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What Is the Object of Criticism?

What is the object of criticism?[1] In choosing this title, I wanted to take advantage of the double meaning of the word "object". On the one hand, it can be understood as a synonym for purpose or goal: What, apart from its basic task to select, inform, and evaluate, should literary criticism strive to do? On the other, an object is also a thing, a phenomenon—something that is seen, felt, perceived; the matter with which literary criticism occupies itself.

What is this matter? What, exactly, are we—as literary critics—criticizing?

Literature, would be the obvious answer. But what is literature?

This admittedly obnoxious question may in most situations seem superfluous, because we all know *kind of* what we're talking about. In others, and when studied more closely, it can appear so complicated that we'd rather just stay at its pragmatic surface. It is, however, safe to say that with "literature", we do not mean written text in general. We are referring to the institution of what in Swedish is called "skönlitteratur", in German "Belletristik" and in English usually "fiction", as opposed to nonfiction. These texts, we believe, operate under the premise of artistic autonomy. We ascribe them aesthetic value, and regard them as substantially different from other texts encountered in day-to-day life, such as emails, newspaper articles, manuals and scientific papers. We would all agree on the vanity of confining them to an impermeable social category, unstained by history, politics, technology and so on. As we see it, literature cannot be pried away from the external forces that condition its existence—and neither, of course, can criticism.

1 "Criticism" is of course a broad concept, even when narrowed down to "literary criticism". In this essay I will primarily be using the word to denote the practice of reviewing books, for newspapers, literary journals etc.

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Equally obvious is the fact that modern literature has undergone a series of transformations since its genesis at the end of the eighteenth century. Among the most pronounced changes in recent decades are the status and the concept of fictionality. The suspension of disbelief, which up until recently was practically inherent to the act of reading fiction, has been subject to a considerable marginalization. Kendall Walton's famous theory of fiction as make-believe—according to which representational art is presumed to ask its audience to engage *as if* the depicted events were real –simply does not seem apt to describe the aesthetic experience of reading much of the most influential literary works of the last twenty years, works that nevertheless are assigned the label fiction.[2] To mention a few examples: Karl Ove Knausgårds *Min Kamp* (*My Struggle*); the novels of Rachel Cusk; the documentary literature of Svetlana Alexievich; the autobiographical works of Emine Sevgi Özdamar.

To be sure, fictionality has never enjoyed ontological stability. As the literary historian Catherine Gallagher puts it, "the novel is said to have both discovered and obscured fiction".[3] Its strategies for doing so are manifold. But one of them is to question the formal conventions governing the relationship between intra- and extratextual reality: between reader and writer, between fact and fiction. It seems to me, however, that this questioning historically has taken the shape of a sort of immanent opposition. By toying with reader expectations, modern texts have negatively affirmed the dominant agreement against which they position themselves, that is, the "fictional pact": the unspoken arrangement according to which statements made in a fictional text cannot be taken as statements about the empirical world. At the other end of the referential spectrum, we have what the French literary theorist Philippe Lejeune called the "autobiographical pact".[4] Readers of books marketed as memoirs or autobiographies expect the narrator-author to stay reasonably close to factual events. Information in an autobiographical text that deviates from this agreement belongs not to the realm of fiction, but to what Lejeune calls "the order of lying".

I am not suggesting that there ever was a time and place where the categories of "fiction" and "autobiography" flawlessly described each and every literary text published, or that they ever intended to do so. But I do believe that the normative border between these concepts has

2 Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe. On the foundations of the representational arts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

3 Catherine Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality," in: *The Novel. Volume 1: History, Geography, and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 337.

4 Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Édition du Seuil, 2001).

disintegrated so profoundly that they in many cases have lost their descriptive usefulness. The ascent of autofiction to quasi-dominant mode of literary expression is one sign of this shift. But perhaps we should regard autofiction not as a driving force, but as a symptom of a much larger change in the collective structure of interpretation, whose roots and consequences go way beyond literary trends.

