Olga Kuminova, "To See Across the Veil of Print: Virtual Re-personalization of the Reader-Author Relationship during the 'Reading Revolution'"

By the end of the eighteenth century, a new relationship had established itself between the literary text, the author and the reader. A key element in this relationship can be figuratively termed "the veil of print"; this "veil" has defined the modern state of literature from the eighteenth-century "reading revolution" up until the advent of digital media that may be seen as introducing a new social condition of direct global accessibility between individuals. The "demographic explosion" of all three populations, authors, texts, and readers, which began (though certainly did not end) in the eighteenth century, led to a situation where literary texts came to be written for an anonymous population of readers, and then purchased as mass-produced objects to be widely read without any tangible social connection to the author. Therefore, the interaction between authors and readers of literature, which previously took place in the narrow upper-class and learned elites in more direct interpersonal ways, came to be impersonalized by the

new medium of mass print and the publishing industry. Writers and readers both responded to this challenge by inventing strategies to re-personalize communication through the text. I will argue that beginning with the eighteenth century readers and writers devised and perfected various techniques for creating a *virtual relationship* through the text. Revisiting some influential accounts of reading, e.g. Wayne Booth, *Rhetoric*, Jane Tompkins, Robert Darnton, and Heather Jackson, in light of this hypothesis reveals some new aspects of a much-discussed change in reading practices. The patterns of "reading for the author" researched by Barbara Hochman in nineteenth-century American readers – who were certainly influenced by the eighteenth-century transatlantic heritage – have provided an inspiration for much of the present argument. The metaphor of a veil chosen to represent the reader-author relationship through the medium of the printed text has been inspired by the image of the "curtain of print" used in Bertrand Bronson's largely neglected analysis of the eighteenth-century reading revolution. Several sources in rhetorical and communications theory provide theoretical grounds for the present article. These include Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels on the indispensability of positing an author in order to read a text, Walter J. Ong on the ways in which writers imagine/posit their audiences while writing and encode these audiences in texts, and Gerard

Genette on the function of paratext, particularly prefaces and dedications, in literature. Last but not least, Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy of language as primarily an attitude of the self towards the Other – and only then a sign system (elaborated in *Totality and Infinity*) – offers a perspective on language and communication that is indispensable for my argument. In his later book, *Otherwise than Being,* Levinas proposes a very useful distinction between the "said" and the "saying," two complementary aspects of language, where "the said" stands for the supposedly finalized or at least finalizable thematic content of discourse, while "the saying" expresses the interpersonal and diachronic aspect of language. In the eighteenth century, the mass-printed text brought the sealed, object-like aspect of the text to an unprecedented extreme, which created a need for re-embedding this "said" in the ongoing interpersonal dynamic of "saying." This process of reconverting the "said" of the printed text into the interpersonal and immediate "saying" is crucial not only for psychological but also for pragmatic reasons: according to Levinas, the "said" is essentially ambiguous, since the interlocutor is not present to disambiguate or clarify his/her message; a similar insight in literary studies belongs to New Criticism, which emphasized ambiguity as an essential property of the literary text. Eighteenth-century novelists were well aware of their readers' desire to access the individual behind the written

words of the text, to know what kind of a person the author is and what such a person could have implied by describing certain human interactions and behaviors. Novelists responded to this desire in their considerable efforts at *disambiguating* their texts and their personalities in prefaces such as those analyzed further in this article.

I should emphasize that this article attempts to tackle only a very specific aspect of the reader-author relationship early in the age of mass print, namely the ways in which readers and authors coped with the new and challenging communicative situation of literature imposed by the advent of mass print culture and the corresponding "demographic explosion" of the writer's audience. The discussion here is based on theoretical and historical scholarly works, as well as twelve prefaces to eighteenth-century British novels. They constitute the primary material analyzed here because a full historical examination of the extant records of reading and/or writing experience in the eighteenth century would be far beyond the scope of the present article.

The "Reading Revolution," or the Demographic Explosion of Literature

When the printing press was invented in the fifteenth century, it became possible to bring the written – now printed – word closer to many

more readers than before. Yet many historians of culture, literature and reading in Europe (e.g. Bronson, Engelsing, Tompkins, Darnton, Wittmann, and Jackson) argue that the new medium of print had its most profound effects on the writing and reading of literature only three centuries later. In the 1970s, the pioneering German school of history of reading, with Rolf Engelsing as its best known representative, proposed the notion of a "reading revolution" that occurred in the second half of the eighteenth century, involving a dramatic expansion of the reading public and a corresponding increase in the production of printed matter. According to Engelsing, these developments led to the increasing dominance of what he called an "extensive" mode of reading: a cursory running through a lot of printed material, mostly light reading (novels, periodicals, almanacs etc.), and doing it mainly for entertainment, without much rereading or dwelling upon any particular item (183-85). By contrast, the earlier, "intensive" mode of reading predominated when books were scarce and every reader only had access to very few books that s/he reread many times in a deeper, more 'respectful' and meditative manner. Similar descriptions of a change in reading practices occurred as early as the mid-nineteenth century: David Hall cites Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill expressing reservations about the social and cultural implications of mass print (11-12). As de Tocqueville related the

phenomenon of mass-printed newspaper to the weakening of individual opinion among the newspaper's collective audience (Tocqueville 114), Mill complained that, ever since cheap and popular books have prevailed, "there are fewer who devote themselves to thought for its own sake, and pursue in retirement those profounder researches, the results of which can only be appreciated by a few. Literary productions are seldom highly finished – they are got up to be read by many, and to be read but once" (Mill, "De Tocqueville on Democracy in America', qtd. in Hall 12).

