New Beginnings in Literary Studies

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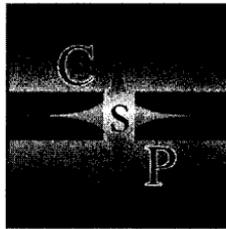
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CHAPTER TWENTY

VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES – REAL READERS: NEW DATA IN EMPIRICAL STUDIES OF LITERATURE

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Abstract

The internet revolution brought about an increased interest in "virtual communities" of different kinds. Empirical studies of literature may benefit from the material produced by groups of literary readers exchanging their experiences via the internet.

Materials bearing on literature found on the internet raise several questions about their validity and general importance for empirical studies. On the other hand, given easy access at relatively low cost and readers' spontaneity, such materials are highly attractive for the study of literary reception.

This chapter discusses some of the methodological aspects of internet research, proposing some solutions based on a pilot study of the Polish book-recommendation system biblioNetka.pl.

Introduction

I would like to start with this short passage taken from a reader's diary found on the internet:

I force myself to finish this page and my organism fights against it. One of the muscles starts to shudder and an intrusive thought appears: 'hey girl, buy yourself some magnesium'. And the other one: 'with vitamin B6'. And another: 'or aspargine'. Nice potassium is not so bad either. However, I remember why do I [sic!] sit here with this book, so I force myself to return to the last sentence I read. My ambition tells me so. But it is not an

ambition of my mind, which is turned off right now. I'm reaching the desired end of the page, realising that I don't have a clue what I have just read.[1]

This naturalistic description of the reading process introduces the core question of this chapter, namely the question of usefulness of this kind of material in the study of literature. What is the research value of such material? In what way, if at all, do this pill popper's confessions contribute to the advancement of our understanding? How should we treat such material? Should we consider such statements valid research material? If so, how should we classify this material? What kind of data treatment should be applied in such a project? Finally, the core question in every research is: why should we do it? Is this material worthy of being examined carefully? In the course of my discussion I will address these questions and propose possible answers. My remarks are based on a pilot study of biblioNETka.pl, a Polish portal dedicated to literature. In the following parts of this article I will give an overview of this research, its methodology and findings. Finally, I will raise the question of the possible usefulness of internet material for empirical investigations.

Virtual Communities

The internet revolution brought about, among other things, people's increased interest in gathering in "virtual communities" of various kinds. Numerous discussion forums, specialised portals, or newsgroups on Usenet, dedicated to various topics (e.g. books, movies, computers, fishing...), attract manifold users interested in a particular subject, in sharing their experience and obtaining some desired information. The idea of analysing material available there originates from marketing research. Nowadays many firms specialised in online monitoring sell their services to companies for vast sums of money (Mącik 2005, 90).

The phenomenon of internet communities can be regarded as something completely new, especially when we focus on the novelty of non-real-time communication (see Wallace 1999). It is possible to log on and take part in a discussion anytime and to have access to previous statements in that particular discussion. Some of these could have been posted several days or months earlier. However, it is the medium that has changed, not the specific relation between people who share the same

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[1] All quotations from the internet sources are taken from the study of an internet portal BiblioNETka.pl, unless indicated otherwise. All passages were translated from Polish by the author.

interests. The new medium gave them new opportunities and tools to establish, maintain and develop this communication. Online discussions can be viewed as an extension of natural face-to-face contact.

In her extensive study of women book-clubs in Houston, Elizabeth Long (2003, 210-213) makes some interesting points regarding differences between real-world groups and the virtual ones. As Long observes, on-line book-clubs tend to gather largely upper class participants, who are more likely to have internet access. Such groups are usually cross-national, within one language group, (e.g. English speakers). On-line book clubs tend to have less clear boundaries, and their moderators bear more responsibility to keep the discussion going. Moreover, such groups concentrate less on analysing and commenting on the interpretations of other users, which in turn can serve as an indicator of higher subjectivity of on-line utterances.

Yet, the medium takes the advantage of an established genre of communication (i.e. discussion on literature) and transforms it according to its own capabilities. In other words, all differences stem from the nature of this medium. As Pietrowicz (2006, 360) points out, every research project run on the internet has to take into account three interlacing contexts: social, technological, and informational. When using the internet as a tool in any research one must bear in mind the specificity of internet discourse.

