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Research Article

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Reading and Our Life Stories

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Abstract: This article addresses the topic of reading in the course of life. Its point of departure is the oral-history research carried out between 2009 and 2015 among 138 narrators (informants, respondents, interviewees) across the Czech Republic. The author presents its background, parameters as well as one of its general achievements—four moments of initiations on an axis of our reading life. The first of these takes the form of sociability (being accepted); the second—autonomy (mastering the skill); the third—maturity (being independent), the fourth—reflection (mirroring). What follows from this is the finding that reading undergoes continual development, whether a long continuity or a meandering chain of partial discontinuities. Thus, our oral history-based research shows that being open to the lifetime span provides us with a specific sensitivity towards reading, stressing mainly the fact of its being rooted in particular time-conditioned, life-motivated and purposive situations.

Keywords: reading, time aspects, life stories, initiations

The study deals with an oral history project that has yielded (i) many findings of a very personal nature (each life story is a world of its own), spanning the years from the 1930s to 2015, (ii) findings of more than an individual nature, i.e. shared (generation experiences, key phenomena of the Czech reading culture) and also (iii) those which might be called general. In this paper, I am focusing on both the whole project (its design) and on what might seem to be its general achievement—the reading life story as a series of four initiations. Before doing so, two general issues should be taken into account, namely reading in its social nature and temporality, mainly in terms of its lifetime structure.

The oral history project represents a second line of the long-term research called "Reading and Readers in the Czech Republic." Before our oral history-based project we carried out three extensive statistical representative readership surveys (2007, 2010, 2013), organised by the National Library of the Czech Republic and the Institute of Czech Literature—Czech Academy of Sciences (see Trávníček). Although these data are inclusive and macroscopic, they provide a reliable and useful picture of the whole Czech reading population with all its main socio-demographic traits. In other words, the macroscopic survey data were used as background knowledge enabling us to know where the highs and lows of the Czech reading population are, how this population is structured as a whole (compared to other countries), where barriers lay between readers and non-readers, who the leaders of the reading culture are. These data gave us a clear picture of how reading develops within the life cycle.

Reading

Reading (as a basic literacy skill, cultural power and habitus) consists of manifold tasks and fulfils various purposes (see Alexander 260-263; Briggs and Burke 50-54; Johnson 3-16; *Lesen in Deutschland 2008* 52-56; Lesňák 85-86; Mangen and van der Weel 116-118; Mann and Burgoyne 68; Rosenthal xiv-xv; Seidenberg 12-13; Sheldrick Ross et al. 5; Siekierski 16-17). Its field is socially broad and culturally multifaceted and can

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be dichotomized by different perspectives: deterministic (I must) vs. free (I can), pragmatic vs enthusiastic, naive vs critical, narrow vs wide, autotelic vs instrumental, intensive vs extensive, quick vs slow, elitist vs mass, accidental vs motivated, male vs female, child vs adult, aloud vs silent, private (personal) vs social (supra-personal). The last dichotomy is of especially crucial importance; however, this dichotomy could be seen on closer inspection as a bit misguided. In other words, there is no such thing as a purely private or intrinsic reading.

As Molly Abel Travis states, "readers never escape a social context; they are both constructed and constructing in that they read as part of interpretative communities and are involved in collective cultural imagining and reimaging" (6). Or, as Martyn Lyons reminds us, "the process [of reading] is not wholly individual and random but relies on broader social and cultural conditioning factors" (5). According to Elisabeth Long, it is impossible to isolate the process of reading from what resides outside personal experience. In other words, there is no true "inside" in the sense of something individual, intrinsic, purely psychological (Long 1-30). Does this mean that there is no reading solitude? Of course, there is, but only technically—in how reading is practised.

Socially and culturally, there is no room for reading solitude, not only because in our decisions we are interwoven in the dense web of other people's decisions, reactions and opinions but also because "the notion of the private and solitary reader is itself a social construction, and belongs to an ideology that privileges and romanticizes the creativity of the lone and isolated actor (writer or reader)" (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 33). Reading is a means by which people maintain relationships with their social environment. So, refusing to read is also a kind of social relationship. In addition to these more or less theoretical parameters, one more must be mentioned—historical. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, Western individuals were sentenced to reading, locked up in the "cultural prison-house" without any chance of escape. The reason is that reading ceased, at that moment, to be the affair of a minority and affected a majority of the population (see Schön). What was taken as a cultural advantage became a necessity spreading out across the whole population.

