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Literary Judgement and the Fora of Criticism

Nobel Symposium (187)

Edited by Mats Jansson, Sandra Richter and Gisèle Sapiro

Wallstein

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Foreword

The Nobel Symposium "Literary Judgement and the Fora of Criticism" was financed by the Nobel Foundation and the Swedish Academy. It took place in Stockholm, June 6-10, 2023, and was organized by Mats Jansson (Project Manager), University of Gothenburg, Sandra Richter (Assistant Project Manager), University of Stuttgart / German Literature Archive, Gisèle Sapiro (Scientific Advisory Group), EHESS Paris, Rita Felski (Scientific Advisory Group), University of Virginia, Ástráður Eysteinsson (Scientific Advisory Group), University of Iceland.

The Editors

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Mats Jansson and Sandra Richter
Introduction

Judgement and criticism are eighteenth-century ideas: from Pierre Bayle to Immanuel Kant, philosophers conceived of the human being as a rational and emotional entity, a self-confident personality who should be able and willing to assess his environment in a more or less homogeneous public sphere populated by educated white European men. According to this historical point of view, individuals were supposed to judge. Yet, at the same time, the need for judgement had already turned into a profession in the eighteenth century: literary criticism.

Criticism thus became a vital element of the work of literary institutions and the concept of criticism an integral part of the public sphere. Judgements were designed to be addressed to the public and communication with the reader became a formative part of the system. Because of this relationship with the reading public, criticism and critical reflection lost their private character. Criticism invites debate, it tries to persuade, it opens itself to contradiction, and by doing so criticism contributes to the public exchange of opinions. In a historiographical perspective, the modern concept of literary criticism is intimately linked to the rise of the liberal, bourgeois public sphere in the early eighteenth century.[1] During this period criticism found its printed form in the literary review, which was to become a relatively stable genre for more 250 years. The commodification of the book market and the rise of a new consumer culture throughout the nineteenth century comprised a structural transformation and fragmentation that left the model of the liberal public sphere untenable, also affecting the institution of criticism.[2] A division of labour between

1 See Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *The Institution of Criticism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 1982), 52.

2 Hohendahl, *Institution*, 73-74.

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journalistic criticism in daily newspapers and essayistic and academic criticism in magazines and journals arose, also related to the institutionalisation of literary studies in academia. Communicating with a large anonymous readership through growing numbers of daily newspapers with increasing editions or specialised periodicals addressing an informed group of readers could both be seen as consequences of the intensification and commercialisation of culture. According to Habermas, the effects of the growing mass culture with its privatisation of culture consumption later contributed to the breakdown of the once homogenous public sphere.[3] During the nineteenth century critical institutions changed accordingly. Literary criticism eventually became a professionalised and specialised activity carried out in the printed media, a process related to the professionalisation of journalism, in the end of the nineteenth century with the right of association and the legalisation of trade unions.[4] This process inevitably separated the critic's role from the primary social conditions of the bourgeois public sphere.

The diversification of the conditions and channels for criticism continued during the twentieth century and increased with the addition of new media such as radio and television. With the arrival of the internet in the last decades of the century, the field of criticism underwent a permanent and radical change. At the beginning of the twenty-first century a new order had been established in the field. Neither literary works nor value judgements were to be found where previous canon-makers and arbiters of taste had put them.[5] Book reviews, writer portraits, critical essays, literary debating programs, blog posts, and literary festivals[6]—literary criticism is no longer a genre but an activity that takes on many shapes. Taking all its printed and digital forms into account, a current typology of literary criticism would have to be immensely diverse. It would also recognise a striking elasticity in 'criticism' as a descriptive concept, making room for both short and shallow and long and deeply probing varieties—in printed and/or digitised form. It may be that the current plurality of voices in cul-

3 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991), 159-74.

4 See Marie Carbonnel, "Les défis de l'Association syndicale professionnelle de la critique littéraire de la Belle Époque à la fin des années trente", *Le Mouvement Social* 214, (2006, 1): 93-111. Abstract in English.

