

The Virtual Classroom in the Age of the Virtual Library

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Abstract

*"The virtual classroom in the age of virtual library" is an article, which is directed towards issues related to the future of teaching classic works of literature in the age of digital literature. The electronic text has promised to make reality all the old dreams of universal and total knowledge, to make accessible all the ancient texts. It expects cooperation from the reader as he enters the virtual library he can enter in the book and write on the fields to change it. Simultaneously, the network is infantile, it requires skills of value structure, hierarchy, selection and here is one of the roles of the teacher in this context. One of the possible issues that arise is connected with the idea of possible / impossible dialogue. The article starts from the ideas of John Durham Peters in his book *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (1999) which in the weary 21st century fewer and fewer means exactly dialogue and more "dissemination". For the author of this book dialogue can be tyrannical whereas dissemination is something altogether different. Applied to teaching of literature, Peters' ideas reveal how unfounded the accusations of the distortion of dialogue are insofar as the book finds its characteristic communicative strategy on the idea of "dissemination", while dialogue is a secondary concept. "Tuning oneself to a particular frequency" the teacher does not pursue sharedness of the world. The teacher shares one's perceptions of the world. The virtual classroom is viewed as a compass in terms of the ocean of the virtual library and one of the tasks of teaching could be a resumption of the related book types of communication, of which we are now deprived, provoking as many occasions and forms of speech of his opinion regarding the cultural heritage, of intellectual creation.*

Reading has for a long time now stopped being one of the contemporary man's essential necessities. The book on the whole is ceding its position in contemporary culture worldwide and the problem is not that it is being replaced by other information carriers such as the computer, or by other types of information, such as the visual type, but that reading itself is becoming different. And the changes seem irreversible. In 1968 Roland Barthes announces the advance of the omnipotent reader at the cost of the death of the author, the dissemination of a multiplicity of different kinds of writing from different cultures, entering into dialogue and argument with each other, parodying each other. Reading becomes a space in which the plural and unstable meanings are unified into one whole, in which the texts acquire meaning. With the birth of the reader, however, evidence begins to appear which, at a first glance, seems to signal the reader's death. The statistics convincingly shows that the percentage of readers, more precisely, the so called "serious readers" is decreasing, especially among young people. Concurrently, analysis of the publication practices solidifies the conviction that reading is in crisis and the death of the reader is explained as an inevitable consequence of the screen civilization. Paradoxically, writing is present everywhere, yet the disappearance-of-the-book and the death-of-the-reader motifs are hauntingly present as well.

On its fruitful soil the digital text promises to turn into reality all those dreams of universal total knowledge, to grant unlimited access to all the ancient texts. It expects the reader's cooperation since, as the reader enters the virtual library, he can also enter the book itself, can write in its margins, can keep adding to it or changing it.

Nowadays there are three ways – coexisting although not necessarily harmoniously – for the inscription and dissemination of texts – manuscripts, print publications and virtual texts. The virtual text makes possible various modalities of reading. In it the methods of advancing an argument and evidence are new, new also is the text presentation – sources correlation. What also changes is the history of scholarly discourse and the ways in which it is provided with foundation and motivation. The digital book makes the author arrange the material differently, it makes hypertextual reading possible. New also is the way in which certain types of objects are perceived, ones that are associated with certain categories in the printed text, dependent on the physical media – letter, newspaper, magazine, book, archive, etc. In virtual reality all texts, regardless of their nature, are read on one carrier – the display – and in the same formats selected by the reader – a text file or a different type file. In this way a continuum is created which blurs the boundaries between genres and texts, which appear equally

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authoritative. The user is not only free to manifest one's attitude – the reader is all the time prompted to satisfy one's preferences, no one monitors whether they make a pause in reading the novel on the screen in order to hop to some erotic web page or check the weather forecast. This extreme democratic quality of reading contributes to a great extent to the destruction of the most traditional modern authority – that of the teacher whose competence cannot sustain a comparison with the amount of information of the huge accessible databases stored somewhere in virtual space.

The centuries-old history of reading offers evidence that changes in reading habits are significantly slower than the pace of technical innovations. Virtual reality, the digital revolution could exacerbate inequality, because of an emergent danger of a new illiteracy, the meaning of which is no more going to be that of an inability to read and write, but rather an impossibility to gain access to new forms of text dissemination, which would be considerably more expensive. In this sense the question of virtual space navigation becomes one of pressing importance.

The various revolutions in written culture which have taken place in the course of time are now happening all at the same time. We can define three characteristics which have a role in transforming our relationship with written culture. First, the presentation of a text in virtual space changes the notion of context and thus the process of meaning-making itself. The physical proximity of texts in a book gives way to their flexible incorporation into logical constructions, constitutive of databases and second – it destroys the visible connection between the text and the object which contains it, gives the reader the right to compose, to join and to divide into separate parts the textual fragments, to make choices about their appearance. Third, it accommodates the position of the reader from antiquity, the reader who reads a scroll, but the scroll is furnished with all the necessary pointers and numbers at the right places and can be vertically unfolded as well. This accommodating of two logics preconditions a new attitude to the text.

