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For an Institutional Literary Critique[1]

Let's consider a literary artefact: a book. To take advantage of it, a whole little factory was put into place, a factory that produces materials, flows, stock, beliefs, experiences, discourses — a factory made of networks, actors, and contracts.

This factory has something extra, like many factories do. It has an invisibility cloak. When it has only barely begun to be set into motion, it covers itself and we can no longer see it. The most radical of these cloaks — and I say so without any pride — are doubtless the French ones. They are white. They are "pure." They are like our book covers. We say that they are white, as with Gallimard's famous collection in France, even though they are not actually white, but cream-colored.

The book cover communicates something more than whiteness. It tells us that it is pure, which admittedly poses some problems, since this association between whiteness and purity dates back to the height of French colonialism. And besides, even when the covers are not white — for example, when they are yellow — they attest to the same idea of purity. All solid-colored covers — whether they be white, yellow, blue, or something else — are actually "white": in France, in Germany (Suhrkamp), and even today in the United Kingdom (Fitzcarraldo). They are like a white cube in a museum or a gallery. They tell us, "on this site, a transubstantiation has taken place": living beings into author names, manuscripts into books, manufactured objects into works of the mind.

The covers speak, and they are actually the first ones to speak about and to produce criticism (conceived of as a secondary discourse based upon the works) of books. And not only are they the first to speak about the books, but they also tell us that we must only speak about books, which subsume the literary. Nothing about what comes before

1 Translated from the French by Jackson B. Smith.

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and not even anything about what comes after in the process of literary creation seems to exist once the editorial utterance has been made. Deep down, the editorial utterance institutes, imperceptibly, an authoritarian and hegemonic discourse. It tells us, "Don't look down!" just as others say, "Don't look up!"

As for us—teachers, researchers, critics, authors, translators—for years, we have told our students or readers, "look up," at the sky of ideas, of beauty, of theories, of text and nothing but text, and so on. We often told them "look up," and rarely "look down," into the world of materials, flows, stock, capital, beliefs, experiences, networks, actors, and contracts. These radical invisibility cloaks thus draw our attention toward the only pieces of information that they wish for us to comment on, from which we are to make criticism: an author's name, a title, potentially a literary genre, and also a publisher's name, presented as a "house." Those are the objects that the editorial utterance offers for literary criticism.

Literary criticism, whether it be academic or relating to the media, is largely ancillary. Not only is it in the "service of," but it is also secondary, consecutive. Nothing designates this ancillary nature more decisively than another editorial practice that speaks in a different way through these covers, which are not stripped down, but are indiscreet, like novelty stores, where promotional blurbs drawn from criticism from the media or the academy are multiplied. Critical discourse, secondary, is then integrated into a primary discourse, which we speak very little about and which is derived from the editorial function. But even if the tone of the discourse changes between these two styles of cover, the objects remain the same.

They are what the literary critic grabs onto. Of course, over the past few decades profound reconfigurations have taken place: a professional crisis for journalistic criticism and for the press whenever it is not in English; the spreading of a semi-professional and amateur criticism in digital spaces in which academics are especially invested, as too are amateur readers; the development of an academic criticism that is interested in contemporary production, with critics exploring audiovisual and digital formats. But these mutations, as substantial as they are, do not draw into question the primary critical discourse that is pronounced by the editorial function and that unfolds on book covers.

In this sense, whether they speak as a white cube or as a novelty store, these covers still say the same thing: there is only instituted literature if there is a book, just as there is no instituted art except through the gallery, the museum, or the white cube. We can speak about whatever we want, so long as we are speaking on the basis of *this*, what one might call bibliocentrism. And literary criticism, as a

whole, regardless of its current reconfiguration, is profoundly biblio-centered.

The function of critical discourse is perhaps, essentially, to maintain, to conserve "this society of discourse," in which, to quote Foucault in *The Discourse on Language*, "the act of writing]…] is institutionalised today, with its books, its publishing system and the personality of the writer."[2]

And, in some ways, one might say that this still works (there has never been as strong a desire to write books as there is today), but it works in an extremely paradoxical way, insofar as the book-institution is destabilised, and on several levels.