5 Phillipa Chong, *Inside the Critics' Circle. Book Reviewing in Uncertain Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

6 See Gisèle Sapiro, "Literature Festivals", *Journal of World Literature* 7, (2022, 3): 303-31.

tural and literary debates calls for a more heuristic definition of criticism as a concept.

Current debates have focused on the 'new public sphere' and what this posited new situation might entail for criticism. The internet 'decenters' the public sphere, calling forth new forms of computer-mediated interaction.[7] The increasing medialisation and digitisation of the public debate about literature creates an array of collective sub-publics in which more or less renowned individuals or groups can enter into conversation and create opposing discourses, allowing them to engage in dialogues within the groups and also to comment on the literary and cultural institution at large or to attack them.[8] The motley crowd of blogs and chats, booktokers, booktubers, bookstagrammers, and websites such as Goodreads etc. have further differentiated and deinstitutionalised criticism.

This new digital media landscape has led to a shift, not only in the way criticism is read, but also in its function in the broader literary climate. With the increasing number of platforms where literature is criticised and discussed, literary texts that were once assessed and approved by cultural authorities in a hierarchical system are now judged by a horizontal network of lay and professional readers, who in the case of self-publication can decide for themselves what should be published and read and what should not or need not be. The fact that a growing number of amateur experts discuss and review art and culture suggests that this so-called de-professionalisation process going on might rather be seen as a specialisation, increasing as it does collective knowledge about the subject area.

One effect of criticism is its potential impact on sales, making a book product known to a readership and hence to future buyers. Criticism today, is part of and subject to what in recent decades has been characterised as "the attention economy" and is in several ways influenced by it. In an age of distraction and in a society overflowing with information and goods the crucial problem lies in capturing the attention of readers/consumers. Richard Lanham has argued that in post-industrial capitalism the source of economic value is no longer the production of commodities as such but rather the attention that these

7 See James Bohman, "Expanding dialogue: The Internet, the public sphere and prospects for transnational democracy", in *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere*, ed. Nick Crossley and John Michael Roberts (Oxford, U. K.: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) 131-55 [139].

8 John Michael Roberts and Nick Crossley, "Introduction", in *After Habermas*, 14-16.

commodities are able to capture.[9] Lanham therefore places disciplines of rhetoric and style—design, advertisement, marketing—at the very centre of the attention economy. In its rhetorical struggle for the attention of potential readers and buyers, literary criticism in some of its forms pays heed to these disciplines. Through the plethora of digital platforms and various social media, critics can now reach larger audiences and more effectively distribute their critical ideas and evaluations, provided that the voices can make themselves heard in the ever-louder concert of attention seekers. The attention economy offers new possibilities of dissemination and engagement for literary criticism, but it also brings challenges when it comes to the potential influence of market dynamics. The blogging culture is, as Beth Driscoll has shown, in various ways inextricably interwoven with the market, the publishing industry, and its commerce. Some bloggers are paid for their jobs in the book industry, for example by selling advertising space, and are therefore not amateurs. However, she claims that another aspect of their professionalism counters the commercial, in that bloggers preserve an autonomy that is grounded in their authentic and trusted opinions to the benefit of other readers. In fact, amateur blogging can also have commercial value and marketing effects, mainly in drawing attention to newly released books.[10]

Book bloggers are tastemakers through the expression of individual and group taste cultures, be it mass-market fiction or highbrow literature.[11] Taste has to do with personal preferences, but it also positions the blogger as literary reviewer in a social structure. Expressing cultural or literary taste also comprises the distaste of others' taste, to paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu. Taste classifies the classifier.[12] In their social roles reviewers and critics are part of the infrastructure and institutional architecture that shapes and circulates taste in the cultural industry and book market of the early twenty-first century, David Wright explains.[13] Taste is thus an integral part of what he terms "the liking economy", to be taken as a corollary to the attention economy, where books are given attention (or not) and are evaluated through

9 Richard A. Lanham, *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 1-41.

10 Beth Driscoll, "Book blogs as tastemakers", *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 1 (2019): 280-305 [282, 301].

11 Driscoll, "Book blogs", 283.

12 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London and New York: Routledge, 2010 [1984]), 49, xxix.

