

Materialnost branja: primer bralcev romanov v Angliji 18. stoletja in pogled v sodobnost

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Čeprav je fizična materialnost knjig in branja v študijih literature praviloma zapostavljena, nas zgodovina knjižnih praks vedno znova opozarja na pomen zunajbesedilnega v literarnem doživetju. Predstavila bom različne dimenzije materialnosti branja, ki so izrazite že v času, ko branje romana postane priljubljena in razmeroma razširjena pristočasna praksa, tj. v Angliji 18. stoletja. S primeri, predvsem s slovito uspešnico Samuela Richardsons Pamela, bom poskusila pokazati, kako pomembno vlogo so v uveljavljanju branja romana odigrali na eni strani specifična predmetnost romana in specifikke branja romana, na drugi pa načini, kako se je prebrano artikuliralo oziroma »povnanjilo« v pogovorih, uprizoritvah odlomkov, prek razprav v bralnih klubih, društvih in knjižnicah, predvsem pa z oživiljanjem junakov skozi druge pristočasne aktivnosti in družabne dejavnosti. Sklenila bom s premislekom o sodobnih različicah »povnanjanja« branja in o opazno povečanem zanimanju za predmetno plat knjig, ki očitno spremlja aktualne metamorfoze knjižnih nosilcev

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Uvod

Tema tega članka so materialne oziroma predmetne razsežnosti branja: tisto, kar je pri branju konkretno, oprijemljivo ali popredmeteno, pri čemer me to zanima v njegovi vključenosti v zgodovinski kontekst. Gre za nekaj, kar je podobno tistemu, kar Robert Darnton označi kot »zunanjo zgodovino branja« (gl. Brewer 7). Ta razsežnost praviloma ostaja zanemarjena ali kar povsem prezrta v obravnavah branja s stališča tako literarne vede kakor študij historičnega bralca.

Medtem ko je teorijam bralčevega odziva mogoče očitati, da se, kot pravi William Sherman, »ukvarjajo z vsemi mogočimi vrstami bralcev razen z realnim in zgodovinskim« (gl. Colclough 4), po drugi strani preučevanju historičnega bralca, ki se ukvarja z branjem oziroma bralnimi navadami in njihovimi individualnimi posebnostmi kot z zgodovinsko spremenljivo prakso, prav tako manjka širši materialni okvir branja in knjige, okvir, ki nujno vključuje ne-literarne in ne-besedilne dimenzije. Te postanejo opazne šele z gledišča interdisciplinarne epistemologije, ki študij branja pomakne iz območja literarne vede v polje kulturnih študij, sociologije, knjigarstva in posamičnih zgodovin, zlasti kulturne, družbene in spolske. Po mojem je prav ta pogled pomemben za celostno razumevanje branja in njegove kompleksne organske vpetosti v družbo. Če se osredotočimo na roman kot osrednjo literarno obliko, velja, da materialne razsežnosti romana in branja romana pomembno prispevajo k uveljavitvi tako romana kot literarne zvrsti kakor branja romanov kot priljubljene prostočasne prakse.¹

Takšna epistemologija izhaja iz mojega razumevanja romana kot kulturne forme, kakor jo kulturno-materialistično konceptualizira Raymond Williams. Poenostavljeno rečeno, to pomeni, da je mogoče neko kulturno produkcijo, če jo želimo scela razumeti, preučevati zgolj v razmerju do njenega družbenega in zgodovinskega okvira, se pravi, z analizo njene produkcije, distribucije in konsumpcije. Na primeru knjige to nazorno ilustrira zdaj že znameniti Darntonov »komunikacijski krog« (1982), ki sta ga leta 2006 nekoliko elaborirala Baker in Johns.

V okviru »materialnosti branja romanov« obravnavam vrsto zadev:

- fizično oziroma predmetno plat romanov in nove načine branja, ki so jih romani vpeljali;
- raznotere sledi branja, med katerimi so poleg pisanja o branju tako podobe bralcev kakor denimo bralno pohištvo;
- in predvsem različne načine, na katere liki iz fikcije prestopajo svoje izhodiščno besedilo in se pojavljajo »zunaj« strani, kar David A. Brewer (2, 78) imenuje »domišljjski podaljšek« in »migracije značajev«.

Materialnost branja se skratka nanaša na oprijemljivo, vidno stran branja, ki jo je mnogo lažje opisati kakor definirati.

Zgodovinski okvir

Moj primarni referenčni okvir bo zgodovinski kontekst, v katerem je po mnenju mnogih branje romanov prvič postalo priljubljena in razmeroma razširjena prostočasna praksa – Anglija 18. stoletja, ko lahko roman

tudi prvič obravnavamo kot kulturno formo, tj. v vsej njegovi organski vpetosti v družbeno polje.

Da se je branje sploh lahko uveljavilo kot oblika prostočasje, so morali biti najprej izpolnjeni nekateri temeljni družbeni pogoji. Med njimi je predvsem določena stopnja pismenosti in s tem zadosten bralski potencial; nato razvit knjižni trg z delujočo produkcijsko in distribucijsko mrežo, ki pripelje knjige do bralcev in jih naredi dostopne tako fizično kakor cenovno; pa prosti čas in določena stopnja zasebnosti. Vse to je bilo izvedljivo samo v ugodnih religioznih in političnih okoliščinah. Anglija je bila protestantska država z močnim vplivom puritancev, kar je spodbudilo individualno branje *Biblije* v domačem jeziku in je s tem izrecno promoviralo pismenost. Poleg tega je Anglija prva vpeljala parlamentarni sistem in že konec 17. stoletja delovala kot parlamentarna monarhija.

Vse to je imelo pomembne posledice: zaradi soudeležnosti ljudstva pri odločanju o državnih zadevah je velik pomen dobila javna razprava, kar je pozitivno vplivalo na razvoj časopisne kulture. Časniki in periodika so v Angliji cveteli vse od državljanske vojne naprej (1642–1651) in tako zviševali število pismenih ter obenem krepili sekularizem, pri čemer sta se oba učinka očitno povezovala.