Perhaps, and this will be my proposition here, "literature" (this institutionalisation, since the dawn of modernity, of the literary arts in the book) is lacking an institutional critique of the book, just as there was, in several stages, an institutional critique of the exhibition space, of the gallery, of the white cube.

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I am lucky to have a very privileged position of observation for watching this paradox unfold. For ten years now, I have directed the most important—and one of the rare, it must be pointed out—programs of literary creation in France. We have, moreover, chosen the label "literary creation" rather than "creative writing" to show that we do not intend to duplicate the various models from the United States. I will not go back over the shared principle according to which both our models consider that literary creation can be the object of an academic program, as can other artistic practices, especially in the era of massification and democratisation of higher education.

Nevertheless, we diverge on certain principles proper to the United States' models: bibliocentrism; a program focused on literary genres; the class of such-and-such a professor who as such occupies the role of master; individualised literary projects for which one must free up as much time as possible, following this idea that writing corresponds with some form of calling and not with work. Our principles were almost entirely the opposite of theirs: development of out-of-book literary practices (performances, exhibitions, social experiments); literacy in the processes of publication (or publishing literacy); no workshops focused on one literary genre; the development of in situ and collective workshops of literary production aimed at diverse modes of publication; contact with the literary and artistic ecosystem of the Paris

2 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010) 226. Translation modified.

region and its forms of sociability; a reflection on writing as work and employment.

These principles do not dismiss the book-institution, and the desire that one might have for it, since a significant majority of our students want to publish a book with an established publishing house and succeed in doing so—which opens up another literary critical space. I'll get back to that.

But first, a few words on what led us to construct this program, because, from my point of view, it is an apparatus for institutional literary critique. We did not make it solely for intellectual reasons, but because our survival depended upon it. Indeed, literary studies, especially in a university located in a poor and multicultural suburb are undergoing a vocational crisis. This meant that we were no longer going to train students in this critical gaze that is proper to literary studies and that might encourage them to practice literary criticism in the academy or in the media.

By contrast, the hunger for writing and for literary production has never stopped growing. Since we had the means to put ourselves there, we did. And, in ten years, we have, I think, become the most sought after literary master's program (studies and creation taken together) with an admissions rate of 5%—which, by the way, is an enormous problem that we are trying to sort out, since our objective is democratisation, not elitism.

One might believe that what I am conveying here is the end of criticism and of literary judgment. But that's not at all what I think: on the one hand, because a part of our literary teachings are still bibliocentric; on the other hand, and most importantly, because our students spend the better part of their time reading and rereading their own work—individually, mutually, and collectively—and discussing it. They spend their time doing literary criticism.

The difference is that their criticism does not have to do with books, but with texts, and doubly so. First, because, as each of us knows, we do not write books, even if we fantasize about it, rather we write texts that the editorial function transforms into books. Second, because the texts that they discuss are unfinished. They therefore discuss a literary practice that, later, maybe, will result in a book but, in the meantime, will yield a collective reading or exhibition or contribution to a performance or to a collective artistic or social project. Additionally, their criticism is dialogical and contributive (entirely oral in our case, even if the model of a written critique delivered at the end of the workshop can usefully supplement it) inasmuch as it is not public (in the sense of the public sphere of the book or of the press). Rather, it has to do

with a space that, if it is not private, is at least semi-public (the classroom, the studio, the workshop, the rehearsal), and can have an almost immediate effect on the future of the texts.

Viewed in this light, if there is a transubstantiation of the text into a book and of the person into an author, then those who participate in this process are familiar with its highly collective, interpersonal, and even random dimensions. The discussion group and working group apparatuses make up its critical core.

Fundamentally, these things are not new, but we speak little about them. Anyone who has been part of a publisher's or a literary journal's review board knows them well. They represent a very particular critical form whose vocation is not to be public except in the act of publishing that they authorize. It is what weaves the editorial function and utterance, much more than what weaves the author function.

