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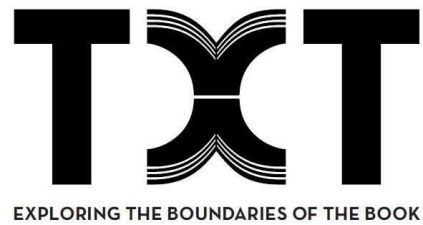
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Reading Practices during Times of Transition

An Eternal Circle

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It has always been a matter of deep interest for scholars and people attracted to the written word to know what people read in the past, are reading now and will read in the future. A list of certain titles considered classics or must-reads has been a person's business card to the intellectual world of printed culture for quite a long time. However, we know little about such lists in earlier centuries. Can the limited number of available books caused by the imperfection of the 'hand-made' technology be considered as an excuse for a scribe or a monk for not reading this or that particular title? Were there any books that had a greater value in the eye of ones contemporaries? Did a sort of 'best-seller' (or should we say a 'best-copier'?) manuscript, which determined the literary or intellectual taste of a person from the Middle Ages, exist? The answers to such questions are not necessarily obvious, but these questions fall into the same paradigm that can be formulated as 'What did they read in the Middle Ages?' Fortunately for us, there are still records concerning book production, numerous enough to feel quite safe in this subject area. Yet we will find ourselves in a tight corner if we ask how people read.

The problem of understanding the way people read books is relatively recent for the history of the book and it is a difficult one. Remarkably, this interest can arise with renewed force as a consequence of new technologies, especially when e-readers are being developed. New characteristics of paper books such as linearity, analogue-like character, physicality, etc. have been discovered recently. In the same way as scholars found themselves looking for and describing features of paper books compared to the possibilities of the digital era, the study of reading practices gained a new stimulus. 'How do we read books now and how were books read before?' is not something that naturally comes to our mind. The process of reading seems to be so built-in into our lives as well as our consciousness and world perception that it does not allow us to question it. Even today, with the advancement of Web 2.0 and the omnipresent Internet, people may have

difficulty defining their reading experience when asked to describe the way a person reads. On the other hand, a question about their reading preferences is fairly simple.

In a chapter about making a medieval manuscript, R. Clemens and T. Graham claim that ‘few books in the Middle Ages would have been read from cover to cover. Most books were read discursively—that is, the reader would read some chapters or lines in one part of the book and then skip to another book.’¹ This statement sounds very familiar and may remind us of modern digital reading practices. Of course, we use another term—discontinuity—and another perspective to look at to describe the way we read today, but present-day digital reading seems to have some common features with medieval reading. This is probably due to the unset character of reading in the Middle Ages in general, compared to those of the order of books of today or recent past. Besides, the term ‘discursive’ should be understood as discontinuous in accordance with its medievalist usage.

Thus several questions arise:

a) What are the reasons for reading to move from continuity to discontinuity? Can this discontinuity be a temporary characteristic of the period moving into the digital order?

b) Which books were read from cover to cover in the Middle Ages and which books can we expect to be read in this way in the digital future?

c) What were the methods of finding essential information then and do they have any traces of similarity with present-day search engines or strategies?

It might be useful to limit this essay to one or more types of reading in order not to lose the thread in this potentially huge subject: different types of reading, for example by purpose (entertainment, studying, devotion, etc.) can be categorised, and one of them can be described in detail, but such limitation may turn out to be less fruitful because some types of reading (for example, reading for entertainment) are an invention of a later period, or some types of reading can be regarded as interpenetrative as it is in the case of devotional and studying types of reading. Perhaps a rigorous distinction between different types of reading can be drawn at a later stage of the development of reading culture connected with the invention of printing and increased availability of books for a broad audience. That is why a fairly imprecise or overly generalised approach to the categories such as ‘reading’ and ‘reader’ (by which we mean ‘the historical reader’² to make a clearer distinction between a present-day reader and abstract readers from the Middle Ages) should not be considered a grave disadvantage of this essay, as it is mostly caused by the character of the research material itself and the on-going debate in the field of terminology and methodology of this particular discipline. Moreover, a broad period of time called the Middle Ages does not contribute to the precision of these categories; however, special emphasis will be placed in the Later Middle Ages as well as on the period of advanced book production and changing reading practices.