13 David Wright, *Understanding Cultural Taste: Sensation, Skill, and Sensibility* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 144.

various liking systems (thumbs up, stars, lists etc.), making the cultural products visible as commodities on a market and potentially increasing commercial activity.[14] Long before the digital liking culture, in the end of the nineteenth century, novelist Henry James in a critical essay claimed that no aesthetic analysis can beat the I-like-test: "Nothing, of course, will ever take the place of the good old fashion of 'liking' a work of art or not liking it: the most improved criticism will not abolish that primitive, that ultimate test."[15] James' self-assured dictum predates the evaluative element of current blogging culture where bloggers seem to cultivate the immediate liking (or disliking) of the book at hand. Historically, though, taste has been an inseparable part of our engagement with aesthetic objects and thus a component of literary criticism since taste was first systematically theorised in the eighteenth century.

Criticism at large of course also comprises forms and fora of criticism that function as counterweights, sometimes as an outspoken policy, to consumerist approaches to culture and the monetising logic of the market. Literary journals and magazines, in printed form or online, devoted to deeply probing, reasoned, well-argued critical analyses of literature are still vital channels for criticism. Concerns have also been raised—and downplayed—that the myriad of opinions about literature that the internet in its boundlessness mediates, threatens traditional criticism in its printed form. Rónán McDonald has claimed that current "dilation" of criticism is also "dilution", which calls for authoritative critical voices challenging readers to take on more advanced and unfamiliar literature, a function that would best be served by criticism whose evaluations are informed by academic reasoning.[16]

Whatever form literary criticism takes and whatever function it serves, literary criticism always deals with judgements and evaluations. What is advanced or antiquated, beautiful or ugly, good or bad, pleasing or disturbing? We want to know, especially when it comes to something as fascinating and as difficult to assess as literature. What is the secret of literature that makes for amazing reading experiences or for relevance in a variety of arenas? Why is the meaning of literature not easily consumed, how does it reject all attempts to be understood or used, only to be even more useful, invigorating and necessary? And

14 Wright, *Understanding*, 161-64.

15 Henry James, "The Art of Fiction", in: Henry James, *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 44-65 [57].

16 Rónán McDonald, *The Death of the Critic* (London: Continuum, 2007), 7, 16, 146.149.

how can we cultivate our judgement, our intuition, our cognitive abilities, and our taste so that we know what and how to read?

It is because of the dazzling character of literature and the whole literary field that literature is so hard to judge. Who could grasp characters as scarred as in Morrison's *Beloved*, a plot as diversified as in Pynchon's *V.*, a style as experimental as in Sarraute's *L'usage de la parole*, a tone as dry as that of Herta Müller's *The Hunger Angel*, an atmosphere as magical as in Mahfouz's, García Márquez's or Rushdie's tales, to say nothing of the structural complexity of a modern novel such as Gao's *Soul Mountain* or Gaddis's *J.R.*? Which perceptions should be part of aesthetic judgement and how should these be brought to bear? Assessments of suspense in a text, the ways in which a text is structured, the innovations of its style, its references and self-references, its political and ideological content? There is no formula for literary judgement and its engagement with the text.

What is generously dubbed as 'judgement' is often nothing but a nuanced description: a written and limited account of a reading experience that may arouse disgust, lukewarm feelings or enthusiasm for a book and its author, a more or less elegant manoeuvre in grey zones. Judgement means a statement for or against a book that is shaped by multiple factors: a position in an agency, a publishing house, within a circle of literary critics competing with each other, an occasion for talk in a book club or at a coffee table, a note on social media with which someone wants to raise attention, perhaps strengthen her intellectual profile and increase her cultural capital, an act that both consecrates and demands authority at the same time.

The history of aesthetics has shown that objective criteria for value judgments are difficult to contend with and intersubjectivity hard to reach. Values may be relative, but this does not make them arbitrary. If so, what parameters do we use and how? As John Frow points out, judgements of value are always choices made within specific regimes.[17] This does not mean that regimes determine the judgements in question, but that they specify ranges of possible judgements, and particular sets of appropriate criteria. In so doing, they exclude, of course, certain criteria and judgements as inappropriate or unthinkable. Regimes do allow for disagreement, albeit limited. In a sense, disagreement is only really possible when relevant parameters or rules of engagement can be commonly accepted. The romance book club, the online community for fantasy literature, the highbrow poetry magazine constitutes specific regimes within which literary values are produced, discussed, and tested.