Mill's view of these cultural changes could not express more clearly the widely shared nostalgia for the earlier, elitist modes of writing, reading, printing and learning (which Hall, as a book-history scholar, does not share). Since the 1970s, when Engelsing's account was first published, its opposition between intensive vs. extensive reading has been much contested and convincingly shown to be an oversimplification (see e.g. Darnton 249-50), yet its pessimistic spirit is still relevant and revealing. Engelsing's argument is informed by nostalgia for the older, alledgedly slower and more thoughtful mode of reading reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's nostalgia, expressed in "The Storyteller," for the storyteller-listener relationship that preceded the alleged "isolation" of both the author and the reader of the novel.[1] Industrialization, mass production and marketing, as well as the demographic

explosion (in this case, of the circle of readers) are still often discussed in a pessimistic spirit. Yet the present article is informed by a different, more welcoming attitude towards the "reading revolution," which, not to mention its positive social effects, created a new, more profound and intense mode of reader-author relationship.

According to contemporary accounts and today's historians' estimations, the number of "extensive" readers in Europe rose dramatically during the eighteenth century, in Wittman's estimation, by over 100 times (288-89). Despite the fact that such readers still constituted only a fraction (about 1.5%!) within the total population, there was a widely-shared sense of an epidemic outburst of "reading mania" by the turn of the century. One German traveler reported from France that

> everyone in Paris is reading … Everyone, but women in particular, is carrying a book around in their pocket. People read while riding in carriages or taking walks; they read at the theatre during the interval, in cafés, even when bathing. Women, children, journeymen and apprentices read in shops. On Sundays people read while seated in front of their houses; lackeys read on their back seats, coachmen up on their boxes, and soldiers keeping guard (quoted in Wittmann, 285).

Contemporaries had an overall sense of a conspicuous, even shocking spread and democratization of reading. Many commentators expressed the sense that this democratization posed a serious threat to existing political regimes and ways of life – a sense that was reinforced and confirmed by subsequent events such as the French Revolution. One conservative Swiss bookseller "expressed a conviction shared by many of his contemporaries in 1795: it was not the Jacobins who dealt the fatal blow to the ancient régime, it was readers" (cited in Wittmann 284). But what concerns me here is not so much the political as the psychological consequences of the reading boom, and particularly the way it reshaped the relationship of the reader and the literary text and its author.

The huge increase in demand for new reading material went hand in hand with a corresponding increase in the supply of new titles and in the output of the printing industry. To give only a few isolated examples, if the Leipzig book fair catalogue listed 1,384 titles in 1760, by the turn of the century this number had grown to 3,906 titles, while the number of copies also increased, especially if one takes into account the industry of cheap reprints (Wittmann 302). Lending libraries and "reading societies" or clubs multiplied throughout Europe, which indicates that the number of readers grew even faster than the output of the printing industry (Wittmann, Darnton, Raven). Also in Ireland, according to Peter Fallon, an "explosion" in the

printing industry occurred between 1750 and 1800. Thus, book production became a branch of mass industrial production.

Becoming a mass commodity is more problematic for a literary work than for many other kinds of products, and this difficulty only intensified in the century following the "printing revolution." William Morris, the nineteenth-century socialist writer, idealist, artist, activist and entrepreneur, who was extremely unhappy about the economy and ideology of mass production, nostalgically looked back to medieval modes of production and social relations. Significantly, one of the forms that Morris's rebellion against the capitalist world took was founding the Kelmscott Press – a publishing house that combined socialist and Gothic revival ideas with Renaissance technologies, established, in Morris's words, "as an endeavour […] to re-attain a long-lost standard of craftsmanship of book-printing" (qtd. in Henderson 388). Opposing the alienating, depersonalized capitalistic relationships of mass production, Morris aspired to bring every worker's labor closer to artistic work, to infuse it with significance and inspiration. What is more, the prices he initially put on his books were quite democratically low, but the dealers blew them up as soon as the books left his possession (Peterson, *Adventure*). Ironically, counter to Morris's socialist aspirations (but in perfect keeping with the nostalgic pre-capitalist ideas behind his

enterprise), the rarity and quickly soaring market prices of the Kelmscott books destined them for narrow elites, Morris's immediate friends and relatives or his upper-class social circle – replicating the way literature functioned before the eighteenth-century "printing revolution." [2]

Authoring a Text for Mass Production: The Writer's Side

The impersonalization of the book in the capitalist mass-production publishing industry that so exasperated Morris developed over the course of the long eighteenth century, transforming not only the physical "body" of the book but also the communicative aspect of the text, and the changes that writers confronted as a result were no less significant. This is how the profound changes in English literature and its social context in the long eighteenth century are described by Jane Tompkins:

> [O]nce the authors become dependent for their means of support upon the sales of their printed work [rather than on the generosity of individual patrons], the personal relation to their audience is severed and the relationship becomes more purely economic. […] Instead of taking place within the context of a social relationship, the production and consumption of literature go on independent of any social contact between author and reader. Literature becomes simultaneously both impersonal and privatized (214).