Having that in mind, we should consider material from biblioNETka.pl as a sort of record of discussions on literature. Around 2,000 users registered on this portal exchange opinions about books they read. Basically, biblioNETka.pl is a book-recommendation system, similar to those run by online bookstores (e.g. Amazon.com), where users are encouraged to express their opinions about a book and recommend it to others. Recommendations of this kind are very influential in business, since readers who are not keen on professional criticism prefer to take advice from ordinary people similar to themselves. Yet, an important question arises, whether encouraging users to create a positive 'word of mouth' – all of the submitted utterances are potential means of advertisement – does not affect reader responses published online. As Elizabeth Long puts it, „Amazon.com encourages readers to comment on books for the company's own commercial purposes". (2003, 206).

Yet, all internet discussion forums and recommendation systems provide a vast amount of data for reader response analysis. Hence, the findings presented in this study – although dedicated to a single internet community – should be considered valid for other online resources of this kind. Amazon.com, as a commercial recommendation system, will serve

as a context for the study, whenever it will be useful to point out some interesting comparisons.

In general, actual readers investigated online are common readers, who read for aesthetic pleasure, or to escape, or to fulfil their individual goals. Eva Maria Scherf (1990, 492) distinguishes three kinds of reception: reception as an action, activity and operation. The last type refers to a research activity, which "is not determined by a sensory cognition motive, but by a scientific cognition motive". This type of reading is subject to institutional norms of literary criticism. Hence, one rarely finds testimonies of such reading in discussion groups of ordinary readers. Moreover, as Long observes, sometimes readers' goal is to submit a personal and by no means 'academic' interpretation (Long 2003, 145-146). What the researcher does encounter is evidence of two other types of reading. Reading as an action is that

> type of reception which is founded on the need for physical and psychological reproduction, in which reception functions as an action which, incorporated to a greater or lesser extent into practical everyday forms of activity, aims to stimulate this activity emotionally, i.e. to dynamize it or to break down particular internal tensions (for example, by laughing). (ibid., 491)

In other words, literature approached in this way serves as an emotional tuning. The third type of reception, reading as an activity, serves different purposes:

> The hierarchically superior motive is the desire to (re)cognise oneself and the world in appropriating a text; what makes this a special kind of activity is the knowledge that such (re)cognition will be accompanied by a highly emotional experience ... the reader/viewer/listener seeks to take from the text whatever s/he can relate as directly as possible to personal practice. (ibid.)

Internet material is therefore a source of highly personal accounts of reading as an action and activity. This kind of reading, as I shall discuss in a minute, requires a specific kind of literature, which will enable readers' self-implication and highly emotional reactions. Therefore, participants in biblioNETka.pl concentrate mostly on realistic prose, which enables immersion into the fictional world. The virtual absence of poetry in their discussions may be caused by a general belief that poetic texts are "difficult" and "incomprehensible".

BiblioNETka.pl, as a non-profit community, not only recommends books but also provides the space for discussions about literary

experiences. Various forums at biblioNETka.pl resemble ordinary discussions about literature one can hear in a book club, in the subway or on the street. Therefore an empirical researcher in the field of literature has the unique opportunity to explore the ordinary behaviour of actual readers. However, the question arises: is it really so simple? Does the internet give researchers a magic tool to explore their field of interest? Let me complicate this picture, by pointing out several problems the researcher should be aware of when working with this material.

Basically, we can divide the internet material into two groups: requested material and "fresh" material. (Mącik 2005 proposes a different terminology calling these categories respectively primary and secondary material. Being confused about which category should be in fact called primary I will use my own terminology). Each of these groups contains different kinds of data, which may serve different research purposes. Requested material generally consists of data submitted in reaction to a researcher's enquiry. This group therefore comprises all surveys distributed online (either via e-mail, or on websites), online focus groups moderated by a researcher, and all other forms of data gathering in which a researcher encourages subjects to express their opinions. A researcher can, therefore, influence the form of the response from the very beginning. In general, this kind of research does not differ much from a standard research procedure (e.g. surveys). The researcher treats the internet as a *tool* for standard data collecting. In the case of "fresh" data, however, the internet serves as a *source* of data. The main difference is that data are not requested but only collected by a researcher. Hence, subjects' opinions are more spontaneous and not biased by a research situation. Fresh material can be found on various internet forums and websites where users express their personal views and react to statements submitted by others.