17 John Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value* (Oxford, U. K.: Clarendon Press, 1995), 144-55, here: [151].

In the end, it is through literary judgement that the process of evaluation, selection and maybe even the canonisation of a literary work begins or is further developed. This happens in the various fora of criticism, be they private or public, non-profit or commercial, where thoughts, feelings and power play a role and where criticism and ultimately literary judgement may only be able to prove themselves if they engage with the text that is being judged. Canon thus results from practice. Literary texts do not form a canon by themselves—they land there because people, and in particular literary critics have read them throughout history, and expressed their opinions about them, always with more or less controversial and debatable results. Canon is a cultural and man-made construct and not a monolithic one. It is conditioned by aesthetic, political, ideological and/or religious value systems. As such canon can always be challenged, revised, rewritten and perhaps even discarded. Burning questions arise concerning the relationship between the centre and the periphery. Where does the world begin? The literary world? All answers involve critical activities. In our globalised world of book production, some say over-production, the decision to translate and translation are discriminatory acts involving selection and evaluation, i.e. criticism.[18] What books, for example, are to be selected for translation and thus allowed to enter the worldwide anglophone circulation system? Answering this question is only possible if the various national literatures and linguistic spheres have been subjected to the basic mechanisms of literary criticism. Whose foundations are, of course, always open for discussion.

Sociological and media perspectives on criticism are crucial for the understanding of its material conditions, but we also need to consider that criticism is a particular type of text. Critical texts, presenting a form of metalanguage, are conditioned by the objects upon which they focus. Michael Riffaterre has characterised criticism in the form of essayistic writing on literature as a category of expression that paraphrases, quotes, and interprets pre-existent artefacts.[19] The critic not only describes but also develops the figurative forms he or she is commenting on. Thus, the figurative language of the novel or poem influences and determines the critical language, generating a new set of tropes and figures born from the literary work. Even without the critic being conscious of it, the figures and rhetorical devices of the literary text may have such a powerful impact that they decide the

18 See Gisèle Sapiro, *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur mondial?: Le champ littéraire transnational*, Paris 2024. (Forthcoming in English on Polity Press).

19 Michael Riffaterre, "Litteraturkritikkens diskurs", transl. Claus Bratt Østergaard, *Ny Poetik. Tidsskrift for Litteraturvidenskab* 3 (1994): 97-110.

critic's choice of words and formulations. Criticism may thus appear as literature in the second degree, through images and figurative accounts of the poem's images or figurative accounts of the world. Thus, the intertextual approach to criticism draws our attention to distinctive features of the critical language. Literary fiction itself may indeed take the form of criticism, for example in using the language of parody or pastiche to comment on other literature, consciously borrowing its stylistic traits. The double role of the writer-critic is particularly thought-provoking, as a reviewer presumably using his or her personally acquired language when writing about someone else's language. Writing literature and writing about literature using the same pen or keyboard inevitably creates interrelations within the writer-critic's own *œuvre*.

The critical text need not be regarded as a subservient imitation of the object text, but quite the opposite. It tells its own story of a specific meeting between a reader and a literary work within a given historical, social and institutional framework. The critical text as alleged parasite gives birth to something completely new. The critic looks closely but keeps her or his distance, formulating independent observations and saying something new about the artwork, new to the readers and to the writer as well. In this sense it would be more relevant to characterise the critical text as involved in a dialogic situation. The critic enters a dialogue with the literary work, answering its call in an affirmative or rejective evaluative discourse, which may indeed also address the writer directly. The review or critical text is a response in a public discourse about literature that furthermore involves a reaction from the review reader. The notion of dialogue not only applies to criticism in printed media and the relation author–reviewer–reader. In a concrete sense current digital criticism indeed allows for reviewers and bloggers to respond to and comment on each other's readings and reviews, initiating digitised dialogues about literature.