Tompkins's language in this passage is less neutral and matter-of-fact than it seems – one can sense here, as in Englesing's pessimistic account of 'extensive' reading, a preference for the way literature functioned before the eighteenth century "revolution." Even without an explicit evaluative comment on Tompkins's part, the personal relationship between the author and his audience certainly sounds more humanly meaningful than a purely economic relationship emptied of all social contact.

Many eighteenth-century novelists apparently felt similarly and devised various rhetorical strategies to adapt to this new mode of relations with their readers. An early example of this new mode of relations can be found in the opening of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, which declares: "An author ought to consider himself, not as a gentleman who gives a private or eleemosynary[3] treat, but rather as one who keeps a public ordinary[4], at which all persons are welcome for their money" (1). Fielding draws a clear distinction between what an author might be inclined to consider himself, a generous host to whom his guests (readers) are tied by the personal ties of friendship and/or gratitude, and what he ought to be, in order to fit into the more modern, democratic and market-like relationship – all persons welcome, without discrimination, for their money, which buys them an equal portion of entertainment and instruction while absolving them of any further bond or

obligation to the author. In terms of social status, not only does the author of *Tom Jones* position himself in this opening as one among dozens of commercial competitors (even while he is making an argument for his product's greater excellence), he also positions his reader as one of the less wealthy, undistinguished city crowd.

Nonetheless, I would modify Tompkins's assertion that in the age of mass print "the production and consumption of literature go on independent of any social contact between author and reader." It would be more accurate to say that the eighteenth-century printing revolution gave rise to, or greatly increased the role of, a different kind of social relationship: the more hypothetical, imaginary, or 'virtual' relationship that takes place between authors and readers by means of a literary text. Such a relationship is not equivalent to zero contact.

Bertrand Bronson offers a more detailed version of the change effected by the medium of print on the relationship of authors with their audiences, and consequently on the nature of literature. He dates that change as early as the English Restoration:

> Gradually but increasingly, there develops a race of authors who
> write to an indefinite body of readers, personally undifferentiated
> and unknown; who accept this separation as a primary condition of

their creative activity and address their public invisibly through the curtain, opaque and impersonal, of print (302).

Bronson poses the novel as a genre that emerged as writers attempted to cope with "the curtain of print," the uncertainty of the authors about their prospective audience, which in the age of mass literacy and print, has become a "Cheshire Cat" (310).

Furthermore, this "curtain of print" is even more isolating than Bronson suggests: while it definitely includes the separation that writing as such already imposes between the writer and the reader (since writing presupposes the reader's absence – see e.g. Ong, Levinas, *Totality*), it also includes the alienating mechanisms of publication, mass production and market distribution of literary texts, as well as the effects of the demographic explosion of readers (the distancing effect of identifying oneself as one reader among thousands). Yet I argue that, paradoxically, this "curtain" or, as I will further call it, "veil" of print was instrumental in creating the new virtual relationship between the reader and the author which I am trying to outline.

I will use here the metaphor of a veil to describe the essential separation between the reader and the writer of literature in the age of mass print because, for one thing, Bronson's choice of "curtain" draws on the idea

of the theater. It thus points at the collective aspect of the relationship between performer and audience: the writer professionally entertains the audience through the public medium of the book, whose materiality is represented by the edifice of the theater, an image famously invoked by Thackeray in *Vanity Fair*. The image of a veil, by contrast, implies a face-to-face, one-to-one, interpersonal aspect of the relationship between the writer and the reader, which in the age of mass print becomes highly indirect, defined and shaped as well as hindered by the medium of the mass-printed text. The veil is not there to be lifted, like the curtain in a theater, but to be kept in place, allowing only a blurred glimpse of the face behind it; a veiled lady met in the street should be experienced by the passer-by precisely as veiled – clad in a certain mystery, which also surrounds her with an aureole of presupposed desire: not everyone is entitled to see her face, but everyone is supposed to want to see it, so she veils it. (In fact, these implications in the case of a literary work can also have a marketing function.) For a reader of a mass-printed literary text, if the text presented an aesthetically appealing 'fabric', it would also confer an appeal on its author's person obliquely present behind it, who normally would not be accessible or visible to the mass reader except through his/her text. When the veil of print was a new phenomenon, it actually heightened the readers' desire to know the author, to

'see' the face behind the veil, to re-personalize the relationship. I would suggest that this "veil of print" effect is what gives rise to the mainstream mode of reading in the eighteenth- and nineteenth century, what Barbara Hochman calls "reading for the author" – reading fiction to make a pleasing and edifying 'acquaintance' with its writer.