For this reason, those who participate in this program remove the invisibility cloak of which it was a question at the beginning of my essay. And they encourage us—we, being teachers—to do so with them: to discuss, to work, to experiment with materials, flows, stock, beliefs, experiences, discourses, capital, networks, strategies, contracts, and a whole society of discourse whose function is to maintain the book-institution, both as a fantasy and as an institution.

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Yet, what about this book-institution has revealed itself to us, collectively, given that, faithful to the principles of institutional critique, we consider ourselves to take part in that very institution?

What has revealed itself is a very strong tension between democratization and overproduction along with a malfunction of the book's economy.

Democratization and massification since, if there is a field that is not in crisis, at least in France, then it is indeed the field of publishing books of contemporary literature. Never have editors received so many manuscripts (it's a bit like global warming; each year breaks the previous year's record), publishing so many of them. Never have literary creation programs received so many applications. The book market maintains a strong stability, and does this so well that, first, it does not escape concentration and financialization, and that, second, as is the case elsewhere, it stimulates the voracious appetite of multibillionaires (Vincent Bolloré, Bernard Arnault); each city or village in France now has its own literary festival; they are currently in the process of creating a new publishing season in the spring, since those in September and January are overflowing. Everyone wants to hold (or to commercialize) workshops for writing a novel or narrativized work of testimony.

Thus, from a numerical point of view and from that of the masses—not only that of global business, but also that of democratization—in this sector, everything's just great, so long as one considers that growth is an indicator that everything's just great. And besides, it is this growth and the challenges that it poses that must be considered.

For access to various resources—that, like all resources, are not infinite, not least as they concern various gatekeepers (who guard the doors to publishing, to journals, to bookstores, to the press, to festivals, to residencies, to fellowships, etc.) and "consumers" of literature—has become more and more difficult and competitive. The access strategies, to speak as though in the management world, cannot be ignored when thinking about both what is written and what is projected into the desire to produce books of literature. The author's persona has become a crucial issue.

Indeed, if the market remains stable but the number of titles increases, then that materially brings about a very strong reduction in the average print run.

The bright side is that the cost of admission is relatively low for publishing a book. Many can have access, but the pathway into the VIP section is narrow and unpredictable. And, from the spot where most others remain, you do not get to see much of the party.

That being the case, if there is overproduction, then it is above all an overproduction of titles and not of copies. There is a malfunction in this balance.

I am convinced—not ideologically, but because almost every day I spend time with aspiring writers—that this new condition has been completely integrated into their desire and into their work. The strategies for entering into literature and dwelling there take this new condition into consideration.

The book market is not exactly the job market either. It's even worse! At a push, it looks like the ultra-competitive job market of high-tech sectors, for example, but not the job market for services, industry, or the world of agriculture. Like the former and unlike the latter, it is not moving toward rarefication. Like the former, there are ever more newcomers, but they quickly walk back out. The damage is considerable.

This makes it possible to consider the question of personal writings in a different light. From my observatory, both as an editor and as the director of Paris 8's masters in literary creation, I have found that the most effective strategy for entering into literature—and writing is making an entrance—consists in making a persona and a story correspond, and therefore in privileging personal forms of writing with an

autobiographical tendency such that the author is directly incarnated in the public sphere. This aesthetic fact is largely attributable to a malfunction of the market, namely in the titles-to-copies correlation. We can speak about the evolution of the idea of the individual, about contemporary narcissism—that's what literary criticism does, and it is most likely true, but we cannot neglect the ecosystemic dimension that takes precedence over the others. That's what aspiring authors do, and that's what institutional literary critique is.

Publishing follows and reinforces this evolution.

In publishing, this translates into a phenomenon of hyperconcentration, on the one hand, and of atomization on the other. This phenomenon is also global. On the one hand, we have financialized publishing, moving in the direction of large groups, thus in the direction of profitability, thus in the direction of publishing without publishers as André Schiffrin described it,[3] and therefore opening the way for new actors (agents) who partially take on the editorial function (the literary part) but without the dimension of ecosystemic regulation of the chain that it had presupposed. On the other hand, we have a publishing that is more or less supported by exogenous structures, public policy, private foundations, universities, and that is hardly concerned with profitability—a publishing, that is sometimes looking for another economic model, usually a not-for-profit one, with a new balance, an in-between of autonomy and heteronomy. An article that has since become classic, *MFA* vs. *NYC*,[4] had described this movement in the United States. And when I read it in 2010, I told myself that it was an evolution specific to the U. S. and that it was not in danger of occurring in France. Today, I think that it is certainly our future.