This volume thus addresses an array of questions relating to the forms, functions, and significance of literary judgement; the conditions and consequences for criticism in a gradually transformed postwar media landscape; the changing role(s) of the critic over the last decades; the medialisation of criticism as reviewing and its rhetorical and generic effects; the ascription and dissemination of literary value for a growing but diverse global readership; the implications and consequences for writer, critic, and reader of criticism becoming digitised.

The contributions in this volume were initially delivered at the Nobel Symposium "Literary Judgment and the Fora of Criticism" in Stockholm, June 6-10, 2023. They have been revised before publication, allowing for varied formats and styles of citation.

The content of the volume is organised in thematic clusters. The first section addresses authors as critics and their dually challenging activities, highlighting the problematics of double roles and critical language and focusing on fiction as criticism in itself. Novelist Camille Laurens discusses the double role of critic-writer, speaking from her own experience as critic in the daily press and as prize-awarding member of the Académie Goncourt. However different the judicial criticism of a literary prize-jury and the journalistic criticism in the daily press, she finds herself working with the same language, her language also as a writer, a language with which she is deeply invested, aesthetically and morally. Juan Gabriel Vásquez points out that certain works of fiction—*Don Quijote, Hamlet, Ulysses*—can be read as criticism of fiction itself, whether of genres, mechanisms, or particular works. Since the modern novel was born with this kind of critical act by Cervantes, it is common practice that fictional works or scenes contain acts of literary criticism which are an integral part of the plots themselves, thus reflecting on the activity of discussing literature as a transformative experience. Zeruya Shalev bears witness to the intertwining of criticism and literature throughout her own career as a writer with its ups and downs on the way to success. In particular, the seminal influence of her father, by profession also a literary critic, proves to be a challenge to wrestle with and in hindsight to overcome and to be reconciled with. Daniel Kehlmann testifies to the double-edged function of criticism for the professional writer, who is constantly working under the pressure of being reviewed. Reviews are craved and feared. They can at worst have a negative impact in terms of real and symbolic capital, and yet they are also needed to puncture the bubble of narcissism under which writers work, to keep them on their toes. He concedes that the writer is the powerless part in the critical system, who however on occasion also turns critic in writing book reviews.

Literary criticism functions within a social and public institution. Zoltán Kulcsár-Szabó centres on the structural transformation of the literary public sphere and how recent technological revolutions in communication, especially networked digitalisation, have affected certain factors of literary criticism, first and foremost the distinction between so-called lay reading and professional criticism. Following a quick overview of debates on criticism around the millennium in Hungary, he provides a case study of a fierce critical debate in a Hungarian online literary forum in 2007-2008, where anonymous contributors, among them amateur and professional critics, exchanged their views on the intertextual practices of Péter Esterházy's novels. Above all, the debate revealed that the implied ideas of authority over texts expressed the need for authenticity and originality precisely in an (on-

line) medium of communication that, in general, seems to throw away these principles in its everyday textual practices. Literary criticism, whether it be academic or mediatic, is largely ancillary, Lionel Ruffel contends. Not only is it in the "service of," but it is also secondary, consecutive. It maintains a discourse according to which 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. Perhaps "literature" is lacking an institutional critique of the book, just as there was, in several stages, an institutional critique of the exhibition space and of the white cube. What does one see when one lifts up this invisibility cloak that forms the covers of books? This is what Ruffel attempts to uncover in his article, working from a situated position as director of the most important program of literary creation in France. From his double perspective as a poet and critic Magnus William-Olsson offers a poetic listing of statements on the function and relevance of literary criticism in an era of economic overabundance and with the internet overflowing with information. He presumes that criticism in this so-called new public sphere might indeed, as a counterweight to the market mechanisms of hyper-capitalism, involve public libraries and librarians as critics.

