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De-Centering the History of Reading. The Perspective of the Czech Lands, 1750–2021

“Reading remains the most difficult stage to study in the circuit followed by books” noted Robert Darnton in his seminal essay on the history of books (1982, 74). This project, funded by GAČR (2022–2024), draws on long-lasting research in the “book communication circuit” conducted at the *Institute of Czech Literature - Department for Research into Literary Culture* in order to take this challenge even further. We will ask what are the distinctive features of the history of reading, and literary communication in particular, in the geopolitical area of the Czech Lands from 1750 to 2021. The key aim of the project is threefold: firstly, we intend to test the existing methodological and conceptual tools as developed in “mainstream” historiography of reading, largely based on evidences rooted in Anglo-American and West European contexts (e.g. Cavallo-Chartier 1999, Schneider 2004, Fischer 2005, Lyons 2010, Crone-Towheed 2011 et al.), on the analyses of processes and institutions of reading in the Czech lands and Central Europe in more general terms. Secondly, we want to open up the epistemological potential of thus far largely under-explored data and research traditions of the “other Europe” to the international debates and achieve a displacement, i.e. a de-centeration, of the usual point of view on reading. Thirdly, we intend to enrich the Czech scholarly landscape by stimulating a revival of its tradition in the theory and research of reading and contributing new original research, but also by offering an MA course at Charles University.

We argue that the Czech Lands demonstrate features that have shaped the regional history of reading in a distinctive way. These distinctions include a tradition of authoritarian interventions in and control over reading (i.e. counter-reformation, “enlightened absolutism”, Nazi occupation, state socialism); the heritage of the centralized school system at the level of institutions and practices; the aesthetic doctrine of socialist realism; and limited access to reading matter on the regulated book market. At the same time, there is also the considerable impact of reading counter-practices via the “second circuit” (i.e., hand-copied or smuggled non-Catholic texts, dissident

samizdat) and the search for an alternative “hidden transcript”. Moreover, local reading communities have a distinctive history of multilingualism, along with entangled language-based identities and ethnic conflicts, as well as influential traditions of translation characteristic of small nations.

For the purpose of our project, we define reading as a cultural technique which enables human beings to make use of written or printed texts in order to communicate across local and temporal distances, acquire knowledge, educate and entertain themselves. Further, we adopt R. Chartier’s key concept of reading as appropriation which “involves a social history of the various uses (which are not necessarily interpretations) of discourses and models, brought back to their fundamental social and institutional determinants and lodged in the specific practices that produce them.” (Chartier 1995, 89).

The Department for Research into Literary Culture (VLK)

The Department for Research into Literary Culture deals with literary communication in the Czech lands from the Enlightenment up until the present. The professional interest of its members focuses, first, on the social and economic contexts of literary communication and on the historical transformations of literary institutions (authorship, writing, distribution and reading of texts); and, second, on the study of genres and media of popular culture. From 2009 to 2015, the whole team authored an award-winning synthesis on literary censorship entitled *In the General Interest. Censorship and Social Control of Literature in Modern Czech Culture 1749–2014* (2 vols, Wögerbauer – Píša – Šámal – Janáček et al. 2015). After that, members concentrated on various fields: the topography and prosopography of book culture in Bohemia, 1749–1848 (Claire Madl, Petr Píša, Michael Wögerbauer), on Czech popular fiction in the 1st half of the 20th century (Pavel Janáček, Markéta Holanová, Pavel Kořínek), on multilingual literary life in the First Czechoslovak Republic (Petr Šámal), on Comic Studies (Pavel Kořínek) or continued researching censorship (Petr Píša, Stefan Segi) and on quantitative and qualitative research on contemporary reading and readers in the Czech Republic, ongoing since 2007 (Jiří Trávníček). Nearly all these investigations have, in one way or another, been paving the way to the department’s interest in the historical reader. As members of the international consortium project READ IT (Reading Europe Advanced Data Investigation Tool – <https://readit-project.eu>) they contributed to the development of a digital environment that aims to collect, describe, share and popularize evidence of reading activities from the mid-18th century up to the present.

De-centering the history of reading is, however, neither a plain follow-up to the DH-project READ IT nor to the work on censorship. Despite it being a “national” project, it is VLK’s first one to be mainly aimed at an international public. The main output of the project will be an English-language monograph that aims at the core of the project, i.e. to de-center international research in the history of reading. The evidence is from the Czech Lands, yet it will participate in and contribute to scholarly debates that go beyond this particular location. The monograph will consist of three parts. First, an introduction that will extensively demonstrate the epistemological potential of Central European empirical evidence for the historiography of reading, as we argued above. Second, a set of case studies in four chapters each of which will concentrate on one of the research issues presented above. And third, a critical study of reading research in Central Europe (in the Czech Lands, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary), which is largely unknown in the international context.

Literature

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