Lifetime Structure

So, reading could be called peopled solitude, social intimacy or—as Lauren Berlant writes—the "intimate public sphere" (qtd. in Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 33). Seen from another point of view, reading is an activity which is subject to some unavoidable conditions; if these are not fulfilled, reading cannot happen. What is required is reading material (*what*) and time for this material to have a chance to be experienced (*when*). Is that enough? No, what we also need is a link between the reading material and the time—motivation (*why*). Only this aspect turns reading into a cultural activity. It changes it from a technical discipline into a social event that integrates us into a web with other people. In addition, motivation also puts reading into an axiological space—as a choice among some possibilities—forcing us to take an appropriate decision. To put it another way: "Even the decision not to read—rejecting reading as a value—is itself a value-based choice" (Socha 102).

Let us now turn our attention to the dimension of time. It represents a wide spectrum of aspects on two axes (i) quantity and (ii) time-span. The first of these is marked out by such components as "how long?" "how much?" "how often?"; the second by "within a day," "within a week," "within a month," "within a year," "within a lifetime," "within a historical period," "within history." Only the two last aspects cannot be covered entirely by individual testimonies; the rest lies within reach of personal experience.

So, reading is a time-dependent, time-driven, time-conditioned, time-organised, time-consuming practice: Ian Collinson calls readers "time bandits," meaning that they "have to negotiate, purchase or steal, the time and space in which to read" (55). Our time spent reading may be long, short, compact, fragmented, fluid, interrupted, free, under pressure etc.

Reading Life Stories (Readers' Biographies)

The project is particularly focused on time-spans of individual lives. Speaking about the reading we do throughout our individual life is closely connected with the question of how our reading is present in our memory, i.e. in what form we recall it. The answer is relatively simple: reading is stored in our memory not as a set of facts but rather as a series of experiences. All these experiences are, by their very nature, beyond the reach of a statistical questionnaire, and also beyond the reach of a strictly prescribed interview with questions or themes specified in advance. The reason is that these experiences are often not accessible by means of the get-it-get-out method, being hidden in time-conditioned circumstances. The best way of eliciting this information, it seems to us, is a narrative interview which has defined in advance some unavoidable points or themes but, at the same time, allows enough room to adjust to a variety of life courses. In other words, this method of interviewing must be both limited and open. It must be limited in order to allow comparability within the whole base of narrators, and simultaneously opened in order to be able to follow an individual and thus irregular details. What is more, the method of narrative interview brings the temporal development of the person's reading experiences to the fore. This opportunity to present events as ordered or connected in time is very liberating for the speaker (narrator). This could be called the when-effect: "when I was about fourteen, I read...," "This title was very important for me when I moved from my village to Brno...," "after my grammar school, when I began to attend the public library, I first came across Remarque's books...." In short, this effect—in contrast to a focused interview—opens things up, giving access to our experiences by shedding light on their circumstances.

The point of departure of the project is the oral history-based fieldwork carried out between 2009 and 2016. In this time span, 138 narrative interviews across the Czech population were recorded and transcribed (in 67 locations across the Czech Republic; from a wide range of professions; aged 15 years and older; between 30 and 200 minutes long, as far as the recording time is concerned). The narrators were recruited by means of snowball sampling. What we tried to avoid was close relationships between narrators and narratees (family members, relatives, friends, colleagues). We also tried to eliminate recruiting more narrators from one family nest (relationships parents-children, grandparents-grandchildren, siblings).

As for the narrative interview, it is a qualitative (as opposed to quantitative) or ethnographic method. The main advantage of this method consists in the fact that "ethnography is a sensitising research method because it forces researchers to meet their others, and as researchers come to face-to-face with their others, so they also come face-to-face with the ethics of cultural research" (Collinson 15; see also Nightingale 64 and Balling 44). Thus, the ethnographic method keeps our academic "interpretations sensitive to concrete specificities, to history" (Ang 110). What does it mean for our research team in particular? It means mainly openness to various attitudes to reading as well as to different life trajectories. In other words, trying to find an operative middle between what was prescribed by the structure for all interviews and what cannot be foreseen in advance.