This essay is an attempt to show reading as an evolutionary process (from reading discursively to reading discontinuously), particularly touching upon two time periods in the long history of reading: the Middle Ages and the so-called transitional age, with some

speculations about a third time period known as the digital age. The period of time we are living in is often referred to as transitional due to the rapid changes that are taking place in all the spheres of life. However, this suggests that there should be some kind of a transition or a shift which implies instability and an unsettled character of new, incipient practices. The digital world in general and digital reading in particular are products of new technologies and have not reached their final stage of development and therefore cannot be ranked properly yet. Nevertheless, a paradigm shift with accompanying anxieties is obvious. The order of the book is changing into something that can be described as a 'disorder' of the book (until the moment when a full digitisation is complete) when old rules seem to stop working but new ones are not yet developed. Discontinuity, as a prominent feature of this transitional period, has already been mentioned and it is natural to wonder if it will be preserved in the course of digitisation, or if a new shift to continuous linear reading can occur again. Speculations of such kind are purely theoretical and it is advisable to look at the current changes in reading from a long historical perspective. Moreover, we will see that some features of the transitional age (fluidity, discontinuity, non-linearity, etc.) that are presented as new, bear the traces of familiarity that had been enjoyed before.

The process of reading seems to be so built-in into our lives that it does not allow us to question it.

The shift from hand-made manuscripts to printed books could have had more consequences than we have thought before. The whole tradition of reading may have changed in the same fashion in which we are experiencing such changes today while moving to digital reading. The way we read today is determined to a certain extent by the medium we are using for it. Modern devices with touch screens connected to the Internet are common in a digital age, and reading online is becoming as natural as shopping online. There are still many fervent debates about the nature of online reading, its characteristics, quality and differences with reading a paper book; however, they should be all omitted due to the limited length of the essay. What is of primary concern here is that the invention of printing made the book linear and fixed. Not only the order of words, chapters, etc. on the page was fixed physically, but also the possibility of different versions of the same text was obliterated. It is intriguing to see that the same change, only backwards, is taking place now, as if we are going back to the origins of the codex. The profound changes a new digital medium causes are quite visible and traceable, but what kind of a medium was the hand-written codex?

To answer this question we should know much more about reading practices of that period; however, it is almost impossible to get any information of this kind. The only reliable source, besides limited written evidence, is the books themselves, yet no one can assume that we would use the book in the same way as our predecessors.³ In a zealous debate about the importance of the content of the book before its format (for instance, in *Print is dead* the author denies the significance of the book (paper) as a medium⁴ and

in his new foreword to the book he claims that ‘after all, the printed page is a display device, and thus is no different than an iPhone⁵) we should admit that denying the latter will produce no results. So the main question before us at this point is to define what can allow us to perceive a medieval book culture as non-linear. As Arthur Bahr writes,

The Internet has made it easy, normal even, to read in all sorts of nonlinear ways, but the evidence of medieval compilations suggests that people were already doing that many centuries ago.⁶

In his recent and provocative book, Bahr gives a fresh look at the idea of a composite manuscript. Traditionally codicology is engaged in finding out the way such a manuscript was made from a historical and technical perspective (its provenance, the time of assembling, etc.) but it has little to do with finding the meaning behind these compositions.

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However, numerous examples of composed manuscripts suggest that the practice of manuscript composition was quite common for the Middle Ages,⁷ thus implying its importance for a medieval culture. One more key issue here is that these compositions were initiated by the medieval readers themselves⁸ (we will return to this idea later). Bahr analyses different composite manuscripts to answer what he defines as an interesting literary-historical question, ‘why specific assemblages got put together the way they did.’⁹ For instance, while scrutinising the corpus of Andrew Horn, who was an early fourteenth-century London lawyer, the author comes to the conclusion that binding together separate

works (among them there are legal treatises and a piece of French poetry) has an intention behind it:

One poem just doesn’t make sense, but if you read the poem in juxtaposition with the legal treatise that comes after, then the two pieces make sense.

He’s suggesting that the law and literature are sort of the yin and the yang, you need both.¹⁰

So the applications of Bahr’s research method can help to put an end to the discussion about irrelevance of the medium for a written culture (from scrolls to printed and digital books) as well as be of much use for the literary criticism which completely ignores the problem of a medium; and parses only the text as a thing in itself by opening new perspectives for interpretations, and by analysing perception of the texts by the contemporaries. Besides, one of the important implications of Bahr’s work concerns his successful attempt to discover a non-linear eclectic mode of reading in the Middle Ages. Thus, Bahr succeeded in showing that a medieval reader was accustomed to jump from one piece of writing to another, even if it involved different (often quite opposite or unusual) genres or sorts of reading matter. However, we can argue to which extent continuity-discontinuity and intensive-extensive reading are correlated. We can assume

that medieval reading practices were highly intensive (though discontinuous) compared to those of today which can be described as extensive, as the reader is scanning and skipping through the text. Such fast modes of reading can probably be explained by the flood of reading-material for devouring, yet new realities bring together new methods to deal with them. A medieval book culture could not afford to read extensively, simply because of the lack of books.