Pomemben dejavnik predstavlja tudi zgodnja komercializacija: Anglija je prva razvila pravo globalno kapitalistično ekonomijo; to je bila država industrijske in potrošniške revolucije, kar je bilo ne le dobra podlaga založniškega posla, pač pa je imelo tudi močne družbene učinke. Med temi sta bila najpomembnejši ločitev dela od doma, ki je može poslala v tovarne, žene pa vezala na domove, in tako psihološka kakor prostorska razmejitev javnega od zasebnega in s tem prepoznanje zasebnosti kot vrednote. Kot »zibka zasebnosti« (gl. Ariès 12) je Anglija tako izpolnila še eno pomembno predpostavko za razvoj bralnega prostočasje. To je tudi določilo prevladujoče bralno občinstvo – ženske, ki so ostajale v zasebnosti svojih domov.²

Ti dejavniki in procesi se staknejo v Angliji 18. stoletja in v drugi polovici stoletja »pridelajo« dovolj pismenih in premožnih z dovolj prostega časa, da sestavijo spodobno bralstvo romanov.³

Angleški roman 18. stoletja in *Pamela* kot študija primera

V nasprotju s tedaj prevladujočo prozo junaških romanc, ki je do konca 17. stoletja v privzdignjenem izumetničenem slogu na dolgo in široko pripovedovala o fantastičnih podvigih plemiških junakov v daljnih ekso-tičnih deželah, romani ponujajo fikcionalizirano dejanskost – stavijo na verjetnost in realizem tako v zgodbi kakor v načinu upovedovanja zgod-

be. Namesto tradicionalnih epskih zapletov, abstrahirane univerzalnosti in stiliziranih značajev kraljev in princes v abstraktnem kronotopu ponudijo ljudi iz mesa in kosti, tj. predstavnike srednjih in nižjih slojev, ter njihov »lov na srečo«. Osredotočajo se na ljubezenske in družinske odnose, se pravi, na tisto, za kar smo zaradi lastnih izkušenj vsi strokovnjaki, in to poudarja univerzalno dostopnost in odprtost romanesknih svetov. Pomembna novost je prikaz junakove notranjosti in psihološke zasebnosti, kar spodbudi proces identifikacije tako med bralci in liki kakor med bralci in avtorjem ter avtorjem in liki.

Vse to je seveda povezano s spremembami v knjižnem poslu, ko s postopnim zatonom tradicionalnega patronskega sistema vlogo neposrednega avtorjevega naslovnika prevzame anonimno bralno občinstvo. Da bi navezal stik z neznanim bralcem, avtor uporabi drugačne tehnike: neposredni nagovor, prvoosebno pisanje, kramljajoči stil; vse to zmanjšuje razdaljo med vpletenimi v bralnem komunikacijskem razmerju. Občutek bližine dodatno krepijo realne aktualne reference – na trge in ulice, na naslove časnikov in imena politikov, literatov idr. –, ki ustvarjajo skupni dogajalni kontekst in ponovno povezujejo svet bralca, avtorja in junaka. V ospredje stopi urbani svet rastoče buržoazije, ki ga beroči prepozna tudi kot svoje lastno, znano, domače okolje, v katerem se znajde in ki ga razume ter pozna.

Na tej podlagi romani opazno črpajo iz mnogih drugih zvrsti – literarnih in neliterarnih, stvarnih in nestvarnih, javnih in zasebnih, denimo iz dnevnikov in pisem, iz religioznih, filozofskih in zgodovinskih tekstov pa iz vzgojnih priročnikov in novinarskih žanrov. Kot tak je roman v izhodišču izrazito eklektična zvrst, ki šele postopoma najde svoj pravi izraz.

Če bi želeli zelo na kratko opredeliti značilen angleški roman 18. stoletja in bi iskali skupne poteze, bi lahko rekli, da takšen roman v ospredje vselej postavi posameznikovo zgodbo, mikrosliko nekega življenja, ki pa ostaja pripeta na ene in iste teme stalnice, ki so praviloma moralna vprašanja z izrazito didaktično noto. A četudi moralni nauk dejansko pogosto sklepa te pripovedi, je lahko zgodba sama vse prej kot moralna. Ravno tako pomembno je namreč tudi, da zabava. V grobem lahko ločimo dva tipska modela angleškega romana 18. stoletja: sentimentalne romane, ki temeljijo na prvoosebni čustveni izpovedi ženske junakinje, in pustolovsko potopisne romane z moškimi liki v tretji osebi in z bolj rokovnjaško-zabavljajškim tonom.⁴

Za ponazoritev se bom osredotočila na prvi pravi romaneskni *bestseller*, *Pamelo* Samuela Richardsona iz leta 1740. To je zgodba o krepostni mladi služabnici, ki jo začne po smrti njene gospodarice nadlegovati novi hišni oblastnik, gospodaričin sin g. B. Pamela se mu sicer uspešno upira in brani

svojo nedolžnost, vse dokler ta, potem ko med drugim skrivaj prebere njena obupana pisma staršem, ne sprevidi njenega vrlega značaja in spozna, da je vredna veliko več od bežne avanture. Ko se tudi ona ogreje zanj, jo nazadnje očaran zaprosi za roko. Tako je krepost tudi nagrajena. *Pamela* je pisana v prvoosebni pripovedi v obliki pisem oziroma dnevnika in je značilen primer sentimentalnega romana.

Fizična razsežnost romana in nove oblike branja

V Angliji 18. stoletja so romani običajno izhajali v majhnem formatu *duo-decimo*, ki je bil zlahka prenosljiv in priročen tudi za v žep, tako da je lahko z njim bralec, kadar se mu je zahotelo, vstopil v »območje zasebnosti«. Ni naključje, da postanejo knjižna znamenja prav v tem času običajno v hrbet vsiti svileni trakovi za pomoč pri prekinjenemu branju.

Naslovnice romanov so učinkovale kot nekakšni oglasi, ki so poskušali čim bolje prodati vsebino. Naslovnice so bile zato na gosto popisane strani, iz katerih je bilo mogoče razbrati zgodbo, vrline glavnih junakov in moralno sporočilo. Naslov *Pamele* v celoti zveni takole: *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded, in a series of familiar letters from a beautiful young damsel to her parents. Now first published in order to cultivate the principles of virtue and religion in the minds of the youth of both sexes. A narrative which has its foundation in truth and nature and at the same time it agreeably entertains by a variety of curious and affecting incidents, is entirely divested of all those images, which, in too many Pieces calculated for Amusement only, tend to inflame the Minds they should instruct.*

Močan paratekstualni aparat priča o novosti romaneskne fikcije: njeni bralci namreč potrebujejo »uvajalna« navodila, ki šele postopoma podmačijo nov tip branja. Danes tudi nevajeni bralec praviloma nima težav s preskokom v individualne izpovedi, takrat pa je branje o neposredni sodobnosti delovalo presenetljivo tuje. Obsežni uvodi s pojasnjevanjem okoliščin nastanka dela, opombe pod črto in sprotne pojasnila zginejo šele s postopno konvencionalizacijo romanesknih zgodb. *Pamelo* tako okvirja elaborirana krovna zgodba, v kateri se Richardson predstavi zgolj kot nekdo, ki je slučajno naletel na pisma služabnice Pamele, in na ta način zasedra svoje pisanje v resničnost. Richardson je pele veliko pozneje, potem ko je uspeh romana spodbudil številne ponaredbe in nadaljevanja, razkril fiktivni značaj svojih del.