Disadvantages of the internet material

Typical problems that occur in internet research are closely linked to the specific nature of the medium. First of all, we do not know much about the subjects, who remain largely anonymous on an internet forum. Secondly, internet research is, by definition, narrowed down to a small but constantly growing population of people using the internet and taking part in online discussions. That in turn raises the question whether those groups are representative of the population at large. Thirdly, an online community of any kind influences its members, which affects their individual responses, especially when we take into account the commercial basis of some recommendation systems. Fourthly, internet material is not coherent

-- the researcher has to deal with various types of expression. Finally, the core problem of every qualitative research is this: what if the data collected on the website show a low degree of relevance to the research topic? I will discuss these disadvantages in detail and try to suggest some solutions to avoid them.

Subjects in an internet study are anonymous. All that the researcher obtains is a text signed – if at all – with a nickname. If one deals with registered users it is sometimes possible to see their personal data, edited by users themselves in the form of a short presentation. Needless to say, relevant data from such statements is hard to obtain, and its reliability is questionable. Hence, it is difficult to judge subjects' gender, age, education and social background, to name just a few characteristics one is generally interested in. Lack of such data is the strongest disadvantage of such internet research.

Although the situation is problematic there are still some indicators a researcher may employ in order to deduce something about subjects. This procedure is based on the analysis of language, the only thing the researcher has access to. First of all, in some languages it is easy to tell the gender from the verb form used by a subject. For instance, in most Slavic languages verbs are marked for gender. In Romance languages, adjectives in self-reference are similarly marked for gender. In English there are some indicators to distinguish women's and men's speech. However, these differences are often questionable (Wardaugh 2002, 314-321). Secondly, one can employ Basil Bernstein's (1971) famous distinction betweeen elaborated and restricted code. Although one can question Bernstein's findings, his basic theoretical framework can be useful in employing the complexity or simplicity of language as an indicator of the speaker's social background. However, this could be misleading if we take into account the risk of code-switching in an online environment, i.e. a university student may use colloquial language in online conversations. The same goes for age. One can attempt to judge the maturity of expressed opinions in order to deduce how old – more or less – subjects are. The problem here stems from the difference between life experience and age. One can act as mature even if one is young, and *vice versa.*

Amazon.com presents an interesting solution to the problem of anonymity: every user who decides to go under a real name, i.e. the one used to pay for ordered goods, receives a badge 'REAL NAME' displayed next to reviewer's 'nick'. Although it can serve as a hint for other customers by increasing the author's credibility, it does not provide extra information for the researcher. Knowing that a subject's real name is "John Smith" does not throw much light on his background. However,

commercial systems, such as Amazon.com, provide the researcher with a set of information about the items purchased by a certain user. Detailed analysis of a consumer's profile could provide some data on both the user's economic status and her general taste.

Another complication in internet research is caused by the narrow population that can be examined. Together with the aforementioned complications this disadvantage contributes to the general sampling problem. A researcher cannot choose the population s/he wants to study – the population is already there. Moreover, subjects already have a specific need for online affiliation, which makes them different from people in the general population. This is a problem that may gradually disappear, however, as more and more users register on such forums and websites. Perhaps in a few years' time, the interest in internet communities will grow to such extent that everybody will participate in at least one of them. Until that happens, however, one should be cautious. Yet, studying such communities may still be worthwhile, as they consist of real people discussing real literature from a real perspective in a real manner.

At the same time one must not overlook the impact such communities have on their members. The difference between real-life conversations and online ones is that every member of the community can join the discussion and read what was said before. This situation triggers group conformism – members want to show their close ties with the group. Let me illustrate this phenomenon with a short example from BiblioNETka.pl. The following statements are taken from the autobiographical notes of six users:

> 'My name's Linda, I'm 21 and reading is my passion' / 'Reading is my passion' / 'books are my passion' / 'I've always loved books' / 'Since I was a child, I've always wanted to had a job connected to books' / 'I don't want to write too much...I just LOVE TO READ'

This particular book-lover syndrome shows the importance of indicating that a user belongs to this particular group. It seems that this confession of love serves as a sort of password to the community of other book lovers. Conformism may also affect other forms of expression, since there is no speaking *in vacuo*: speaking always means speaking TO somebody. Therefore the researcher has to be aware of the risk of group conformism in order to avoid stereotypical data.