Bronson, in his turn, is mostly concerned with the writer's side of the problem. He examines the ways in which Defoe, Swift, Richardson, Fielding and Sterne each came up with their own, more or less satisfactory solution to the problem. Richardson, for instance, approached the indefinite addressee with great success by developing the genre of the epistolary novel – framing his fictional discourse as an exchange between characters who write letters to each other, and whose specific relationships to each other are already in place at the outset of the novel. This fictional frame of personal correspondence not only makes the writer's task more specific and manageable – it also helps the reader to become engaged in the narrative. In this account, all that remains for the reader to do is identify with the characters as they read the letters, and the popularity of Richardson's novels shows that his strategy worked. Yet in spite of this success, Richardson "was unwilling to leave [his *Clarissa*] to speak for itself, but had to be discussing it with all and sundry, in his own person" – since "the epistolary form unites

us to the characters, not to the author" (Bronson 315). An additional important tool Richardson had at his disposal for conquering the impersonalizing and alienating element of the publishing industry was running his own printing press. Yet the discussions of his works "with all and sundry" seem to have been no less crucial.

Richardson's cultivation of his own, predominantly female "fan club" has been a subject of discussion for generations, starting with Richardson's contemporaries. John Mullan's account of this author's relationships with the circle of his admiring readers emphasizes his cultivation of the most refined ties of sociability and mutual sensitivity. In terms of the present argument this translates into creating a circle of readers who are also the author's correspondents and friends, for whom and to whom Richardson wrote fiction. Elspeth Knights analyzes several cases in which Richardson's writing can be said to have been influenced by his correspondence with his reader-friends, or when he sought "confirm[ation] of his authorial decisions" from women readers (224). In effect, Knights' research shows that Richardson's ongoing conversation with his friends and correspondents was an integral part in his process of literary creation. I would argue that this case provides a particularly pronounced example for Levinas's view of discourse as being essentially enabled by the presence of an interlocutor: in

this view, not only any question or imperative, but even any indicative proposition "is maintained in the outstretched field of questions and answers" and is made possible by the interlocutors' presence to each other, which precedes all discourse (Levinas, *Totality* 96). To make this notion more tangible, I would risk another fabric metaphor to describe the function of Richardson's correspondents in the writing of his novels: perhaps their function can be compared to that of pins on a lace-maker's pillow, which provide the indispensable holding points for the thread, between which the lace is woven. The complication is, of course, that Richardson the author is not the lace-maker towering above the pattern: he is one of the pins, and each one of his interlocutors is also to some degree the lace-maker.

Another effective strategy for coping with the veil of print, adopted by Henry Fielding, is particularly successful in *Tom Jones*. As Bronson says,

> [Fielding] had a great deal to say about his greatest novel [*Tom
> Jones*], about the forms of fiction, about the conduct of the
> narrative, about self-appointed critics, about the character and
> actions of his invented persons, about the conduct of life itself; and
> he chose to incorporate all this in the body of the novel, in
> introductory essays, in running comments, and in the witty, wry,
> ironic manner in which he reported events. He gives us so much of

himself that in effect he becomes, not a character in the book, but the Master of Ceremonies, and much the most interesting person in it, if at the same time apart from it. We feel that we know him better, and more intimately, on his own chosen terms than anyone else to whom we are introduced. Without this personal voice at all times in our ears, the book would be a vastly different sort of thing (315).

In other words, Fielding directly attacked the impersonality surrounding a mass-printed literary work, by capitalizing on his own presence as an author in his text. The reader who hasn't met the author before is designated by this strategy as the principal reader for whom the book is intended – thus in a way reinforcing the "veil of print." Of course, contemplating such a verbal self-portrait of the writer is not equivalent to actually meeting him; the media of writing and print still remain in place, with all the limitations they impose on communication between writer and reader. Yet this authorial strategy of explicitly coming forth from behind the screen of fictional action and cast of characters is a major gesture of reaching out towards the remote, unknown reader, and according to Bronson, it worked. "Fielding's solution brings him and the reader into close relationship, and in his hands it is so successful as to serve as a model for a great part of the novel writing of the next century"

(316). The conventional address to "Dear reader" in later eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels continues precisely this strategy.