A median production is in the process of disappearing, as are average sales figures. The two poles of attraction are quite strong: the mainstream and, sometimes, chosen confidentiality. Such risk-taking, which would entail combining a major radicality of proposals (discomfort) and the broad public, is generally avoided. They are looking for comfort zones, for literature as a transitional object.

We might ask ourselves, but why all of this? Why are large financial groups taking an interest in publishing, which is, after all, not the

3 André Schiffrin, *L'Édition sans éditeurs* (Paris: La Fabrique, 1999).

4 The Editors, "MFA vs. NYC," in: *n+1* 10 (Fall 2010). This article opened such a significant debate in the U. S. that it gave rise to a book, edited by Chad Harbach and entitled *MFA vs NYC: The Two Cultures of American Fiction* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2014).

most profitable market? It is because, in the book system, there was a sort of blind spot, a zone of fragility, that was able to be maintained, except when publishers mastered the chain—and now, in spite of everything, a sort of ethics, though I would not go as far as saying virtue. This zone of fragility makes it so that the book economy is very unique, since points of sale can, under certain conditions, send back unsold books. So long as the publisher regulates the chain, it has no interest in returns, far from it. But there is another actor, the distributor or *diffuseur-distributeur*. The great capitalistic mutation of the 90s in France was the moment when the big publishers decided to invest in the chain of distribution in order to create behemoths that manage the distribution of dozens of publishers. Yet, in some way, the overproduction of titles and the malfunctioning of the book economy are in the distributor's best interest, since it makes money on returns. And since one must find publicity outlets for these new titles, a whole literary ecosystem was developed to bank this overproduction: festivals, salons, exhibited literature, and others. They give all of these almost still-born books that have no resonance with the public sphere of the book a resonance in specific and localised public spaces. And, by the way, it's often pretty cool. Yet, until now, these specific public spaces, which are sometimes undertaking another form of institutional literary critique, have been the object of no interest at all for literary criticism, which finds itself partially disconnected from contemporary literary reality.

What we are therefore seeing develop is a predatory and extractivist system that, furthermore, is on the road to ruin, given the exorbitant ecological cost of its production chain. From my point of view, not one person who inhabits it, and especially not the literary critic, seems to be aware of this, except for these young people who, in the critical space of literary creation programs, realize that they are its raw material. A raw material that, moreover, does not escape from processes of racialization and domination since our student population at Paris 8 includes many non-white and non-heteronormative voices, toward whom the French book-institution—profoundly structured by ideals of whiteness and the patriarchy—is nevertheless partial. Just as we occasionally buy ourselves a treat, it takes a certain pleasure in running through its whitewasher some of those whom it most likely did not want to see until now.

That is the realization to which my students have brought me, and that my training as a literary critic had prevented me from seeing.

And there's a whole heap of problematic elements that suddenly come to light. Let's take just one that is really obvious. Since my university is public and the tuition fees are practically nothing, for ten

years it has therefore been public money that has made these texts emerge and that has perfected them so that, after that, private publishing organizations could pick them up and commercialize them. Among them, there are great publishing successes that have brought in a lot of money for organizations who, at the same time, externalize their editorial work and contribute to overproduction. We are going to have to work on this and in order to do so, we are going to have to remove all the invisibility cloaks.

To make use of the words of the artist and theorist Andrea Fraser, a great figure of institutional critique, "It's not a question of being against the institution: We are the institution. It's a question of what kind of institution we are, what kind of values we institutionalise, what forms of practice we reward, and what kinds of rewards we aspire to."[5]

To me it seems necessary that the literary world convert to institutional critique. Better late than never.

5 Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," in: *Art Forum* (September 2005): 283.