The next disadvantage I would like to point out is the heterogeneity of the internet material. In the study of biblioNETka.pl I came across a wide range of texts of different length and purpose. The longest form of expression was an elaborated subjective review. This form allows users to

express their general attitude towards a book. Some of them copy the editor's text from the cover. Sometimes, however, readers need only a short quote to describe the book. Another form is a reader's diary – an account of the individual reading processes outlining a reader's expectations, reading experience and conclusions. Sometimes users express their opinions in a more discursive way, posting short comments to statements made by others. The shortest form of evaluation is a mark (from 1 to 6) given to a particular book. If one wants to obtain reliable material, the problem of variety of expressions must not be overlooked. Among the two aforementioned variables – length and purpose – the former is not so important. One can express oneself accurately in just a few words and the researcher can compare it to the content of other longer statements. However, the latter category, namely the purpose of writing the text, may present the researcher with some difficulties in judgment. For instance, the form of a review outlines a more general and 'objective' mode of description, whereas a reader's diary is a purely subjective genre, concentrated on the reader's private experience. Hence, different forms of internet expressions may be incomparable.

At Amazon.com users can rate a book or provide a comment called "a Customer Review". Quite similarly, comments are either highly personal and subjective ("I really wanted to like this novel. I paid about $20 for it"; "Eeek! I love this book soooo much! It's splendidly artistic...")[2], or based on professional literary criticism ("*House of Leaves* is probably this century's - or the past one's - *Moby Dick*."; "*House of Leaves* is the very definition of post-modern."). Yet, we can also obtain such information as "Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought...", or "What Do Customers Ultimately Buy After Viewing Items Like This?" Although the material found in both commercial and non-profit recommendation systems may be similar in content, one should be aware of the differences in functions of this material. Whereas material from BiblioNETka.pl could be conceived expressive (readers want to share their observations), utterances at Amazon.com serve the function of impressing (the company concentrates not on the users who submit the comments but rather on those who browse them). Hence, all that we see at Amazon.com depends highly on ·an algorithm, which aims at presenting the user with a highly personalised content, one s/he is likely to appreciate.

Finally, data collected from the internet can be totally irrelevant to the research topic, especially when the research question is narrowly

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[2] Comments presented here are taken from various Customer Reviews of: Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, at Amazon.com.

formulated. For instance, if we want to find out how readers react to suspense in crime fiction, it may turn out that they do not write about it or simply that they do not read such fiction. The problem with relevance is also caused by something one could call the I-have-an-exam-tomorrow syndrome: users often share their personal experience, their life problems, anxieties, or wishes instead of writing about books. The readers' community is often treated as a group of supportive friends. Therefore, researchers have to design methods that enable them to ensure the relevance of their data. That means that the method ought to be highly qualitative and the research questions carefully formulated in order to meet the specific criteria of the medium.

Some researchers tend to emphasise the ephemeral character of internet material, claiming that webmasters are free to delete users' entries at any time (see Mącik 2005, 93). Although the risk of losing data is always real, one should not overplay its significance, since all data can be retrieved from the web in the preliminary phase of the study and safely stored on the researcher's PC.

The list of disadvantages of the internet material is long and it is not always possible to avoid these problems. I would nevertheless claim that the internet is a promising medium to study people's reactions to literature. It is an unobtrusive way to observe literary reception *in actu*. So let us look in somewhat more detail at the benefits of an online research.

Advantages of internet material

The main advantage of online research is the availability of material. One does not need to organise large groups of surveyors, nor does one have to look for subjects. Data are already there, on the web, waiting for the researcher to download and analyse them. What is more, the online material is produced without the researcher's influence. Hence, the material can be considered spontaneous. Finally, the heterogeneity of this material allows researchers to find out more than they expected.