At the same time the web is infantile, it requires abilities for constructing value hierarchies, for selecting and this is where one of the teacher's roles in this context is found. The virtual classroom is seen as a compass with regard to the ocean that is the virtual library while one of the tasks of teaching could be the renewal of the types of communication, associated with the book, of which we have been deprived nowadays – the provoking of occasions for the articulation in different forms of one's personal opinion with regard to the issues of cultural heritage and intellectual creativity.

The new encyclopedic navigation requires a competent editorial agency which is instrumental in helping distinguish between the digital book and the contemporary practice of uploading on the Internet crude, unfinished texts, ones whose conception has not been considered with regard to their new form, texts which have not been proofread and edited by publishers. The reproducing of texts by one or another technical means is in itself neither good nor bad. It depends on how it is used. The reader today is threatened by the risk of getting lost among the accumulations of texts, of being tossed about in the digital sphere without a compass. The virtual classroom of today can be such a compass for him. One of its tasks could be the renewal of the types of communication, associated with the book, of which we have been deprived nowadays – the provoking of occasions for the articulation, in various forms, of one's personal opinion with regard to the issues of cultural heritage and intellectual creativity. Such a public space could coincide in its scale with the whole of humankind.

One of the probable problems that arise is related to the idea of the possibility/impossibility for dialogue. In saying this I draw on John Durham Peters' ideas about communication as they have been presented in his book, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (1999). For him the concept of "communication" whose meaning has, in the weary twenty-first century, come to mean less and less dialogue and more and more "dissemination". For the author of this book dialogue can be tyrannical whereas dissemination is something altogether different. Applied to literature, Peters' ideas reveal how unfounded the accusations of the distortion of dialogue are insofar as the book founds its characteristic communicative strategy on the idea of "dissemination", while dialogue is a secondary concept. "Tuning in to a particular frequency" the teacher does not pursue sharedness with the world. The teacher shares one's perceptions of it.

How is one to teach the classics today, however? Without the obtrusive moralistic dictum that the classics are the embodiment of culture and ethics. As it is well known classic works are not an iconostasis, because they themselves are controversial, dynamic and far from venerably monolithic. Most often they feature and dramatize acute ideational and aesthetic arguments. But the classic text begins to die a slow death when, becoming part of the general educational system, it becomes part of the compulsory reading lists, part of the canon understood as "the right books". In this way the regulation of interpretations is standardized and the way it is perceived is linked to expectations for the formation in the reader or a particular normative behavior and particular ethical categories. Thus, from



a means for the “initiation” of the young person, the classic text often turns into a boring manual for “correct” reading.

The situation with the classics today is strongly reminiscent of Hamlet: what everyone expects from him is action, whereas he remains silent: “What do you read, my lord? Words, words, words”, replies Shakespeare’s character. Are the classics only a resource of plot lines, motifs and images for the contemporary writers, painters, musicians? When we look at the contemporary attitude towards the classics, it is good to remember that the writers and poets of the nineteenth century often looked back towards their predecessors with a mocking smile as well. The passing of time makes the subject matter of the classics lose its up-to-dateness, realia, issues, conflicts change too, and if the young person does not find in the book the answers to the questions that interest him, he will hardly reach for that book again, except by obligation.

Here again the instrumental role of the virtual classroom and the teacher becomes prominent as they can put to use the benefits of the digital revolution in order to make the “dissemination” of the ideas of the classics interesting and exciting, so that the student/pupil continues to seek the threads connecting the present with the classics. Through the formats of computer games, through the hypertextual potential of digital space, offering more and more choices to users, an increasing number of provocations are triggered and forms are made available for the articulation of one’s personal opinion with regard to the issues of cultural heritage and intellectual creativity. Such a public space could coincide in its scale with the whole of humankind.

There are no reasons for being skeptical, the classics have pervaded every sphere of contemporary culture, saturating it in the various forms of hidden reminiscences, allusions, citations, periphrases... They are constantly argued with, constantly rewritten, they sometimes get parts of them severed, they get “purged”, but even when they are being denounced, opposition is, more than anything, evidence that the classics are alive. Perhaps this is so because these texts prove to be an “all-encompassing communication code” in literature and language, harmonized with people of many epochs. That is why contemporary literature cannot run away from the classics and is instead constantly made aware of its non-freedom from the old ideas, methods and issues. That is why it is constantly turning towards their dusty old chest in the hopeful expectation of finding gold bars inside it.