To explain what I mean by this, I would like to start by mentioning a much-cited article by the Danish literary scholar Frederik Tygstrup. In *Litteraturens geografi, teknologi og epistemologi* (2015), Tygstrup argues that literature has become less recognizable as a discourse on its own.[5] Its various modes of mediation are increasingly to be found in other spheres. Imaginary versions of reality are everywhere: in journalism, in politics, on social media, in advertising, and so on. One reason for this change, Tygstrup argues, is to be found on a technological level. Literary texts are increasingly disseminated via screens. They have escaped the rigid epistemic vehicle of the book into a space that is much more versatile and interactive, and which they share with other media, such as moving images, sound recordings, etc. This space is populated with representations of subjects, including that of the writer and of the reader herself. In a few seconds, the latter may jump between a literary text, her own Instagram feed and that of the author, experiencing all three through the same device. (To the people reading this, it may sound like an appalling habit; but it is, nonetheless, a common one.)

In a sense, then, we are constantly surrounded by fiction. And perhaps, Tygstrup suggests, this could be one of the reasons why its traditional brother in arms seems to be turning in other directions, towards the lived, the tangible, the "real". Instead of depicting events that are *made up*, literature, it could be said, now strives to find a precise language for those rare experiences that actually aren't.

However, despite all this, literature is not distancing itself from fiction. On the contrary, we're dealing with a kind of semantic expansion. The word "fiction" has come to denote everything from classical realistic novels to thinly veiled autobiographical works, which, were it not for the fear of defamation lawsuits, could just as well be called memoirs. Works of the latter category subscribe neither to the fictional, nor to the autobiographical past. Instead, they ask the reader to agree to what another Danish scholar, Poul Behrendt, refers to as a

5 Frederik Tygstrup, "Litteraturens geografi, teknologi og epistemologi," *Kritik* (2015): 22-30.

double contract.[6] They combine traditional markers of fictionality with signs suggesting an intimate correspondence between plot, characters, and factual reality. They wear the colors of both teams: "A novel—about my divorce!"

The aim of this essay is not to claim any contributions to this ongoing discussion on the current status of fictionality. Rather, I want to ask what the changes outlined mean for criticism. How should we, as critics, engage with the double contract? Where does our area of jurisdiction end, when a supposedly fictitious work refers to ostensibly factual people and events, and by doing so, operationalizes this referential uncertainty in such a way that it becomes intrinsic to its function as a work of art?

Let me illustrate this problem by way of a recent Swedish example. In 2018, the author Alex Schulman published a novel called *Bränn alla mina brev* (*Burn All My Letters*). The book—Schulman's fourth—chronicles a love triangle that took place in the summer of 1932. Its participants were Schulman's grandfather, the well-known conservative critic Sven Stolpe; his wife Karin Stolpe; and the equally well-known critic Olof Lagercrantz.

The book was marketed as a novel. And it does, for the most part, read as one, bearing many typical characteristics of fiction: dialogue, inner monologues, etc. At the same time, Schulman makes use of historical documents, such as letters and diaries, whose contents allegedly support the novel's retelling of events. This dependence is made clear in two ways. One: Through a frame story, where the narrator Alex Schulman—due to biographical details identifiable with the author—examines Sven Stolpe's personal archive, housed by the Uppsala University Library. And two: Through paratextual information, including various interviews with Schulman, where he speaks of the text as "documentary", "true", "based on letters and diaries", and so on.[7]

However, when cultural journalist Lapo Lappin recently reviewed some of the sources in an article for the magazine *Kvartal*, he came to a slightly different conclusion. (Lappin 2023) According to Lappin, the greater picture as it emerges from the historical documents differs considerably from that which is given by the novel. To what extent is still unclear, since Schulman's source material includes diaries kept by—and hardly shared outside—the immediate family. Nevertheless,

6 See Poul Behrendt, *Dobbeltkontrakten: en æstetisk nydannelse* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2006).

7 As quoted in Lapo Lappin, "Schulman och sanningen," Kvartal 2023, March 31. Available at: https://kvartal.se/artiklar/schulman-och-sanningen/.

Lappin shows that the novel departs from empirical reality at several points, some of which are of crucial meaning to the plot. For example, Schulman claims—as narrator, in the novel, and as author, in interviews—that Karin Stolpe's entanglement with Olof Lagercrantz made her husband Sven Stolpe so furious that he tried to kill his wife, by driving their car off a cliff. This car accident/attempted murder-suicide is well-documented. But Lappin shows that it took place thirteen months before Karin and Olof even met. Whether the event was premediated or not is hard to prove. But whatever the cause, it could not have been the affair.