Easy access to data allows researchers to run the study at any convenient moment. What is more, materials obtained in that way are ready for analysis. For instance, a researcher does not have to transcribe any recordings or decode his survey. If one applies content analysis software (e.g. PROTAN, TextSTAT), the first results can be obtained within minutes after the material is collected. Online research can be also repeated at certain intervals to trace trends. Finally, online research is extremely cheap, which enables researchers to carry on their studies with limited funding.

An obvious advantage of materials collected this way is that a researcher does not influence them in any way. Readers respond to texts in their own way, having as much time as they need. Moreover, readers share their opinions with others only when they really want to say something about the text they have read. For the researcher that is a guarantee that their responses are genuine and not provoked by a request, as it may be the case in a reading experiment. Furthermore, any bias introduced by an experimental situation is eliminated, since subjects read texts in their favourite environment (on a couch, on the train, in a café...). Online research thus enables us to eavesdrop on readers' real experience, expressed in their own terms.

The list of disadvantages seems to be rather longer. However, in my opinion, it is an indication of the method's limits, but does not prove that it is useless.

It is important to explain in detail the approach taken in the research presented here. Shaun Moores claims that ethnography of audiences "attends to the media's multiple significances in varied contexts of reception as opposed to focusing on quantification through measurement" (Moores 1993, 3). He defines it as a "method for investigating a social world of actual audiences" (ibid., 5). The aim of this kind of research is to measure "the extent to which media messages influence the thoughts and actions of their receivers" (ibid., 5). Therefore, a media ethnographer explores the context in which the meaning-making process takes place.

That is because online research does not allow us to measure a complete individual response to certain texts: however, we can say something about different styles of reading, different strategies of dealing with literature, and about the connection between life and literature. In order to show the kind of information that can thus be gathered, I will now present a pilot research project, which I ran on the users of biblioNETka.pl.

Study of biblioNETka.pl

What follows is a list of topics that emerged in the course of the project. Through these observations we can learn more about users of an internet portal and recognise the possibilities for further internet research on literary responses.

My initial goal was to test the role that literature plays in readers' lives and to give an account of their literary experience. Therefore I chose to work on readers' diaries. In order to obtain more information about the subjects, I also examined their autobiographical statements and their

responses to other users' comments.

I developed a sampling frame of 222 users who (1) submitted at least one reader's diary and (2) presented an autobiographical statement. I analysed every tenth user starting from number 1 (1, 11, 21...), then a second sample beginning from number 5 (15, 25, 35...). If a user did not meet the criteria (for instance, if the autobiographical statement was removed) I substituted him or her with the next user on the list. After the second run I considered the sample sufficiently large, since the same content started to repeat itself.

The sample consisted of 45 readers. For obvious reasons it is hard to give a detailed description of this group. Their age ranged from teenagers (attending secondary school) to adults (40-50). The gender distribution was unequal and it reflected the general structure of biblioNETka.pl users: 36 females (80%) and 9 males (20%). It is a rather common proportion, given the findings of Elizabeth Long's study on Houston book-clubs, 64% of which are female-only, 33% are mixed, and only 3% are exclusively male (Long 2003: xiii).

It should be noted that males tend to concentrate on non-fiction books, e.g. on philosophy or history. Women usually wrote shorter diaries but were very open to interaction (long discussions, invitations, comments). The average number of readers' diary entries per user varied from one to a dozen or so. The average was 3-4 entries per user. Although the material varied in length, even a single entry could be significant and contribute to the analysis.

In order to examine the material collected, I designed a double-phased procedure. In the first phase, I traced all statements that could fit into general categories, namely:

(1)   what is literature?
(2)   what role does it play in a reader's life?
(3)   reading as an everyday activity;
(4)   fiction's effect on reality.

In the second phase I applied an inductive technique of creating patterns out of data collected in the first phase. I applied content analysis to both phases.

The strategy was aimed at describing the role of literature among common readers in their own terms. I am referring here to Clifford Geertz's concept of the 'local knowledge', through which people organise the world (Geertz 1984). Analysis of categories subjects use themselves describing their experience, leads us to an understanding of reader

behaviour. Therefore, what I wanted to know was a secondary goal. The primary aim was to test what readers really want to say about their experience. I put the results into four larger categories, concerning:

    (1)   pre-reading strategies,
    (2)   reading strategies,
    (3)   attitudes towards literature,
    (4)   literature and reality.