When it comes to the design of the interviews, they were consistently but not dogmatically organized from the point of view of reading (reading experiences) and conducted by beginning with the narrator's family background, going on to their preschool life, early, late and post-school age and gathering together all utterances concerning the subject's reading: hearing their parents reading aloud to them, the first experience with a book or other reading matter, the first book they read, moving on to books for adults, compulsory reading, reading guidelines by parents and other people, banned books, library attendance, the influence of other mass media activities on the narrator's reading. The last section of the interviews was devoted to personal reading habits and rituals. To avoid misunderstandings, all the narrators were assured at the start that what we were looking for were not avid or professional readers but common readers, that is readers of all possible kinds and approaches to reading (see also Doležalová 504-505; Chymkowski; Graf; Hurrelmann et al.; Lyons and Taksa; Sheldrick Ross et al. 56-60).

The main criteria of these interviews were two: firstly, anonymity and secondly the nature of the narrative (life story), stressing the importance not only of *what* is described but also *when* (in which part of the life-cycle) this *what* occurred. The aim was to trace the reading life stories of particular narrators up to the time of recording. It should be underlined that prior to recording, the narrators were informed about what our interview would cover and what its purpose was.

In the phase of interpretation, the whole of the material was organised according to three lines of enquiry: generations, key phenomena and testimonies. The first of these creates a portrait of four generations (named after the mass medium which began to play the chief role in their youth): the radio generation (65+ years), the TV generation (45-64 years), the computer generation (25-44 years), and the internet generation (15-24 years). The second criterion. key phenomena, looks at the crucial themes of contemporary Czech reading culture, as they have emerged as some points of intersection in narrators' testimonies (for example Betty MacDonald's books, *Granny* by Božena Němcová, *The Good Soldier* Švejk by Jaroslav Hašek, reading apostasy, home libraries, public libraries, prohibitions, mystery, re-reading, Pottermania, reading places, being overwhelmed by so many titles, compulsory reading). The third criterion, testimonies, focuses on eight personal reading life stories (as a sample of the whole base), by means of which one can see a range of attitudes to reading. These life stories were selected as examples of specific types of readership—for example, a person who is fully illiterate; a person coping with dyslexia; a woman curing her psychological problems by reading, which becomes a kind of obsession; a young student who does not have enough patience to read a book to the end, a man raised in the tradition of the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938) and considering books to be a path to his personal improvement.

Reading Life as a Chain of Four Initiations

Reading is neither an inherited process nor a natural process or—as Maryanne Wolf asserts— "with this invention, we rearranged the very organisation of our brain" (3). In other words, we are not born as readers; we become readers—reading must be learned. In addition to that, reading is, as stated earlier, a time-dependent and time-driven activity in many aspects. Having said this, reading seems to be by its very nature a process of successively mastering skills and competencies. This process has its own steps, each of which represents a new form of something different from what has been reached before. However, these steps are not of a purely technical nature. Testimonies of our narrators let us know that instead of steps, what we have to do with here are some threshold experiences. Not only does something new appear here, but we are elevated to (initiated into) a higher dimension of our reading life. One can be surprised by realising that there is not just one clear line between not-being a reader and being a reader, as it is taken for granted. Speaking in terms of our lifetime stories, there are several lines—four bridges to new challenges.

The first initiation—sociability (being accepted). This occurs at the time before we can read and is tied to the first things that we can remember about reading and books. At this stage, reading needs a mediator, i.e. we are dependent on others, who seem to us to own the key to the secret, "locked-up" world of letters. Reading in the form of other people reading aloud creates social bonds, a feeling of safety or being accepted; an infant associates it "with a sense of being loved" (Wolf 82). This is an important cultural investment in what will come next because it presents reading at the beginning of the person's life as something obvious and "domestic." Some narrators remember this childhood experience as a major gift bestowed on them, as a unique and irreplaceable intimacy or as a sort of ritual: "I had a very kind grandfather who lived about a half of kilometre from us in the same village. We went to him, and grandfather read aloud to us. My brother was two years younger, so I led him there, and my grandfather took a book and started reading" (man, a policeman, 44 years). Being read to does not entirely disappear after the preschool stage of life but its role step-by-step diminishes.

The second initiation—autonomy (mastering the skill). This is a step into reading as such, i.e. reading as a technical or cognitive acquisition. This has to do with the time of starting school (ca six years), though in some cases the narrators were able to read, at least partly, before they started school, in many cases thanks to older siblings. The major event within this initiation is the first experience of reading a whole book

which represents a sort of rite of passage into the state of being an independent reader. However technically mastered in full extent, autonomous reading is still mentally and cognitively demanding at this age. It takes up to ca 13 years before autonomous reading and reading aloud present the same levels of mental demands. Being closely linked to the school, this initiation is sometimes remembered as a kind of torture or at least something not very pleasant: "Calling on us to read in school and reading out loud up to the third grade was not pleasant for me; and even now I have a problem when I have to read aloud, so I do not quite like it" (woman, a university student, 26 years).