Fielding's compelling authorial persona is also consistent with the unusual type of dedications he wrote for several of his other novels. According to Gerard Genette's extensive survey of western literary dedications, this genre of paratext under the guise of promoting the most disinterested sentiments has the clearest political and economic functionality. Throughout the period in which authors depended on specific persons for patronage, a dedication served the purpose of securing such patronage and winning not only financial and political support for the author, but also some form of authorization for the text. Fielding's dedications, however, are not fully explained by Genette's model. In Fielding's dedications the author positions the book as first of all an extended communication within a strong relationship with a highly valued friend. Thus, *Amelia* is dedicated to Ralph Allen, who earlier served as the model for Squire Allworthy in *Tom Jones*, which signifies a relationship going far deeper into the author's work and life than a mere application for financial support from a well-known philanthropist.[5]

The more famous dedication to George Lyttleton at the opening of Tom Jones disrupts the pattern described by Genette even more

conspicuously. This dedication weaves a very close, intense and complicated relationship with the dedicatee; it looks as if the author is prepared even to slightly overstep the limits of propriety and use a very measured amount of force to convince the dedicatee (and the reader) of the sincerity of his affection: "Sir, Notwithstanding your constant refusal, when I have asked leave to prefix your name to this dedication, I must still insist on my right to desire your protection of this work" (xvii). Even though Fielding uses the conventional trope of seeking the dedicatee's "protection" for the work, his biographical connection with Lyttleton is much deeper than merely seeking support from a powerful social superior. Fielding and Lyttleton were friends from the Eton school bench, lifelong correspondents, and shared the same political views which both expressed in their satiric publications (see e.g. Beasley); moreover, in terms of aristocratic origin they were approximate social equals. I would argue that Fielding's dedications stand in direct contradiction to both Genette's classification of dedication as an entirely subservient paratext and Tompkins' assertion that in the age of mass print once the writer is not economically dependent on an individual patron "the personal relation to [the authors'] audience is severed and the relationship becomes more purely economic." I see Fielding as strenuously trying to assert the primarily and sublimely personal character of his dedications,

which transcends their economic and political functions (although he directly acknowledges the latter). It seems that these dedications assert the central role of an Other, a certain privileged, singled out, personally valued reader/addressee, in bringing the text into being. To conclude, Laurence Sterne's dedication to Mr. Pitt at the opening of Tristram Shandy exemplifies this latter function even more directly, by Sterne's saying: "If I am ever told [my book] has made you smile, or can conceive it has beguiled you of one moment's pain – I shall think myself as happy as a minister of state; – perhaps much happier than any one (one only excepted) that I have ever read or heard of" (2).

The Paratextual Functions of Eighteenth-Century Novel Prefaces

> *The preface could be entitled "the lightning*
>
> *rod." G.C. Lichtenberg*

One common strategy used by authors for coping with the veil of print is the use of the preface. Genette's theory of prefaces starts by outlining "the prefatorial situation of communication" (161), which he boils down to clear and basic pragmatic goals: "to get the book read" and "to get the book read properly." Yet I will attempt to inscribe Genette's richly illustrated, detailed classification of the preface as a form into a more general view of the preface as an act of *setting up* the three parties of the novel's communicative situation,

the reader, the text and the author. I want to suggest that this act derives from a deeper existential need than the promotional urge suggested by Genette: the author's need to establish a ground for communication with the elusive, indefinite audience in the situation of profound communicative uncertainty imposed by the "veil of print." For this purpose, Levinas's view of language proves very helpful in understanding the prefatorial communicative situation. From Levinas's more general perspective, a preface can be seen as the ever-renewed attempt to re-convert the fixed and mute "said" of the main text into the dynamic interpersonal process of "saying."

The prefaces of the novels by Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding and Laurence Sterne cover the period between 1719 (*Robinson Crusoe*) and 1760 (*Tristram Shandy*). For the most part, Genette's analysis accurately describes what these prefaces do. They certainly promote the novel to the reader and attempt to direct the reader's perception of and response to the narrative. Often the preface performs the function of anticipating and answering criticism (Genette 207-9), serving as a "lightning rod," in the words of Georg Christof Lichtenberg, a nineteenth-century physics professor and famous wit whom Genette quotes. I would say that this happens especially when the novel recounts the adventures of a female protagonist and the author is likely to face charges of immorality for the sheer

fact of handling such content (Richardson's *Clarissa* and *Pamela,* Defoe's *Roxana* and *Moll Flanders*). As Defoe expresses it in the preface to *Moll Flanders,* "an Author must be hard put to wrap it up so clean, as not to give room, especially for vicious Readers, to turn it to his Disadvantage" (3). In Defoe's preface to *Roxana* this concern almost takes the form of a legal stipulation: "if the reader makes a wrong use of the figures, the wickedness is his own" (xi). Conversely, the reason for the brevity of Defoe's preface to *Robinson Crusoe* might have to do with the fact that the male narrator/protagonist and the story of his virtuous solitary existence did not require a lot of "wrapping up." Similarly, Defoe says at the opening of *Colonel Jacque* preface: "… this Work needs a *Preface* less than any other that ever went before it"(B): the protagonist/narrator's life, although not blameless, is still an example of virtue gaining the upper hand. These examples show how prefaces strain to *disambiguate* the text for the reader*,* giving her a sense of a guiding, responsible authorial presence, as well as to surmount the helplessness of the author now that he is fundamentally absent to the unfamiliar mass reader.