Trgovci so znali dodobra izkoristiti vsebinsko dostopnost romanov in s tem njihov potencial za privabljanje množic. Romane so ponujali v različnih vezavah, za kupce s tanjšimi in debelejšimi denarnicami: v snopičih brez platnic, vezane v karton, v usnje, ali po individualnem naročilu. Zlasti

priljubljena so bila cenejša kolportажna nadaljevanja v periodiki in rabljene ter piratske izdaje, za manj pismeno publiko pa so bile na voljo skrajšane verzije. *Pamela* je najprej izšla kot dvodelni *duodecimo*, v nekaj mescih je bila štirikrat ponatisnjena, obenem pa so jo izdali še v delih in »na črno«. In prav romani so zvrst, ki vpelje komercialne knjižnice, t. i. *circulating libraries*, ki so proti plačilu posojale knjige na dom. Roman skratka v hipu zaživi kot tržno blago. Tako Terry Lovell (28) pravi, da »roman v bistvu nastane kot tržni artikel«. Roman je prvi in edini novi žanr po izumu tiska, ki je v temeljih vpet v profitno politiko knjižnega trga – pisan za zabavo množic in za profit. Prodajajo ga skupaj z vsakdanjimi potrošnimi artikli in celo s špecerijo.⁵

Romani so vpeljali tudi nove prakse branja. Pisani so bili namreč za individualno, zasebno branje in brali so jih praviloma potihoma in na samem. V nasprotju z glasnim kolektivnim branjem, pri katerem je slišano komentirano in s tem tudi lažje cenzurirano, takšno branje uhaja vsakršnemu nadzoru. Nekateri prihodu romana pripisujejo celo glavne »zasluge« za revolucionarni prehod od intenzivnega, tj. ponavljajočega se in poglobljenega branja peščice dostopnih besedil k ekstenzivnemu, hitremu, površnemu branju velikega števila knjig, in sicer vsake le enkrat. Ta »bralna revolucija« naj bi se sklenila ravno konec 18. stoletja. To spremembo seveda pogojuje nova dejanskost, ki je v tem, da s proliferacijo in večjo dostopnostjo knjig več ljudi več bere. A glavni povzročitelji tega obrata so prav romani, ki prinašajo zgodbe, ki jih je bilo sploh mogoče požirati drugo za drugo in celo med prelistavanjem. Poleg tega tiho branje zahteva precej manj časa kakor glasno. Teza o ekstenzivnem branju, ki jo leta 1973 postavi nemški raziskovalec Rolf Engelsing, danes sicer velja za poenostavljajočo, saj odzivi na številne takratne uspešnice (Richardsonovo *Pamelo*, Rousseaujevo *Julijo*, Goethejevega *Wertherja*) dokazujejo, da so ljudje tudi po *Pameli* obsesivno brali iste tekste, jih navajali na pamet in nasploh dojemali karseda intenzivno. Zato se zdi primernejše ugotoviti, da različne vrste branja pač soobstajajo. To pa ne zanika dejstva, da so romani temeljno spremenili bralne prakse.

Spremembe v bralnih navadah pustijo sledi tudi v prostorski organizaciji domačih interierjev: branje romanov se infiltrira v intimo spalnice, hkrati pa postane »vidnejše«. T. i. bralno pohištvo – bralni pulti, zložljive bralne mizice, bralne zofe, bralne svetilke ipd. – omogočijo udobnejše druženje s knjigo in pričajo o naraščajočem pomenu bralnega prostocasa.

Vizualna reprezentacija branja

Upodobitve branja romanov so zagotovo eden ključnih primerov »popredmetenja« prakse; ponazarjajo njeno oprijemljivo, materialno plat, in sicer zlasti zato, ker so romani verjetno edini žanr, ki postane priljubljen likovni motiv in razvije prepoznavno ikonografijo. To je sicer največkrat mogoče razumeti v okviru kampanje proti romanu, saj pogosto spremlja moralno-panični diskurz, ki se razvije ob nasprotovanju tej novi kulturni formi.

Glavna skrb se je, rečeno na kratko, nanašala na to, da bi romani s svojo brezoblično formo in bogatim repertoarjem zgodb iz življenja takšnih in drugačnih slehernikov bralce moralno spridili. Bojazen glasnikov moralne panike – vzgojiteljev, duhovnikov in ostalih nosilcev moralne avtoritete v družbi – je tičala v tem, da bi bralci posnemali neprimerna ravnanja junakov in junakinj ter tako zabredli v nesrečo. Dejstvo, da naj bi romani prikazovali resnično življenje, je strahove še krepilo. Zgodbe in liki so bili dovolj realni, da so omogočali identifikacijo, hkrati pa so bili pripetljaji vseeno bistveno zanimivejši od dejanskosti, junaki pa potencirano vrli in lepi, tako da se je meja med svetom romana in svetom bralcev lahko nevarno zabrisala. Prav to pa je vabilo v sanjarijo in po mnenju mnogih bralcev mešalo glave. Poleg tega naj bi zlasti sentimentalni romani vodili v pretirano čustvenost in slabili občutek za »pravo mero«; učinkovali naj bi kot droga, ki uporabnike zasvoji, omami in pasivizira, tako da niso za nobeno rabo več. Če k temu dodamo še, da so bili romani od zadnje tretjine stoletja naprej vsaj v eni od izdaj dostopni tako rekoč vsem razen nižjim razredom, so bile po mnenju mnogih razmere tako rekoč zrele za katastrofo.

Za glavne žrtve (in hkrati krivke) moralne panike branja romanov so veljale predvsem bralke, zlasti mlade bralke. Ženske in mladi so (bili) kot šibkejša, podrejena in ranljivejša družbena skupina, ki jo je treba vselej ščititi pred grozečimi nevarnostmi, v moralnopaničnih razpravah tudi sicer najpogosteje proglašeni za glavne oškodovance. Mladi naj bi bili namreč za slabe vplive romanov dovzetnejši zaradi neizkušenosti, ženske pa zaradi po tedanjem prepričanju prirojene sentimentalnosti, vrh vsega pa so med bralci ženske kot osebe z več prostočasje tudi prevladovale.

Še več, tiho zasebno branje romanov uhaja vsakršnemu nadzoru – prebrane zgodbe se prosto odvijajo v bralčevi glavi, in nobena višja avtoriteta se ne more vmešati v bralčeve sanjarije in ga posvariti pred morebitnimi zablodami.

Likovne upodobitve bralcev romanov praviloma prikazujejo dekleta v razpuščeni drži in s pogledom, ki prevzet od prebranega zre mimo knjige nekam v neznano, nespodobnost početja pa še poudarja bralkin razkrit

dekolte, ki namiguje na prostaško vsebino romana. Da gre pri tem vselej za branje romanov, nakazuje majhnost formata, pa tudi to, da bralka na sliki skoraj nikoli zares ne bere, temveč zasanjano gleda nekam v daljavo.⁶ V resnici je bilo branje romanov takrat precej bolj obravnavano tudi kot telesna in emocionalno nabita dejavnost, to razsežnost na tekst pa osredotočena literarna veda kasneje dosledno zapostavlja. Razumeti je treba, da so romani bralce uvedli v nov svet močnih čustev in da so se bralci, nevarjeni takšnega neposrednega nagovora, tudi primerno odzivali: intenzivna identifikacija s fiksijskim dogajanjem je izzvala izrazito emocionalno reakcijo. Skupina kovačev, ki so drug drugemu glasno brali *Pamelo*, kar je bila sicer redkejša oblika branja romana, je denimo ob srečnem koncu veselo stekla zvonit k bližnji cerkvi, tako zelo jo je zgodba pretresla.

