend on new books.

The trend of condensed writing will have a long-term effect on the culture of reading. The 21st century reader will be a navigator of his own textual destiny. It's a big risk but also a big challenge. Unlike the reader of the past, not only is he faced with the choice of the book, its promotion and evaluation machinery, but also the choice of the reading media. What media recommendations are to be trusted as far as text quality is concerned? It is by no means an easy task to select from the global offer a text that may be of some relevance to us.

Should he strive for a safer navigation, the contemporary reader ought to stick to the text, enclosed in the book form like a baby sheltered in its crib and stirred to life by reading. He will have to learn about the media oceans and seas that he sets off to sail. Moreover, he'll have to develop a clear sense of direction and create his own routes, as it was understood by Jean-Paul Sartre, who referred to reading as a directed creation (*création dirigée*). A new reading is another chance for creation, an opportunity to come up with new meanings, actions and our new selves. This does not imply the new reader should renounce the old media completely but rather combine them with the new ones in order to come near the ideal text.

The newest trend is the popularity of audio books (tapes, CD's and iPods) which redefining the notion of reading and making up of hybrid "listener-reader". The smallest iPod (the Shuffle) holds four books. Although audio books represent only 3 percent of all books sold, the tendency of their usage is increasing. Thanks to children's audio books and memoirs. To read Clinton's "My Life" through Clinton's mouth is more relaxing. Visual reading requires one's full attention, while audible reading allows division of the attention and not stimulates the whole cognitive process. However, it would be wrong to underestimate an audible reading because it opens the new dimensions of reading and creates the new opportunities for reading: during jogging, cooking, eating, car or bike driving, walking dog ... It is much more a time friendly reading.

It takes exactly this kind of diverse media competition, with various forms of textuality, to make the ideal reader of this century more independent and creative than ever before, resembling in this respect deaf Beethoven, who used to hear the music while reading his *Ode to Joy*.

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