The third section features essays that showcase the practice of criticism from contemporary perspectives. Florencia Garramuño reflects on the function of literary criticism in contemporary Latin American cultures from an intermedial and intercultural perspective. She takes her cue from Argentinian writer Sergio Chejfec's *Modo Linterna* (2013, *Flashlight Mode*) and form award-winning works of Brazilian authors Silviano Santiago—*Machado* (2016)—and Teixiera Coelho, *História Natural da Ditadura* (2006, *Natural History of the Dictatorship*). Recent developments in literature and the arts are characterised by transgressions between media and genres, raising fundamental questions of belonging, individuality, and specificity. This calls for a repositioning of literary criticism away from the dominant hermeneutical paradigm to adequately respond to the transgressive challenges of the new and current art forms. Christopher Odhiambo Joseph privileges postmortem as a theoretical trope, that is, a signifying criticality of reading and generating meanings in artistic imaginaries of war in Eastern Africa. War, similar to death, can only be understood in its aftermath, that is, through a postmortem. Arguably, postmortem as a critical analytical lens offers significant insights into the impact of war on individuals, societies, and cultures. As such the trope postmortem invites a criticality that enables a dissecting of the anatomies of three artistic imaginaries: A film *Ni Sisi* (2013) by SAFE-Kenya, *Murambi, The Book of Bones* (2000) by Boubacar Boris Diop and *Thirty (30)*

Years of Bananas (1993) by Alex Mukulu. Ostensibly, postmortem as a theoretical trope in the context of this article, draws inspiration and reflections from the reading of Wole Soyinka's poem, "Postmortem". Since its emergence, modern literature has been closely associated with the concept of fiction, as opposed to non-fiction and autobiography. Though neither of these terms ever enjoyed ontological stability, Rebecka Kärde argues that cultural, technological and social changes of the last decades have blurred the lines so profoundly that these concepts frequently fail to describe the dynamics at work in much of contemporary literature. Specifically, "autofiction" is not to be regarded as a genre, but as a symptom of a change in the collective structure of interpretation. Drawing on the debate surrounding Alex Schulman's novel *Bränn alla mina brev* (2018, *Burn All My Letters*) and on literary scholars such as Frederik Tygstryp, the article asks what this change means for literary criticism. What is its "object", when supposedly fictitious works refer to factual people and events, operationalising this referential uncertainty in such a way that it becomes intrinsic to their function as artworks?

We live in a global world where literature, criticism, and translation inevitably intersect. In this international context questions relating to canon, historiography, periodisation, and the Nobel Prize are addressed. Ronya Othmann begins by highlighting literary criticism as a public discourse: What role does literary criticism play in times of crisis? Where does it find its place between traditional and social media? How are freedom and criticism connected? And why is speaking publicly about literature so important? Othmann asks a series of essential questions and contends that in times of fragmented and smaller public spheres, there is a need for a place where all the particularities can be brought together, in all their plurality. A lively literary criticism is always a polyphonic one. It is at the same time a democratic practice (no homage to genius), and in no way democratic (no consensus and such). It is solely in the service of literature (whatever it may be) and evaluates it (with whatever criteria). A crisis of criticism is always a crisis of democracy, and vice versa. In the disparate, and oftentimes divisive world that is global publishing, the Nobel Prize in literature is one of the few literary prizes that can be awarded to authors regardless of their nationality, country of origin, language, literary genre or readership within or without the geographical sphere of their published work. Arguably, it is the most international literary prize. These are circumstances which set the ground for Xu Xi's thought-provoking question: how does translation of the world's literature, in particular into the English language, affect an author's consideration for the Nobel Prize? She contends that the problem of English is the problem

