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 censuring 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, teacups 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 Eloize 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 photographies (http://www.carabarer.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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