Closely allied with the need for disambiguating the author's intention in the main text is the need for disambiguating the author's personality. The latter can be a crucial detail of context wherever interpretation has to do with

moral issues. For instance, Richardson's assertions in the preface to *Clarissa*

that his text is intended as an important warning to his female readers, can be

transcribed as "I am no libertine, I don't enjoy the way Clarissa is destroyed",

or "I am no sadist, I'm not making you fair ladies cry for my amusement, but

like a good surgeon, only for your salvation." Similarly, Fielding's ironic

opening of chapter one of preface to *Jonathan Wilde,* where he expressed

admiration for the protagonist as a truly "great man" (21), has the effect of

saying, "I am a decent person, I do not admire Jonathan Wilde, any more than

I admire the other, historical great men for their consistent cruelty."

Finally, these prefaces construct the audience that the author imagines to

be addressing; seen from the reader's position, they encourage the reader to

take on certain roles – and these roles, not surprisingly, are usually attractive.

In fact, this gesture of assigning a role to the reader is inseparable from

establishing the *author* as a certain kind of a person within this relationship.

Defoe's exclusion of "visious readers" for *Roxana*, quoted above, does not

only prescribe to the reader a virtuous and cooperative role and designate the

novel as morally sound reading, but also, naturally, positions the author as

someone having a reputation to preserve. Fielding's preface to *Joseph*

Andrews not only situates the novel as a new genre within the western literary

tradition, but also situates Fielding himself as a well-educated man, and the

reader as someone who will read like an educated person, for enlightenment and large-scale reflection, not for shallow or vulgar entertainment (to which the content of the book might easily seem to incline). The latter message could also be read as ironic, to the effect of "well, look at us both, putting on straight faces as we are about to have this outrageous fun," but here the irony does not subvert the function of the direct message; on the contrary, it further deepens the connection between the author and the reader as subtle users of language who can share irony.

Swift's preface to *Gulliver's Travels* builds the novel's communicative situation in an even more intricate way, by positioning the narrative, on the one hand, as told by a completely insane, misanthropic and delusional narrator but, on the other, as a narrative that struggles to cut through the routine insincerity and inhumanity of human "sanity." The resulting image of the reader whom the preface targets is an extremely flattering one: the reader is constructed as someone who is able to figure out the author's hoax and yet be wise and tolerant enough to appreciate its sublime idealistic intent. If a reader is projected by the preface in this particular way, it frames not only a specific, highly enlightened readerly identity, but a very specific relationship with the author, within which this identity takes shape. The author places very high stakes on his reader if he trusts the latter to navigate his way to the kernel

of the author's message past the highly unreliable and possibly off-putting narrative voices in the letters constituting the fictional preface. It seems that prefaces are particularly useful for analyzing the virtual relationships that authors of early novels attempted to establish with their reader, and perhaps also a good starting point for exploring the social impact of the novel, originating in the readers' assumption of the highly enlightened roles (a process addressed to some extent by Darnton's study of Rousseau's readers discussed below).

Thus, to conclude, these prefaces, written early in the age of mass print, demonstrate the writers' high awareness of and ingenuous ways of coping with the new communicative situation of literature, where the writer has to reach out towards the unknown reader and ensure that a sense of direct personal contact is created, even very briefly, to set up a channel of communication. Perhaps Lichtenberg's metaphor of a preface as a lightning rod has a wider applicability than merely as an ironic comment on the authors' dread of critics; after all, a lightning rod is a designated point of contact between the electrodes of the earth and the sky, normally divided by the isolating "veil" of the atmosphere.

Coping with the Veil of Print: The Reader's Side

If eighteenth-century writers' strategies can be interpreted as called forth by the 'veil of print,' the same can be said of readers' strategies, although these are much more difficult to recover. Along with the new 'race' of authors described by Bronson and Tompkins, one can certainly talk about a new race of readers that emerged in the eighteenth century: readers for whom not knowing the writer of the book was the normal condition of reading. To the best of my knowledge, there are no studies at present that would aim at finding and analyzing eighteenth-century readers' expressions of discontent with their situation as readers.[6] Yet there is evidence showing that eighteenth-century readers responded creatively to problems imposed by the 'veil of print', even if they did not have a clear sense of what these problems were. It appears that in many cases, numerous new eighteenth-century readers attempted to create a situation where the words of a literary work would come from a person they knew in some way, as if arising from a face-to-face situation, rather than an impersonal 'nowhere'. One tactic for creating the feel of a personal exchange through reading was the extremely widespread practice of reading literature aloud in the circle of family and friends (Tadmor). While this practice has been persuasively shown by Tadmor and others (e.g. Raven and Hall) to have diverse purposes and reasons, I claim that an additional and essential function of oral communal reading was the effect

of placing the literary text within an interpersonal context, turning it from a mute 'said' to diachronic and experienced 'saying', in Levinas' terms. Although reading aloud does not connect the reader to the author (unless the author is present, as was the case at Samuel Richardson's "perpetual tea party"[7]), it does place the experience of the literary text in the context of specific personal relationships.