Lappin's article caused a heated debate. Some readers and critics expressed disappointment. They felt deceived, they said, having assumed that what they read was more or less a true depiction of events—that is, after all, what Schulman has testified to in interviews. Others defended the author, usually by referring to the aforementioned fictional pact. For example, David Lagercrantz, Olof's son, said to the newspaper *Expressen*: "A silly discussion. A novel must take certain liberties". Yet, he adds: "But the interesting thing is that Olof's diary completely supports the storyline".[8] Ergo: The book is a work of fiction, whose representation of reality happens to be factually correct. The later part is not unimportant. Because, if it was, why would Lagercrantz even mention it?

To both groups, then, the literary work in question seems to extend beyond the horizon of the text. Its double contract activates a system of referentiality that transcends that of conventional fiction. In doing so, a network of other texts is drawn into its orbit, including both the novel's source material—the diaries, the letters—and the interviews in which Schulman asserts its documentary pretense. In fact, we could go even further. Because it must be taken into account, I think, that Alex Schulman is among the most famous people in Sweden. He runs the country's most popular podcast and writes a column for the biggest newspaper. His wife is an influencer-entrepreneur with over 173,000 followers on Instagram, almost as many as Schulman himself (more than 193,000). Several other family members are minor celebrities, not to mention the luminaries that Schulman is related to, and to whom he repeatedly refers in his novels, columns, and podcast. Every Swedish reader of *Bränn alla mina brev* is familiar with Schulman's mediated persona, and in effect, with his brand.

8 Anna Gullberg, "Hemliga dagboken ger Alex Schulman stöd för 'Bränn alla mina brev'," *Expressen* 2023, April 5. Available at: https://www.expressen.se/kultur/hemliga-dagboken--ger-alex-schulman-stod/.

Post Sainte-Beuve, most critics would perhaps argue that such facts are irrelevant to literary criticism. It is the text that should be reviewed, not the writer. But as a critic—and despite my inclination to value close readings of books over scrutinizing of Facebook feeds—I have become increasingly skeptical of this dogma. It seems to me to be characterized by a certain epistemological naiveté concerning the historical dynamics of the institutions of literature and of the subject. The sharp division between text and author rests on an understanding of both of them as self-sufficient, autonomous wholes, fundamentally independent of one another. Of course, these assumptions have been widely criticized. But what I'm asking is if literary criticism to a sufficient degree has realized the implications of this critique.

To make my question even clearer, I want to turn to a third (and final) Danish literary scholar. In the book *Den menneskelige plet: Medialiseringen af litteratursystemet* (2017), Stefan Kjerkegaard argues that literature to an ever-greater extent takes place in between media. Contemporary aesthetic experience is fundamentally structured by the denaturalization of the book and the text as clearly delineated categories. Thus, Kjerkegaard argues, you could say that the primary structure of a literary work isn't that of an object, but of an event—a continuous series of actions.[9] This is especially true for works operating through the double contract, whose very system of referentiality depends on the reader's engagement in real-world events. From this perspective, a critic wouldn't be able to study Alex Schulman's novel without considering its blending in to other fora, such as his podcast and Instagram feed. Not only do these contain just as much fiction as the novel: they are, in fact, part of it.[10]

What, then, is the object of criticism? How should we make sense of our task, if we want it to expand beyond reading of texts towards a more complex consideration of an artwork's unfolding in time and across media? Would this practice even differ from what contemporary literary criticism is commonly regarded as synonymous to anyway, that is, cultural criticism? Isn't such a development doomed to lose

9 Stefan Kjerkegaard, *Den menneskelige plet: Medialiseringen af litteratursystemet* (Frederiksberg: Dansklærerforeningens Forlag, 2017) 51.

10 In 2022, *Bränn alla mina brev* was adapted into a film directed by Björn Runge. The film version relies heavily on the book, implicitly reinforcing Schulman's version of the story: the car crash is shown in both, and so on. Later soft-cover editions of the novel feature images from the movie on the cover, as well as the statement: "Nu som storfilm från SF Studios" ("Now as a blockbuster from SF Studios"). The movie, then, is in some sense part of the novel, the novel part of the movie.

sight of the text as well as of personal integrity, and to descend into formlessness, anecdotes, exhaustion?

I don't know. But in professing that, I don't think I'm alone.