I will discuss each of these consecutively.

(1) **Pre-reading strategies** are employed in the process of choosing a particular book at a particular moment. This choice is affected by several factors. First of all, it depends largely on the temporal context. There is a special time for reading, which can be called a sort of 'internal holidays'. There are books better suited for certain periods than others. For instance, one reader observes: "Christmas is approaching, it's time to read something in Christmas mood". Readers often switch books – they start a new one having not finished the one they were reading, or they reread some books they liked before. It can depend on readers' shifting or multi-faceted practical interests, often combined with impatience, as in the case of this reader who sighs: "I would like to have all those books at last, or at least some of them, and read them, preferably all at once. I've already started the sixth book, and I'm unable to finish any of them. I hate to wait". The choice also depends on the book's availability: readers search for books in bookstores, libraries and on the internet (in that order).

Readers ascribe certain values to particular books. These categories facilitate the choice of a book, guiding readers through the decision-making process. Drawing on the study, I distinguished the following oppositions: (a) easy reading – serious reading, (b) immersive – non-immersive book, (c) required reading – reading for pleasure, (d) portable literature – stationary literature. Let me discuss those categories in brief.

(a) By serious literature readers often mean classical readings, which are conceived as must-reads in a particular culture. Serious books are described as deep, ambitious, requiring more attention and ... thick. On the other hand, easy readings are more accessible, but generate a specific feeling of guilt, expressed in such terms as: "I should start to read something more ambitious". This ambivalence marks a difference between social and individual aspects of reading, between that what we *should* read and, what we *want* to read.

(b) The next opposition is closely linked to the aforementioned time management: there is time for reading and time for other activities. The best description is provided by a reader who hesitates whether she should start to read a certain book: "I know that if I start to read it, I wouldn't put it aside until I finish it. I have to find something I could put aside easily, however, not without any regret".

(c) Required readings are considered negatively with no exceptions. One reader complains: "It's no surprise that I won't be able to read a nice book during the holidays, cause my teacher decided otherwise". What is interesting, however, is that a new, non-compulsory encounter with a text previously read as required, leads to differences in response. This is the case of the reader whose attitude towards a certain author changed when she started to read his books for pleasure. Readers highly value freedom of choice which enables them to adjust reading choices to their actual needs.

(d) Reading can be either autotelic, or serve as a time-killer, e.g. on a journey or in a waiting room. One reader points out that the ideal books to read in public transportation are "divided into small chapters, so you can easily stop reading and resume it later on". He finds texts with long chapters definitely impractical.

If we take a closer look at the act of choosing a book, it becomes apparent that the act of reading is strongly connected to readers' everyday context. Books accompany readers in everyday life, corresponding to their needs and expectations drawn from the 'real' world of everyday life. It is readers' practical interest in the world that guides them in the process of book selection. This notion becomes stronger when we proceed to reading strategies.

(2) **Reading strategies.** The very act of reading is being described by readers as an activity which has physical, temporal and social dimensions. This chapter's opening quotation presented a sample of how literature is treated as a deeply physical process. There are also other physical activities undertaken in the course of reading, like for instance: underlining, marking, making notes or an index of protagonists (who has not done that while reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude*?). All these actions help the reader understand the fictional world.

Temporality is also very important in presenting the reading process as an activity. A book can be read at one sitting or in intervals, quickly or slowly. The reading time also tells readers something about the book they read: "I read a book of less than 300 pages in 2 weeks", one reader observes, "whereas usually it takes me 2 days. Isn't that weird?"

Reading also plays a role in social relations. Sharing striking or witty quotes with others (e.g. with one's family sitting in the same room)

changes the highly individual process of reading into a social interaction. Some readers tend to use passages from their favourite books when they want to say something nice to somebody: "I love to share [the quotes with others], especially the 'gigglegenic' ones. Yet, I giggle a bit, and then I am walking round the house trying to convert them to literature. Unfortunately, they're really resistant ;-))".