Poudariti velja, da moralna kritika romanov, četudi je bila močno razširjena, ni v ničemer oslabila priljubljenosti romanov. Ne samo da bralna moralna panika ni imela zaviralnega učinka – učinek je bil kvečjemu nasproten. Tako je bilo delno zato, ker tisto, kar je odsvetovano, še bolj privlači, predvsem pa zato, ker je moralnopanični diskurz z grajami, očitki in svarili roman paradokсно vseskozi vedno znova postavljaj v središče debate in s tem avtomatično krepil njegov položaj, ga delal opaznega, in tako dejansko pripomogel k njegovi uveljavitvi in »podomačitvi«.

To potrjuje na primer že dejstvo, da so romani, zlasti uspešnice, vse očitneje postajali del tedanje popularne kulture, tudi ne-literarne. To se kaže na številne načine in nam ponuja bogat repertoar ne-besedilnih, materialnih odmevov branja.

Popularna kultura in »povnanjanje« branja

Pamela vsekakor sodi med tiste priljubljene romane, ki so spodbudili največ ne-literarnih materialnih odmevov. Konec štiridesetih let 18. stoletja je bilo tako denimo mogoče kupiti pahljačo, poslikano z motivi romana; a ti so se pojavljali tudi na skodelicah pa celo na ščitih za kamin in na slamnkih. V tistem času namreč avtorske pravice, vsaj kar zadeva takšne ne-literarne primere, še niso bile jasno uveljavljene. Prva uradna ilustrirana izdaja *Pamele* je izšla dve leti po prvem izidu romana (tj. leta 1742 pri založbi Gravelot in Hayman), a številne upodobitve oboževane junakinje so med navdušenimi bralci krožile že veliko prej. Pamela je v Angliji in drugod postala priljubljen slikarski motiv. Joseph Highmore je po izbranih motivih romana na primer poslikal dvanajst oljnih platen. Poleg tega so takratni bralci lahko obiskali razstavo več kot sto miniaturnih voščenihih figuric, ki so predstavljale različne motive Richardsonovega romana. (Ko

je izšel drugi del, je bila razstava ustrezno razširjena.) »Pamela« je bila na voljo tudi kot maškaradni kostum (gl. Sabor in Keymer 143–176).

Bralci so si zamišljali prigode fikcijskih junakov onkraj njihove zamejnosti na izvorno delo in jim tako podeljevali samostojnost in neodvisnost, s tem pa tudi moč vpletanja v svoja lastna življenja. Junake uspešnic so obravnavali kot skupno lastnino (Brewer 78). Poleg Pamele so tudi Gulliver iz *Gulliverjevih potovanj*, Polly in McHeath iz *Beraške opere* in Tristram Shandy doživeli številne pustolovščine zunaj svoje »matične biografije« in se materializirali v raznovrstnih artiklih.

Ta materialna razsežnost branja je v tistem času opravljala zelo pomembno funkcijo, ki jo je mogoče opisati kot »povnanjanje« ali socializacijo branja. V Angliji 18. stoletja, kjer so prevladovale javne in kolektivne oblike zabave – gledališče, ples, koncerti, promenade in druženje v kavarnah –, je bilo branje romanov neobičajna oblika prostočasa, omejena na individualno zasebnost. Da bi se lahko uveljavilo kot enakovredna oblika zabave, je, ko je postajalo vse bolj priljubljeno, potrebovalo svoj odmev tudi v skupinskih javnih praksah. Materializacija branja – upodabljanje literarnih junakov, komercialni odvodi – tako izhaja iz potrebe po socializaciji intimne izkušnje, tj. po tem, da bi naša enkratna »bralna zaznavanja« delili z drugimi. Opisano povnanjanje intimne bralne izkušnje, ki se sklene v materialnem, je pomembno prispevalo k družbenemu uveljavljanju branja.

Pogled v sodobnost: diskurz okrog knjig

Ob koncu si bom koncept povnanjanja branja in s tem povezan fenomen materialnosti branja ogledala še z gledišča aktualne knjižno-bralne kulture. Danes nas obkroža zares širok razpon t. i. bralnih družabnosti: festivali in dogodki, nagrade in priznanje in številni sekundarni literarnih artikli vseh sort. A videti je, da vse to pravzaprav nima veliko opraviti s konkretnim branjem knjig kot intimno izkušnjo beročega posameznika, ki je izvorno sprožila te zunanje družabnosti. Nasprotno, zdi se, da se pomp okrog knjig sploh ne osredotoča (več) na samo branje, o čemer morda najočitneje priča razcvet t. i. diskurza okrog knjig, ki očitno prednjači pred diskurzom o knjigah. Medtem ko lahko govorimo »o« knjigi, ki smo jo prebrali, lahko govorimo samo »okrog« knjige, ki je nismo prebrali. Obenem velja, da lahko govorimo tudi »okrog« knjige, ki smo jo prebrali, ne pa tudi »o« knjigi, ki je nismo prebrali.

Okrog knjig je mogoče zlahka govoriti preprosto tako, da pogovor speljemo od teksta k nečemu, čemurkoli že, kar je glede na tekst sicer nujno zunanje, vendar ostaja kontekstualno povezano z njim. Da smo bili

nedavno priča uspehu knjige Pierra Bayarda *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read* (Kako govoriti o knjigah, ki jih nismo prebrali) pa še knjige Henryja Hitchingsa *How to Really Talk About Books You Haven't Read* (Kako resnično govoriti o knjigah, ki jih nismo prebrali), pove veliko o vzponu in prepoznavnosti diskurza okrog knjig. Tudi zgolj občasni bralec časopisov lahko opazi, da t. i. literarne strani vse pogosteje vsebujejo zunaj-literarne teme; angleški *Guardian* nas tako seznanja na primer s sobami pisateljev, pa z njihovimi delovnimi rituali, pisalnimi orodji ipd., kar praviloma nima veliko opraviti z literaturo.⁷ Eden glavnih elementov diskurza okrog knjig se nanaša na materialnost branja in vključuje vse od najrazličnejših knjižno-bralnih pripomočkov (med katerimi so bralne svetilke⁸ pa stojala in knjižna znamenja) do tržnih literarnih artiklov.⁹

Danes, ko živimo tako rekoč v času ekscesa knjig, postajajo reference na dejanske knjižne vsebine vse redkejše. Namesto teh snov za komentarje o knjigah vse bolj »priskrbevajo« reference iz zunaj-literarne sfere, ki zadevajo recimo avtorjevo življenje ali pa takšne ali drugačne okoliščine pisanja.¹⁰ Vsebina sama vse manj omogoča razpravo o knjigi, saj preprosto ne predstavlja več skupnega imenovalca doživljanja knjige. Z zamenjavo diskurza o knjigi za diskurz okrog knjig vsebina oziroma lastnosti samega teksta umanjajo kot temeljna skupna podlaga različnih bralnih pogledov.