The third initiation—maturity (becoming independent). At ca. 13-19 years the individual moves on to adult reading, that is putting childhood books aside and looking for new reading adventures. These adventures are marked out by the need for new material. The narrators often mentioned that what they were looking for was a realistic world which gave them the chance to step into characters' inner lives and identify with conflicts on the basis of their credibility (keyword: realism—but not necessarily in the sense of the artistic movement, rather in the sense of the accordance between reading materials and life experience). Some authors or genres are mentioned here as being perfectly able to fulfil this task: Erich Maria Remarque, John Irving, especially his novel *The World According to Garp*, mysteries, thrillers: "Transition into a higher level? That was my first mystery. I think I was Agatha Christie. I know it was an interesting, completely different world" (woman, a university student, 19 years). It is worth mentioning fantasy here because it represents the main phenomenon that is popular with this age group (13-19 years). Depending on its specific kind, fantasy is seen as a step into a realistic world (sexuality, believable motivation of the characters' actions) which to some extent is presented under a fairy-tale cover. From the opposite point of view, it is seen as a sort of fairy tale which is less naive than the traditional material from early childhood. This initiation is sometimes invisible, and just happened without being taken into consideration: "I went to this stuff without any problems. I do not recognise any break" (woman, a clerk at the post office, 58 years).

The fourth initiation—reflection (receiving feedback). Reading aloud to children. This means that the circle is thus completed. This initiation enables us, for the first time, to look back and thus to see reading from the opposite perspective. In other words, as it becomes a way of forming others or educating them, reading ceases to be our own private "mission" and is aimed at others. As a result of this, this initiation is a good way of acquiring information about our children's preferences, tastes, dislikes, reading fashions of their generation. As a result, it is also often a source of generation gap-based tensions and misunderstandings: "why don't my kids read what I did?" "how is it possible that they can read such trash?" "simply, a lost generation!," "I read at their age much more and decidedly a better stuff." There were some narrators who considered these initiations to be a sort of display of pity about what they had lacked in their own childhood: "When we had children, we read aloud to them because I thought we were going to catch up with what we had missed" (man, a technician, 53 years).

The ladder-like trajectory of the four initiations proves that what we deal with here is not only a chain consisting of four parts but also a certain continuity in which the previous stage prepares readers for the next one. Thus, those who were not read to in their childhood bring a deficit into the next stage. Those who have not sufficiently mastered reading technically and cognitively, have no pleasure in becoming independent readers, searching for their own reading stuff. What follows from this is both an interconnection of the whole reading-life and the fact that the most important thing is what comes as the first: family background, reading aloud, reading as creating a natural intimacy between parents (adults) and children.

Conclusions

The lifetime aspect of our reading is far from being something marginal. As readers, we are defined or structured, by our *whens*, i.e. by concrete time situations in which (or rather thanks to which) our reading is realised. Reading takes the form of development, be that one extended continuity or a meandering chain of partial discontinuities. One aspect of this development is that it is a succession of initiations. Each of these initiations lays within its own expectations coping with its specific challenges and tasks. Mastering each initiation makes an entrance into a new level of the reading life, i.e. stepping on a higher level of

reading completeness. To put it in a negative way, not mastering a specific initiation makes us, as readers, incomplete.

It must also be underlined that the four initiations are not only steps but genuine initiations, because the fulfilment of one stage enables the subject to step into a higher stage. Thus, the reading life story is, among other things, a ladder-like trajectory. At the same time, this ladder-like trajectory represents a completion of the circle where the first initiation is the last one; however, from the opposite point of view.

When it comes to some meta-critical reflection on the research process, sometimes it was hard to explain to our narrators what our project was about: they felt to some extent lost in the research intentions. However, in most cases, our narrators were pleased having an opportunity to speak about books and reading, which applied also to those of them who are not devoted or regular readers. The greatest reticence from the narrators appeared at the beginning of recording; the more the conversation progressed, the more the narrators (especially women) felt relaxed. There were also cases where reading released traumatic life experiences having to do with serious illnesses, deaths of close people etc. For these people, narrating reading life stories became a sort of personal therapy.

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