The desire to re-personalize one's relationship with the text and the author may also explain some characteristic new strategies of reading that emerged in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century: conversational marginalia (Jackson) and Rousseauistic reading (Darnton). Both of these reading practices imply the reader's election of his/her favorite authors as 'virtual' friends with whom the reader may feel a degree of intimate familiarity that would never be possible if the acquaintance were actually made. Such new readerly practices and attitudes as writing letters to authors and viewing texts as representing, even standing as makeshifts for their authors made sense only within this new way of reading.

In her study of marginalia, Heather Jackson sets out the period between 1700 and 1820 as an age of "sociable marginalia" that reflects an intense need to communicate with both other readers and the implied author.

The most intensely personal marginalia of this period owe their

quality to their having been produced in a social context, written like

a letter to foster intimacy. (The eighteenth century was the golden age

of the letter too.) At every level the personal element in the eighteenth

century marginalia can be linked to their social function (61).

Before the printing revolution, marginal notes served mostly as learning aids

intended for public use and written according to strict rules. The fact that

marginalia became more personal in the eighteenth century was materially

enabled by the growth of the printing industry, which made personal

ownership of books a more common phenomenon. "Private ownership and the

expectation of continued possession […] played a part [in making marginalia

more personal], affecting readers' attitudes toward books and their ideas of the

uses that might be made of them" (50). At the same time, books remained rare

and precious enough to call for wide sharing with friends and family, and to

be passed down to the following generations – therefore it made a lot of sense

to conceive of one's marginalia as a form of communication with other

readers of the same copy of the book, who would normally be more or less

closely related to the annotating reader. Yet Jackson also recognizes that that

a marginal note, even in a shared book, would be much less likely to be read –

or in any case be read soon – than a letter (82); thus, marginalia addressed to

the author must have some additional function, although their function seems

as strange as that of talking back to a TV. Jackson arrives at a conclusion that

the reader's conversation with the author is analogous to the suspension of

disbelief in watching drama.[8]

This explanation can be restated as a conventional and technical

necessity of sustaining an illusion of conversation in reading. I suggest that

the discursive marginal note set out by Jackson as characteristic of the

'reading revolution' era began to serve as a basic instrument of coping with

the new impersonality of literary discourse imposed by the "veil of print."

Within the discourse that the mass-produced book brings ready-made to the

reader, conversational notes create an interpersonal context in which the

words of the book become "spoken" again, as if for the first time and

specially for this reader.

Jackson uses Wayne Booth's concept of the implied author to designate

the addressee of those marginalia that are addressed to a "you." This author,

the addressee of marginalia, "the person inferred from the text on the page"

(Booth, *Rhetoric* 86), is very clearly distinct from the actual author. This

difference, Jackson points out, is most clearly indicated by the illusion of

equality and intimate familiarity with the author implied in such notes, which

would be impossible if the annotator had the *actual* author in mind as a

possible reader of her notes. Yet perhaps Bronson can offer a more adequate

concept for this addressee: he also brings up the concept of the authorial

figure *in the text* which, for the new, wide reading public, becomes a

substitute for a personally known author. He calls this entity "the public's

author," "the Y's X," where Y stands for the public (unknown to the author)

and X stands for the author (unknown to the public), and emphasizes the

multiplicity of possible "public's authors," as well as the different degrees to

which different writers seem to be accessible to the public through their texts.

Bronson's sense of the reader's "version" of the author as a precarious and

incomplete *variable* seems to describe much real-life reading – especially

non-professional reading – more adequately than Booth's more essentialized,

unitary "implied author," which appears to be a *constant* for any given literary

text. In addition, Bronson emphasizes the ultimate insufficiency of "the

satisfactions of a relation through the medium of print" (322), an insufficiency

that until today draws many readers to watch interviews and go to public

meetings with writers whose books they have enjoyed. For Booth, on the

contrary, the implied author seems to be a satisfyingly complete vision of the

author's "better self" (as he defines it in *The Company We Keep*) created

simultaneously with the text, and recovered by a competent reader as part of a

routine reading process. Thus Bronson's theory also seems to account better

for many readers' desire for an actual meeting, or at least for biographical knowledge about the author.

Rousseauistic Reading

Robert Darnton describes a widespread phenomenon among eighteenth-century readers that appears to be a direct and powerful way of dealing with the veil of print. The "Rousseauistic" way of reading, briefly defined, is reading as cultivation of a passionate friendship with the characters and the author, a practice that affects the reader's life. Darnton's chapter "Readers Respond to Rousseau: The Fabrication of Romantic Sensitivity" focuses on one reader, Jean Ranson, a French-speaking Swiss merchant from La Rochelle, and analyzes Ranson's correspondence with the STN publishing house (Société Typographique de Neuchâtel). These letters mention dozens of books that Ranson ordered over the course of eleven years (1769-80) of correspondence with the publishing house, and it is clear from both the list of titles and the letters themselves that Ranson singled out Rousseau as a special author in his library and his life.