Another aspect of the reading process is the role literature plays in readers' lives. For many readers literature serves as an escape from reality. This can be illustrated by the example of an unemployed teacher sharing her opinion about a book in which the protagonist teaches everybody how to look at the bright side of life. "I know it seems unreal," the reader writes, "but one can dream at least". Readers compare their life experience to events depicted in the book they read. They do not search for answers and ready recipes to solve everyday problems but rather concentrate on topics relevant to their situation (e.g. love, aging) and try to find something for themselves. Literature becomes a kind of impulse provoking self-reflection, enabling readers to reconsider their perception of problem-situations they are facing.

(3) **Attitudes towards literature.** The common understanding of the word "literature" seems to confirm this presumption. In general, readers consider literature as a description of life. Hence, they trace a writer's mistakes and improbable events, which make them disbelieve that the picture painted in the story is accurate. "Why almost every book has a happy ending", one of the readers asks, "Why, despite the joy, pain and suffering they describe, 98% of them has a happy end? Why do those books which describe such real life experiences have nothing to do with reality?"

What sets literature apart from non-fiction is the emotional aspect of reading. Readers not only observe the fictional world but also experience emotions. Some users express their negative feelings towards books that have not moved them. By contrast, they prefer books which provide food for thought. One reader wrote: "I love this book. I grab it very often cause it helps me a lot. It teaches life, teaches how to love, how to forgive ... how to cherish hope".   Concluding then, literature is commonly understood as a picture of reality, which moves readers and provokes reflections. "There are no exclamation marks in Kafka", a reader points out, "exclamation marks appear in readers". The role of fictional worlds is a very specific topic that needs to be addressed.

The very first thing to be mentioned is the way readers enter the fictional world. Subjects in my study preferred texts that were well-written; in the present context this meant texts one could read fast, being

overwhelmed by them. This does not, however, necessarily imply an inclination towards simplistic writing. Well-written texts, not too complicated in style, allow readers to enter the fictional world smoothly. Let us take a look at a comment: "[this book] immerses me now and then, but there were moments when I turned pages laboriously". This laborious page-turning is an opposite of immersion – if a text is too complicated one has to pay more attention to the surface structure. Hence, if the text is difficult, readers cannot be so easily transported into the fictional realm. Gerrig and Rapp, who discuss in detail the phenomenon of transport, give empirical evidence to support their claim that "literary narratives' capacity to engage readers increases the probability that those narratives will wield an impact on life." (Gerrig and Rapp 2004, 270).

(4) **Literature and reality.** Fiction interlaces with reality in two respects. On the one hand, readers search for fictional places in the real world, on the other, they seem to trace reality in fiction. The best example of the first category is the action undertaken by a reader who went to Moscow in order to visit the places mentioned in Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*. He even uploaded a photograph of Patriarshie Prudy, the street on which one of the protagonists was beheaded by a tram. Fiction also provokes readers to visit places where narrated events took place. Hence, reading becomes a form of tourism into semi-fictional worlds.

There are also readers who treat fictional events as if they were real. One user made a list of fictional places she encountered in books. What is more, protagonists often trigger real emotions in readers, who tend to judge fictional characters according to real-life criteria. Readers often say: "I like this character, I hate that one..." One reader claimed that the protagonist "is a kind of guy I would definitely like to impress ... Probably I would like to have sex with him, cause nothing turns me on more than intelligence".

Conclusions: online reports of everyday experiences with fiction

The study reported here was aimed at discovering readers' strategies and approaches towards literature. It sketched in brief the role of literature in readers' everyday life, concentrating on the role they ascribe to fictional texts. Believing that the act of reading is a specific everyday activity, depending on the individual context, I tried to investigate what contributes to that context.

The second goal of this study was to test the possibilities of online research in studying the reception of literature. Despite some

inconveniences internet material proves to be useful in certain areas of study, especially concerning emotional reactions to fiction, reading behaviour, and self-implication in literary reading, to name just a few. Hence, studies online could be treated as a complementary research technique for face-to-faces interviews and observations.

As I have shown, literature provides readers with food for thought and shows them alternative worlds; at the same time, readers use it to regulate their emotions. Experience gained in the fictional world is adopted in reality. Literature may also serve other purposes: it can provoke actions or reflections, it can help readers work out their problems and tune their emotions, or it can serve as a mirror, opening up topics relevant to readers' own worlds.

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