Ta trend je najbolj prepoznaven v naraščajočem številu knjig o branju (in nebranju), ki artikulirajo fizično izkušnjo branja in materialne prakse ravnanja s knjigami, kot da bi želele poudariti njihovo kot-da ponovno odkrito materialnost.¹¹ To je zagotovo simptom aktualnih ugotovitev o dematerializaciji knjige, osvajalnem pohodu e-branja in o transformaciji knjižne kulture, kakršno smo poznali doslej. Ta trend se kaže tudi v vrsti na knjigo in branje oziroma pisanje osredotočenih umetniških projektov in performansov, ki poskušajo utelesiti in s tem reflektirati nove načine branja in ravnanja s knjigami.¹²

Naj sklenem z ugotovitvijo, da so bili v 18. stoletju romani »povnanjeni« in izživetji na različne načine, a medtem ko razlaga za to tiči v spremembi narave prostočasa in v popularizaciji tihega branja, je sodobna situacija v marsičem ravno obrnjena. Zdi se namreč, da je branje knjig vse manj predpogoj za govorjenje o njih. Kot da bi intenzivna materializacija branja in govorjenje okrog knjig zadoščala in nadomestila primarni referent – branje samo.

OPOMBE

¹ Prispevek predstavlja zgolj uvodno razpravo o načinih, kako misliti materialne, ne-literarne razsežnosti branja romana, zato ga velja brati kot nekakšen panoramski uvid v problematiko.

² To še zdaleč ne velja za vse ženske, pač pa za večino tistih, ki so si lahko privoščile knjige, tj. za plemkinje in pripadnice višjega srednjega sloja. Srednji sloj je bil tudi tisti, ki je najizraziteje nosil posledice industrijske revolucije; revne žene so namreč morale še vedno delati, aristokratinjam pa tako in tako že prej ni bilo treba delati.

³ Za natančnejši portret družbenega konteksta gl. A. Vogrinčič, *Družabno*.

⁴ Za podrobnejši opis zgodnjega angleškega romana gl. Hunter.

⁵ G. npr. katalog komercialne knjižnice v Bedfordu iz leta 1817.

⁶ Gl. npr. sliki Pierra A. Baudoina *La Lectrice* in *Le Midi* (oboje ok. 1760) ter sliko J.-B. Greuza *Lady Reading the Letter of Eloïze and Abelard*, ok. 1780 (med drugim na <http://www.english.ucsb.edu/faculty/warner/courses/w00/engl30/StagingReaders.ecf.8.99.htm> /31. julij 2011/).

⁷ Gl. npr. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/series/writersrooms> (31. julij 2011).

⁸ Gl. npr. <http://www.wired.com/gadgetlab/2009/07/reading-lamp-holds-books-shuts-itself-off/> (31. julij 2011).

⁹ Patricia Ard (36) preučuje povezavo med zatonom branja in vzponom literarne materialne kulture ter ugotavlja, da postaja »bralna izkušnja zreducirana in poblagovljena za kupce«.

¹⁰ Preusmeritev (medijske) pozornosti od dejanske literarne umetnine k njenemu avtorju je bilo mogoče opaziti že pred desetletji (gl. primerjalno raziskavo literarnih rubrik resnih in rumenih časopisov med letoma 1960 in 2000 v dvanajstih evropskih državah /Vogrinčič, »Literary«/). A medtem ko smo lahko to spremembo pripisali tabloidizaciji kulturnih strani, gre vzroke za današnjo spremembo diskurza o knjigah iskati drugje.

¹¹ Poleg Bayarda in Hitchingsa velja omeniti vsaj še *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader* A. Fadiman (2000), *So Many Books, So Little Time* (2003) S. Nelson, *Reading Diary* (2004) A. Manguela, *Leave Me Alone, I'm Reading* (2005) M. Corrigan, *Joy of Reading* (2008) van Dorena, *Howards End is on the Landing. A Year of Reading from Home* (2009) S. Hill in *How to Read a Novel. A User's Guide* (2006) J. Sutherlanda.

¹² Gl. npr. Fleur Thio, *Hasty Book* (Neučakana knjiga) (Vogrinčič, »K tematski« 9), knjižne fotografije Care Barer (<http://www.carabarar.com> /31. julij 2011/) ali nenavadno knjižni kip Briana Dettmerja (http://www.futureofthebook.org/blog/archives/2009/03/extraordinary_book_sculpture.html, 2009 /31. julij 2011/).

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Materiality of Reading: The Case of 18th-Century Novel Readers in England, And a Glimpse into the Present

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Despite the physical materiality of books and reading often being neglected in the literary studies, the history of book practices repeatedly draws our attention to the significance of the non-textual aspects of the literary experience. In my contribution I will present various dimensions of the materiality of reading, which were already evident when novel reading became a popular and relatively wide-spread leisure practice, i.e., in 18th-century England. Using examples, notably the notorious bestselling Richardson's Pamela, I will try to show that novel reading could not emerge and proliferate without certain material dimensions of the novel and novel reading, or without the ways in which what was read was articulated, i.e., 'externalised' through conversation, domestic performances of selected episodes, discussions in book clubs, societies and libraries, and in particular through re-enactment of fictional characters in other leisure and social activities. I will conclude by reflecting on contemporary versions of the 'externalisation' of reading, and on the evidently increased interest for the materiality of books, which seems to be one of the side-effects of the recent metamorphosis of book formats.

Keywords: history of reading / English literature / novel / 18th cent. / Richardson, Samuel

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Introduction

In this paper, I will discuss the material aspects of reading – the concrete, tangible, objectified dimension of the practice, embedded in the historical context, something akin to what Robert Darnton describes as 'external history of reading' (see Brewer 7). It is the aspect that often remains neglected, if not entirely ignored, when reading is considered from

the perspective of literary studies, but it is also missing from the historical-reader approach.

While reader-response criticism is often explicitly criticised for, to cite William Sherman, being 'peopled with every kind of reader except the real and historical' (see Colclough 4), the historical reader approach, dwelling on the particularities of individual reading habits as a historically changing practice, is in fact as well often missing the wider material context of reading and the book, which necessarily includes non-literary and non-textual dimensions. As such, the wider material context of reading and the book becomes more visible when studied from the interdisciplinary epistemology, which is indeed taking the study of reading further away from the literary field, turning it into an object of cultural studies, sociology, book studies and particular histories – cultural, social and gender history. I believe this aspect is of great importance for fully understanding the complex ways in which reading is organically embedded in society. Focusing on the novel as the quintessential literary form, I believe that the material aspects of the novel and novel reading decisively contributed to the novel's establishment as a literary genre and to the establishment of novel reading as a popular cultural leisure practice.¹

The epistemology behind this aspect follows from my understanding of the novel not simply as a literary genre, but rather as a 'cultural form' in Raymond Williams' cultural materialist sense, in which culture (in order to be properly understood) should be studied only in relation to its specific social and historical frameworks, i.e., through the analysis of its production, distribution and consumption, as is well presented in the now famous 'book communication circuit', which was introduced by Darnton in 1982 and elaborated by Baker and Johns in 2006.