Besides similarities in reading modes between the Middle Ages and a digital age, another vital characteristic of reading practices should be mentioned, i.e. readers' interactions with texts. While pondering over the future possibilities of reading offered by the development of digital technologies, Jeff Gomez¹¹ emphasises the necessity to adapt to the new habits of digital natives. He predicts that reading will be more intertwined with writing, which will find its reflection in a huge amount of comments on a particular book or reading matter (we will avoid the issue what is or will be the book in the digital realm because this question is beyond the scope of the essay). So a door to the collaborative work is being opened again. We cannot but agree that:

Medieval literature is also always collaborative in one way or another: readers often commented on texts by writing notes in the margin or underlining passages, and scribes frequently altered an author's words to suit the purpose of the compilation at hand.¹²

In the same way as medieval people gathered together different booklets or parts of different texts into one book, people of the future will be able to choose to have one or more chapters from different books in their digital collections instead of purchasing a whole book. Gomez says that they will get the right to shuffle different parts from different books or to modify them any way they like.¹³ At this point we can conclude that changes in reading practices of today and tomorrow touch upon two usually opposed sides of the book: its content and the physicality of the object. The book as a physical object was manipulated and modified while the same thing was happening to the content—glosses or other marginal notes were added or the text was altered by cutting, expending or even distorted by mistake. In the digital future, this opposition is going to disappear because of the disappearance of the book, not only in terms of physicality, but also in terms of authorship. The notion of authorship developed quite late due to the fact that printing fixed text. Before the introduction of print, anonymity was common and the author could call himself 'our humble servant'.

Fluidity is another prominent feature of the digital medium to feel anxiety about. New practices of turning texts into 'digital water' (flexible but unable to keep its own form) make us think about the problem of authoritative copies of a certain text and trustworthiness of the knowledge itself. It is more interesting how medieval readers managed to live in the world of juxtaposition of different variants of a text. Freedom in altering and combining texts from different resources enjoyed in the Middle Ages, may be compared with what we are going to get in the nearest future. Such openness for modification will probably make a creator a second-rate figure; who would remember the name of the author if we have only one chapter or a chunk of it on our device,

and will it make sense to refer to an author if a reader has modified the original text?

These questions lead us to another issue in the field of the history of reading, namely the problem of establishing the volume of reading: if reading a book from cover to cover was a rare practice in the Middle Ages, what were the reasons for it and how fast were people able to read? There is little evidence how fast professional scribes could write (an interesting attempt to clarify this issue is made by Michael Gullick¹⁴) and the same research question about the speed of reading may turn out to be unanswerable. We can assume the speed of reading was fairly slow and connected with the fact that many people, who were able to read, read aloud or in a low voice, and could not read silently.¹⁵ As A. Petrucci writes about reading in the Middle Ages:

The overall impression is that there was no effort to shorten the time required for reading, for indeed everything contributed to keep reading extremely slow, attentive, almost stumbling.¹⁶

Also, we may suggest that there is an interdependence between the speed of reading and intensive-extensive modes of reading. Taking into consideration the fact that the human brain was not actually meant for reading,¹⁷ it is fascinating to understand how humans managed to shift to a silent mode, when it happened and whether the availability of books was among those factors to influence this process.

In the light of the speculations stated above we should not be surprised that linear lengthy narratives will probably disappear because of the salient character of a new medium. Moreover, before lamenting the death of a novel, we should not forget that the habit of reading long narratives is not really that old. However, it is of great interest to understand in which way the classics can be read in the future, provided that new generations are willing to read them. New reality can spur the appearance of new genres or modifications of old ones. It is equally plausible that an old genre of digests will revive in full bloom in order to meet new demands of a modern reader, because it is possible that the (full-text) great works of literature will be beyond the grasp of coming generations. Remarkably, the percentage of people who read the works of classical antiquity today is relatively small too. Also telling may be that the notion of reading from cover to cover will disappear as well, because new digital books do not have covers or dust jackets (at least as long as we think of them in 'paper' terms). The limitations of the text within a physical object (i.e. a book or a scroll) contribute to the feeling of the end-ness or finiteness of the text itself. But if the digital reality seems infinite and there is no end to it while we are moving from one page to another, the text can also lose its quality of being finite.