> [T]he one who occupied most of the space on his shelves and most of the discussions in his letters was Rousseau – "*l'Ami* Jean-Jacques" as Ranson called him, although Jean-Jacques was a friend whom he had never met and could know only through the printed

word. Ranson devoured everything he could find by Rousseau. He ordered two editions of the complete works and a twelve-volume set of the posthumous writings. […] He was as hungry for information about the writer as for copies of the writings. "I thank you, Monsieur," he wrote to Osterwald [his friend, the founder of the STN], "for what you were so kind as to tell me about *l'Ami* Jean-Jacques. You give me great pleasure every time you can send me anything about him." Ranson was the perfect Rousseauistic reader (222).

Not only did this reader see this author as his special friend, he also looked up to Rousseau's writings and personality – which he saw as closely interconnected – for guidance in his personal, emotional and family life. The Rousseauistic readers, in Darnton's words, "threw themselves into texts with a passion that we can barely imagine" (251). Rousseau's epistolary novel *La Nouvelle Héloïse,* in particular, evoked an unprecedented storm of enthusiasm, becoming the greatest bestselling novel since novels came into existence in the eighteenth century, and eliciting thousands of letters of admiration from readers that the author collected "in a huge bundle, which has survived for the inspection of posterity" (242). Darnton suggests that these letters, from which he extensively quotes, resulted from Rousseau's casting of

the reader as an intimate friend who was expected to "throw himself into" Rousseau's works the way the author himself did; Darnton regards this as a new way of writing and reading, "transform[ing] the relation between writer and reader, between reader and text" (228).

Extraordinary as the reception of Rousseau was at the time, it established the foundations for a whole new mode of reading the Romantic sensibility.

> The flood of tears unloosed by *La Nouvelle Héloïse* in 1761 […] was a response to a new rhetorical situation.[9] Reader and writer communed across the printed page, each of them assuming the ideal form envisioned in the text. Jean-Jacques opened up his soul to those who could read him right, and his readers felt their own souls elevated above the imperfections of their ordinary existence. Having made contact with "*l'Ami* Jean-Jacques," they then felt capable of repossessing their lives, as spouses, parents, and citizens, exactly as Ranson did a few years later, when he began to read Rousseau (Darnton 249).

In Darnton's account of the phenomenon of Rousseau and his readers, one can see a vivid example of the writer's and his readers' mutual and, to a great extent, successful attempt to reach beyond the veil of print.

In the age of mass print, however, communication happens not only across but also *by means* of the veil of print: the author could never have personally met all the thousands of readers whom his/her book eventually reaches. And the kind of contact that emerges between the reader and the writer's virtual "avatar" or "ideal form envisioned in the text" seems to be a thoroughly modern phenomenon – dissatisfying and contradictory like many other characteristically modern phenomena. On the one hand, there is no direct way for the author to know about a remote reader who reads his/her text with deep excitement and admiration – unless the reader writes a letter or comes up and knocks on the writer's door. On the other hand, the reader's contact with the writer, which the latter cannot feel, is still a kind of personal contact between two specific people – it is *this* writer's book that the reader admires, not anybody else's; it is *this* writer's "ideal form" (Darnton) or "better self" (Booth) that the reader meets in the text.

Conclusion

Drawing on the models of relationship between eighteenth-century writers and readers developed by Tompkins, Bronson, Jackson and Darnton, this article situates these models in a general theoretical framework that conceptualizes the literary text as an interpersonal utterance which, in the age of mass print, needs to be reestablished as such, *re-personalized* by both

writers and readers. To set a scene for reading, the writer must set up, often explicitly in a preface, the three sides of the relationship, the author, the reader and the text, while the reader must create an interpersonal context in which the words of the book become "spoken" again, as if for the first time and specially to this reader.

Notes

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[1] This nostalgia is invoked, for instance, by Peter Brooks in "The Tale vs. the Novel."

[2] For lists of buyers and recipients of Kelmscott books, see Peterson 1984, 1991.

[3] Gratuitous or beneficent (OED) – in either case, bypassing the monetary, market relationship.

[4] A tavern or inn providing complete meals at fixed price (OED).

[5] For an account of the friendship between Fielding and Allen see, e.g., Battestin and Battestin, 1989

[6] For instance, Raven, Small and Tadmor's influential 1996 collection does not mention this aspect.

[7] See Edmund Gosse, 1889, quoted in Rain, 196.

[8] Jackson's dynamic notion of reading as a sort of dramatic spectatorship is reminiscent of Louise Rosenblatt's theory of reading as transaction, where the "poem," the actualized literary work, is not an object but an activity performed by the reader on the text (see e.g. Rosenblatt 1978).

[9] The ultimate source for the concept of "rhetorical situation" is Lloyd Bitzer's 1968 article of the same title – although Bitzer makes only a cursory reference to the communicative situation of the novel as also possibly rhetorical (which, in his definition, is a situation that *necessitates* rhetoric, a performative use of language that effects some change in the audience) .

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