By materiality of novel reading, I refer to a range of different issues:

- the physical aspects of novels and the ways in which they introduced new modes of reading;
- the various traces of reading, which apart from writing about reading also include images of readers and, for instance, reading furniture;
- and above all the different ways in which mainly fictional characters transcend their textual origins and reappear off-page, something David A. Brewer (2, 78) refers to as 'imaginative expansion' and 'character migration'.

In short, the materiality of reading refers to the tangible, visible side of reading, and is as such much easier to describe than to define.

The historical frame

My primary frame of reference will be the historical context which is according to many researchers the one in which novel reading first became a popular and relatively wide spread leisure practice – i.e., 18th-century England; and therefore I will be also focusing on English novels of the time. This is the period when the novel could first be regarded as a cultural form, namely, as organically embedded in the social texture.

For reading to have been able to establish itself as a popular pleasure, some basic social conditions had to be met: first, a certain level of literacy, allowing for a sufficient reading potential; second, a fairly developed book market with a well functioning production and distribution net that enabled people to access books physically as well as financially; third, leisure; and last but not least, some level of privacy.

All this was possible only in a favourable religious and political environment. England was a protestant country with a strong puritan influence, which encouraged individual reading of the *Bible* in the vernacular, and therefore explicitly promoted literacy. More crucially, England was also the first to establish parliamentarism as it functioned as a parliamentary monarchy ever since the end of the 17th century. This had important implications: assuming the participation of a wider society in the state decision making, it stressed the significance of public debate and consequently stimulated the development of news culture. Newspapers and periodicals in England had flourished since the Civil War (1642–1651), increasing the numbers of the reading public as well as strengthening secularism – the two effects being obviously connected.

Early commercialisation is yet another thing that cannot go unmentioned. England developed the first truly global capitalist economy: it was the first country of industrial and, correspondingly, commercial revolution, which not only provided a solid basis for the publishing business, but had profound social effects. By separating home from work, sending men to the factories and confining women to their homes, it differentiated the public from the private, allowing the concept of privacy to become distinguished spatially as well as psychologically, and to be recognised as a value. There is a reason why England is said to represent ‘a cradle of privacy’ (see Ariès 12), fulfilling yet another important condition for the development of leisure reading. The latter also determined the predominant reading public: those staying in the privacy of their homes were women.²

All these factors and processes coincide in 18th-century England, ‘producing’ in its second half enough of the literate, the leisured and the well-off to create a considerable novel reading public.³

The 18th-century novel and the case study of *Pamela*

In contrast to lengthy heroic romances which narrated in an exalted poetic language the fatal deeds of aristocratic heroes fighting for 'the big cause' in distant historical settings, the novels, briefly speaking, represented fictionalised reality, an image of everyday life of ordinary people. Instead of traditional epic plots, abstract universality and stylised (either good or bad) characters, they introduced in simple colloquial prose middle and even lower class heroes placed in contemporary context, thus founding their poetics not only on credibility and realism in content, but also, and mostly, in form. The genre obviously borrowed from many other literary forms; fictional and non-fictional, public and personal (from conduct books and religious tracts, philosophical essays and periodicals, diaries, poetry, to science and history books), resulting in a hybrid, eclectic form.

An important new feature was the novel's dealing with the inner life and the individual psychology, creating a bond of intimacy between the reader and the hero as well as the reader and the author, which enabled the process of identification. The latter was facilitated by setting the stories in a familiar context and by using contemporary references to well known figures of the time (politicians, writers, actors etc.) as well as to famous venues and events. In short, the author, the hero and the reader shared the same 'world'.

The plot put forward the micro image of life, but it always attached this image to the 'big issues' of morale and virtue, often with an explicit didactic component. It has to be said, though, that what was moral was not always agreed upon, and the heroes regularly strayed from 'the right path' only to find it again in the end. This was one of the sources of criticism, although it was usually tolerated in the name of the authors' duty to both teach and amuse.

As a brief and simplified sketch of a typical 18th-century English novel, I could say that there were perhaps two main types. They both focused on the individual, but one was written in the first person narrative, usually in the form of a diary or letters, while the other used the third-person narrator and sent the hero wandering around the world, where he had to live through different, more or less adventurous episodes in a picaresque-like style. If the latter type of novel writing allowed for a more vulgar poetics and chose predominantly male protagonists, the diary and epistolary novels rather functioned as sentimental confessions of the heroine's emotions.⁴

For the sake of an illustration, I will focus on the first big literary bestseller in the history of English fiction, the novel *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* by Samuel Richardson, which was first published in 1740. This is a story of a beautiful and virtuous young servant, who after the death of her mistress

becomes a victim of the new master of the house, the mistress' son, Mr. B. Pamela evades Mr. B.'s attempts to seduce her and successfully defends her virginity, until Mr. B. finally realises – after secretly reading Pamela's letters to her parents – how very virtuous she indeed is, and instead of physically exploiting her, eventually decides to make her a proper marriage proposal. In the meantime he grows to her heart as well – and here we have a virtue rewarded. *Pamela* is a first-person narrative, an epistolary novel and a typical example of a sentimental novel.

The physical aspects of the novel and new ways of reading

In 18th-century England novels usually came in small, duodecimo format, which were easily portable, allowing the individual to enter via reading into a zone of privacy whenever s/he could afford to. It is not a coincidence that novels often came with sewn-in silk-strips for bookmarks that helped with interrupted reading.

The title pages usually functioned as a sort of advertisement as they endeavoured to sell the contents, and they were indeed often used as separate sheets that booksellers hung in their window-shops or on the walls of various public venues. These were thus as a rule densely written pages that allowed one to grasp the plot of the story as well as the virtues of the protagonists and the moral message.

This is how *Pamela's* title page read in full: *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded, in a series of familiar letters from a beautiful young damsel to her parents. Now first published in order to cultivate the principles of virtue and religion in the minds of the youth of both sexes. A narrative which has its foundation in truth and nature and at the same time it agreeably entertains by a variety of curious and affecting incidents, is entirely divested of all those images, which, in too many Pieces calculated for Amusement only, tend to inflame the Minds they should instruct.*

Later on a new fictional form came with a heavy paratextual apparatus containing reading instructions or guidelines that helped the reader accommodate to, and domesticate, the new type of fiction. Today, even a complete non-reader would not have problems if, upon opening a book, s/he would find him/herself in the midst of a personal confession, but at the time writing about intimate affairs set in the immediate present could be taken as confusing or even unsettling. Lengthy introductions, explaining the origins of the work, disappeared only after a period of 'adaptation'.