The infinity of the text implies the advanced methods of searching—the last issue we are going to touch upon in this essay, which is logically connected to the previous part, i.e. how information can be retrieved after finishing a book. Before turning to the medieval and 'digital' methods of finding information, let's examine a book published in 1971 in Great Britain. Marshall McLuhan's *Gutenberg galaxy* is an interesting specimen of what that can be described today as an obsolete way of thinking. The book has a table of contents, but neither running titles nor indexes. Three parts make up the book

and the first part covers about 250 pages. Within each part there is a number of rather short chapters which are introduced with the help of an asterisk (probably a substitute for medieval initials), and the title of a chapter (which is usually a whole sentence; again a reference to the medieval typography) is presented in bold bigger type within a frame (for example, pages 152-153 of the mentioned edition).¹⁸ The size of these titles makes them stand out on the page; thus their searchability increases. However, in the table of contents, only the three parts of the book are listed, for some reason (probably because the sentences-names of chapters are not suitable for making the table of contents so pleasant for our eyes) all the chapters are omitted. The feeling while dealing with this book can be described as frustration (maybe intentional); it feels as if we are back again at the origins of the codex with no possibility to retrieve information in a fast and efficient way. It can be compared with the same feeling which a person experiences trying to search anything in manuscripts before a consistent introduction of running titles, table of contents, hierarchy of fonts and colours for more and less important parts of the text, marginal notes, etc. So the question is 'How can anything be found in this book?'

It looks like we will have to follow Hugh of St. Victor's piece of advice (dated back to 1120s) to memorise graphic features on the page¹⁷ in order to locate a passage we want to refer to. However, coloured initials or shapes made by the patterns of words so common for codices, are of little help in the age of printed book with standardised layout. Trying to evaluate the full range of means provided by human ingenuity for retrieving information from the paper book (from pagination to bookmarks and colourful sticky page-tabs, a modern variation of finger tabs made from the page itself or objects attached to the page such as pippes or ball-tabs), we will come to an unpleasant conclusion that 'the late fourteenth-century book differs more from its early medieval predecessors than it does from the printed books of our own day'.²⁰ For several centuries the manner of locating information in books has not been revolutionised or changed considerably. In order to find information a book should be read at first, then it may be marked up in the way a person finds it appropriate (by highlighting or underlining, by writing a summary, etc.). Most interestingly, present-day search engines allow us to scan digital texts for hits (and basic statistics) without reading them at all. This can be rendered as a considerable step forward in processing information.

Logic suggests that future generations can share the same feeling of frustration looking at the paper books of today. Detailed lists of contents, different types of indexes at the end of the book are unlikely to change the situation for the better. These things are not productive and they are undeniably time-consuming: for instance, an index can refer to a certain page but it doesn't tell a reader which line he or she should look for; a reader will have to scan the whole page to find a necessary word combination if there

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is only one reference to this subject in the book. However, there are usually multiple references on a number of pages. So the verdict is obvious: paper books are not searchable at all!

Conclusion

It is quite easy to imagine a highly-digitised world a few hundred years from our time onward which will have another system of counting time. A.D. or B.C. will be of little importance; our epoch will be described as B.D. (Before Digitisation) and considered as a society of bookworms (however, there is a strong probability that this word will also disappear together with paper books) who literally ate books because every use of a paper book by a new reader brings the end of its life span closer. On the contrary, a new society whose members are unable to hand-write or read long narratives (which will be probably substituted by visualised presentations of a message to forward), may return to reading aloud or to reading at a low voice in order to grasp the written message by making it audible. This mode of reading may lead again to the reduced speed of reading and will result in the reviving of more intensive reading practices. However, the days of linear and continual reading which characterises the order of the book, seem to be numbered and it will co-exist with discontinuity and non-linearity as long as the new medium allows. It is obviously difficult to predict or claim that discontinuity is a temporary feature of the disorder of the book but in all probability it will stay with us for a relatively long period of time until new technologies give birth to a digital medium suitable for continuous reading. Also, it is very unrealistic to expect future generations to read books from cover to cover due to the abundance of reading materials. No matter how nostalgic we can feel about our beloved bookmarks sticking out from our books or about underlining traces and other notes on the pages for finding important passages, searching information is just a practical matter that new technologies help us to deal with more successfully. All in all, even if the history of humanity should make another circle, it doesn't look like we will face it unprepared: new things are somehow familiar—the past repeats itself—*plus ça change*. ■

Notes

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4. J. Gomez, *Print is dead: Books in our digital age*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
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8. *ibid*, p. 56.
9. Dizikes, P., 'The strangely familiar browsing habits of 14th-century readers', 22 May 2013, n.pag. <<http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2013/arthur-bahr-fragments-and-assemblages-0523.html>> (23 January, 2014).
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17. 'Does the brain like e-books?', (New York Times, 14 October 2009).
18. M. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg galaxy: The making of typographic man* (London, 1971).
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20. *Ibid*, p. 74