Pamela thus came accompanied with an elaborate frame story in which Richardson presented himself as a mere editor who came across the actual letters written by a real servant-maid Pamela, thus grounding his writing

in reality. It was only later, when the novel's success brought forth numerous plagiarisms and continuations, that he revealed the true nature of his works.

Merchants knew how to take advantage of the approachable novelistic contents and how to exploit their potential for drawing in the masses. They offered novels in various bindings and different editions for customers with thinner and thicker wallets: in coverless fascicles, cardboard or leather bound, and on individual request. Especially popular were cheap editions in parts or continuations that appeared in newspapers and periodicals, as well as second hand and abridged versions. *Pamela* was first published in two duodecimo volumes; within months it was reprinted four times, as well as published in parts and pirated.

The fact is that, as stated by Terry Lovell and many times repeated, 'novel came into existence as a commodity' (28). It was the first new genre after the invention of the press, and it was inherently embedded in the profitable politics of literary market.⁵

The novel form brought new ways of reading: its content and form called for a private individual reading, and it was indeed predominantly read alone and in silence. Contrary to loud collective readings, novels were (re)played in readers' own heads with no intermediaries censoring the potentially damaging immoral sequences.

Moreover, the rise of the novel was said to bring about another transformation of reading practices, which according to some researchers makes for a proper 18th-century reading revolution: a shift from intensive, i.e., repetitive, thorough reading of only few available texts to extensive, rapid, superficial reading of a large number of books and each only once. However, the theory has been contested and today it is generally agreed that extensive reading did not replace intensive reading, but the two modes rather coexisted, as is proved already by the case of *Pamela* and a number of other bestsellers that were obsessively read again and again. In any case, extensive reading was certainly a consequence of changed reality, and it was possible only when books became more accessible and more people began to read more. And it was the novels, bringing stories that could be easily skimmed, that decisively contributed to the emergence of extensive reading.

The changes in reading habits also left traces in spatial arrangements of domestic interiors: novel reading became more infiltrated in the intimate space of the bedroom and more 'visible' – so-called reading furniture such as reading stands, detachable or folding reading desks, reading sofas, reading lamps and the like – also made it more comfortable and testified to the growing importance of reading as leisure.

Visual representation of reading

Visual representations of novel reading are certainly one of the prime examples of its material, tangible aspects. Novels are probably the only genre that became a popular motif with painters and gained a recognisable iconography. In many cases this motif can be seen as part of the anti-novel campaign as it often seems to accompany the moral-panic discourse.

To put it briefly, the main concern was that novels with their amorphous form and a wide repertoire of stories could and would morally corrupt the readers. The moral-panic heralds ascribed to novels dangerous psychological affects; they were afraid that readers (especially young women) would imitate the inappropriate behaviour of heroes and heroines, and adopt wrong ideas about love and life. Novels were accused of creating expectations that life could not fulfil, and of wearying the sympathies and producing callousness by constantly exposing the reader to scenes of exciting pathos (Williams 13–15).⁶ That novels supposedly presented real life only strengthened those fears, as the plots and characters were plausible enough to encourage identification, but the heroes and heroines were much more virtuous and beautiful, and their lives were considerably more interesting, which was exactly what – as some were convinced – caused confusion and dangerously blurred the boundary between the novelistic and the real. Thrilling, emotionally gripping plots were said to have the effect of a drug, making readers addicted to ever new fictional adventures and turning them into useless passive daydreamers. Add to this the fact that by the last third of the century, novels in one form or the other financially came within easy reach of almost everybody above the lower class, and the circumstances are ripe for a catastrophe! All you need are naïve, inexperienced, susceptible readers – ‘the young, the ignorant and the idle’, as was famously warned by Samuel Johnson – to jump at the bait. Considering that the novel reading public was regarded as predominantly female and that women were already perceived as fanciful, sensitive and thus more liable to bad influence, the situation seemed all the more alarming. In addition, the way novels were read in privacy and solitude with no outer control was seen as particularly prone to manipulation and as such suspicious, as it strongly differed from the loud collective readings, where what was read was always much easier to comment, censure and control.

In most cases, depictions of novel readers represent (young) women in a slouching pose, often dishevelled or even erotically disclosed, as if confirming the indecency of their manners and hinting at the vulgar nature of the book they hold in their hands. That we are certainly looking at a novel

reader is confirmed by the size of the book format – a duodecimo – as well as by the fact that the reader is as a rule not reading the book, but rather dreamily gazing at the distance, evidently loosing herself in her thoughts about what she has just read.⁷

It has to be said that novel reading was at the time experienced and thus regarded as a much more emotional activity, which naturally resulted in a physical, bodily response. One has to understand that novels opened up a whole new world of strong sentiments and readers unused to the new intimate address responded accordingly – wobbling in emotions aroused by an intensive identification with the fictional goings-on. For instance, it is recorded that a group of smiths, who read *Pamela* to each other, ran out to ring the church bell when they reached the happy ending. Unfortunately, the bodily dimension has been ignored by the text-oriented literary studies as well as by the reader-response theories.

The novel panic discourse rather paradoxically not only turned the novel into a more appealing forbidden fruit, but – by making it a recurrent topic of conversation – indirectly legitimated and strengthened its position as a literary, cultural and social form. This is confirmed by the way novels, especially bestsellers, inscribed themselves in the everyday, non-literary experience and became part of popular culture of the time. The latter shows in numerous ways and it offers us the richest evidence of non-textual, material echoes of reading.

Popular culture and the ‘externalisation’ of reading

Pamela was certainly among those popular novels that triggered most spin-offs: in late 1740s you could for instance buy a fan decorated with key scenes from the novel, scenes that also appeared on chinaware, tea-cups and even flat straw-hats and stove-shields. This was still the time when authors’ rights, at least as far as such non-literary items were concerned, were far from established. The official illustrated *Pamela* appeared two years after it had been first published (in the 1742 edition by Gravelot and Hayman), but numerous depictions of the adored heroine had long before circulated among avid readers. Pamela also became a popular motif with painters (in England and abroad): for instance, Joseph Highmore made twelve oil canvases, and one could visit an exhibition of more than hundred miniature wax figures representing the main protagonists of Richardson’s novel. (When the second volume came out, the exhibit was expanded accordingly.) In addition, Pamela was available as a masquerade costume (see Keymer and Sabor 143–176).

As David A. Brewer says, readers imagined characters' lives as extending off-page in ways which suggested their fundamental independence and detachability, and their capacity to migrate into the lives of readers themselves. The characters in broadly successful texts were treated as if they were a common property of all. (Brewer 78) Apart from Pamela, Gulliver of *Gulliver's Travels*, Polly and McHeath of *The Beggar's Opera* and, for instance, Tristram Shandy also lived through an explosion of off-page adventures and materialised in various literary commodities. Such spin-offs in my view form one of the staples of Darnton's external history of novel reading.

I believe this strong material dimension of reading had at the time a very important function, which could be described as externalisation or socialisation of reading. For in 18th-century England, in a time when dominant forms of leisure and pleasure, such as theatre, balls, concerts, promenades, sports and coffee houses, were still collective and public, novel reading was one among the rare leisure practices that were confined to the individual's privacy. Becoming increasingly popular, it therefore needed an echo in the communal public practices in order to be recognised and to establish itself as an equal form of entertainment. Materialising in character visualisation, spin-offs etc., these echoes of reading thus originated in the need to share a unique and intimate experience.

This externalisation of the intimate act of reading, resulting in material evidence, was of great importance and formed a vital part of the social establishment of reading.

Contemporary issues: the discourse *around* the book

In the end, I will look at the concept of externalisation (of reading) and the related notion of the materiality of reading from the perspective of the present.

Today we are surrounded by a wide range of reading sociabilities – festivals and events, prizes and awards, and literary spin-offs of all sorts. All this, however, does not seem to have necessarily much to do with the actual reading of books as a solitary endeavour, which originally triggered these external sociabilities. On the contrary, it seems that the 'circus' around books is no longer centred on reading itself – this is perhaps best seen in the proliferation of what I call the discourse *around*, rather than *about*, books.

My point is that while you can only talk *about* a book you have read, you can only talk *around* a book you have not read. A common and easy

solution for talking *around* a book is to lead the conversation away from the text to anything external, albeit relationally contextual. The fact that we have recently witnessed a success of a book about *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read* by Pierre Bayard (see Bayard) and another one entitled *How to Really Talk About Books You Haven't Read* by Henry Hitchings (see Hitchings) says a lot about the rise of the discourse *around* the book. Even an occasional reader of contemporary newspapers could notice that the so-called literary sections are increasingly including extra-literary topics, such as (in *The Guardian*) writers' rooms or authors' working rituals and their writing equipment, that often do not have much to do with literature.⁸ One of the staple elements of the discourse around books refers to the materiality of reading – a field which is becoming more and more exploited and which encompasses everything from book paraphernalia and so-called book gadgets (such as special reading lamps,⁹ stands, shelves and bookmarks) to 'literary merchandise'.¹⁰

I do believe that in our time, when book narratives are extremely common, references to the actual content of books are actually becoming less frequent. Instead, what is most successfully providing a common ground for book comments are extra-literary references that pertain either to the author's life or to the circumstances of a writing process and the like. In short, the book talk addresses the extensions of books and reading into more generally familiar spheres, because the contents are less and less something that can be shared as common knowledge.¹¹ The trend is most evident in a rapid proliferation of books about reading (and not-reading), which are also increasingly articulating the physical experience of reading and the material practices of handling books – as if stressing their (re)discovered materiality.¹² This is, I believe, deeply symptomatic of the present time of the announced dematerialisation of the book, the coming era of e-reading and of the changing materiality of book culture as we know it. Apart from that, a stream of book-focused art-projects and reading/writing related performances reflects the changing forms of the book itself and at once tries to embody (and thereby comment on) new ways of reading and of dealing with books.¹³

To conclude: in the 18th century, novels were 'acted out' in various ways. But while this can be explained by the changing nature of leisure and the spread of private silent novel reading, the current situation is in many ways reversed. Reading books seems to be less and less the prerequisite for talking about them. The abundant material embodiment of reading and the around-the-book-talk seem to suffice, as if replacing the primary referent of reading itself.

NOTES

¹ This essay merely touches upon various dimensions or various ways in which we may think about the material, non-literary aspects of novel reading, and it should be taken as a sort of introductory panoramic overview of the subject.

² This certainly did not apply to all women, but it held true for most of those who could afford to read books, i.e., the gentry and the upper middle class. The middle class was also the one most affected by the industrial revolution, since the wives of the poor had to remain working, while those belonging to the aristocracy never worked in the first place.

³ For a detailed account of the social context, see Vogrinčič, *Družabno*.

⁴ For a more detailed general description of the early English novel, see Hunter.

⁵ That it was sold together with everyday commodities – even with grocery – is telling in itself. An ad for, e.g., Bedford's circulating library from 1817 also advertised lemon pickle and soaps. Also, it was novels that paved the success of circulating libraries which lent books for money.

⁶ A piece published in *The Critical Review* (October 1765, no. xx) can be cited as a typical complaint: 'From the usual strain of these compositions, one would be apt to conclude that love is not only the principal, but almost the sole passion that actuates the human heart. The youth of both sexes are thereby rendered liable to the grossest illusions. They fondly imagine that every thing must yield to the irresistible influence of all conquering love: but upon mixing with the world, they find, to their cost, that they have been miserably deceived; that they have viewed human nature through a false medium.' (See Taylor 66)

⁷ See, e.g., A. Baudouin's *La Lectrice* and *Le Midi*, both c. 1760, as well as J.-B. Greuze's *Lady Reading the Letter of Eloïze and Abelard*, c. 1780 (<http://www.english.ucsb.edu/faculty/warner/courses/w00/engl30/StagingReaders.ecf.8.99.htm> [31 July 2011]).

⁸ See, e.g. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/series/writersrooms> (31 July 2011).

⁹ See, e.g. <http://www.wired.com/gadgetlab/2009/07/reading-lamp-holds-books-shuts-itself-off/> (31 July 2011).

¹⁰ Patricia Ard (36) explores the connection between the decline of reading and the increased material culture spawned by literature, and argues that 'the reading experience has been miniaturised and commodified for buyers'.

¹¹ The shift of (media) focus from the actual work to its author has been observed decades ago (see a comparative survey of literary pages of quality and tabloid newspapers between 1960 and 2000 in twelve European countries [Vogrinčič, 'Literary']). But while this change could be attributed to the tabloidisation of cultural pages, the reasons for the changed discourse on books should be looked for elsewhere.

¹² Apart from Bayard and Hitchings, one should mention at least Fadiman's *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader* (2000), Nelson's *So Many Books, So Little Time* (2003), Manguel's *Reading Diary* (2004), Corrigan's *Leave Me Alone, I'm Reading* (2005), van Doren's *Joy of Reading* (2008), Hill's *Howards End is on the Landing. A Year of Reading from Home* (2009) and Sutherland's *How to Read a Novel. A User's Guide* (2006).

¹³ See, e.g., Fleur Thio's 2009 *Hasty Book* (Vogrinčič, 'K tematski' 9), Cara Barer's book photographs (<http://www.carabarar.com/> [31 July 2011]) or Brian Dettmer's extraordinary book sculpture (http://www.futureofthebook.org/blog/archives/2009/03/extraordinary_book_sculpture.html, 2009 [31 July 2011]).

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