of critical judgment skewed in favor of Anglo-American culture and values that dictate what is valued "universally" by humanity and fails to fully embrace the world's actual humanity. Richard Jacquemond investigates the gap between the literary value of an Arabic work as defined locally and its value abroad and the feedback effect of translation on the national scene. This intricate system of the production of literary value is tied to 'Orientalism', the set of knowledge, representations and institutions that is constructed in unequal relations between Arab societies and the Euro-American centers where these are still operating. Jacquemond detects three intertwined literary fields or spaces, in which the value of an Arabic literary work is created: the national literary field (Egyptian, Lebanese etc.); the transnational Arabic literary field; and the Orientalist field. He finds that in recent decades the last two have taken over from the first in the creation of literary value. How value is created in a transnational context is also considered by Galin Tihanov. He centres on the relationship between value and period in literary history, notably the nature and value of Romanticism and its various forms of post-Romanticism as responses to modernity. He emphasises that Romanticism and its versions of post-Romanticism demonstrate that the dissemination of value necessarily transcends conventional periodisation and that value is accrued asynchronically. Tihanov introduces the term "syndrome" in order to specify Romantic and post-Romantic discourses as reactions to modernity in different European countries and also includes China in order to broaden the geographic perspective. Here translation proves to play a pivotal role in introducing European Romanticism in a Chinese context that grapples with modernity in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The digital era has brought fundamental changes for the practices, forms, and functions of literary criticism. James English studies the quantitative systems for rating works of art and literature, especially the prevalent star rating systems in current digital media where the most dominant platform is Goodreads, which he also places in the history of star ratings, most notably Edward J. O'Brien's *The Best Short Stories of 1915*. Goodreads is found to resemble O'Brien's system superficially, whereas it in fact is more closely aligned with the rating schemes developed by *Consumer Reports* decades later. The rating system of Goodreads likewise allows for negativity in providing reviewers with a sharper tool for indexing their disappointment than their esteem. Mark McGurl centers on BookTube as a forum to manage the problem of current literary hyperabundance, which is met by a corresponding abundance of BookTube channels reviewing and discussing books. To what extent and in what way could booktubing be

termed 'literary criticism' in a professional sense? To clarify, McGurl positions BookTube on the map of contemporary criticism relative to other forms and fora of criticism. He points out that longer BookTube videos can in fact in their strongly evaluative language also contain 'formal analysis' of sorts. The related but shorter BookTok format however hardly qualifies as 'criticism' in any meaningful sense of the word. McGurl highlights the ranking video as a particularly successful subgenre, adapted as it is to the requirements and limitations of the attention economy. Phillipa K Chong explores the evolving landscape of fiction reviewing following the upheavals brought about by digitalisation in the early 2010s. She traces the shifting dynamics of professional and amateur reviewing, the impact of digital platforms, and the blurred distinctions between traditional and online media. She weighs up concerns about the displacement of professional critics by amateurs and the changing nature of literary discourse and considers how reviews influence readers' choices and, conversely, how audiences' behaviors affect reviewers' writing in the digital age. Moving beyond an adversarial "us and them" framing of professionals vs. amateurs, she argues for an ecological perspective that emphasises symbiosis, diversity, and the well-being of the ecosystem as a whole. Such a view allows us to consider the broader societal implications of book reviewing as a collective and collaborative endeavor that reflects the multidimensional value of books in our society and in our lives.

The Art of Criticism; Criticism as Art

Camille Laurens

Art is Easy, but Criticism is Difficult

When I was young and spoke negatively about a book, my father, who had a whole collection of phrases to quote at hand, often said to me: "Criticism is easy, but art is difficult". I was to understand that creating something by oneself was more difficult and therefore more noble than shamelessly criticizing what others had done. However, at the same time, this remark was contradicted by an exercise I did at school, which I recount in one of my books, called *Encore et jamais*[1] (*Again and Never*). In fifth grade, we were given excerpts from Stendhal or Victor Hugo to read and told to improve them, in particular by looking for colloquialisms and repetitions. The assignment was as follows: "Show that, in the following passages, the author's vigilance is lacking. What corrections could a more demanding writer have made to these fragments?

Without doubt, this is where my vocation came from, at the age of ten: after all, that more demanding writer was me! So it was through criticism that I became a writer. I am not a writer who was offered, at some point in her career, the chance to become a literary critic, I have been a literary critic since childhood, who, having studied texts extensively, then became a writer. There is a cliché that critics are failed writers. Well, conversely, writers are often successful critics. Having read a lot, annotated, analyzed their readings, they establish a very personal relationship with the language of a text. Jean Starobinski, author of a book rightly entitled *La Relation critique* (*The Critical Relationship*), writes: "[I]n this relationship, I hope that one is a critic with all one's faculties, as one is a writer with all one's being."[2] The informed work of the critic thus engages the being of the writer, it is

1 Camille Laurens, *Encore et jamais* (Paris: Gallimard, 2013), 57.

2 Jean Starobinski, *La Relation critique* (Paris, Gallimard, 2001 [first edition: 1970]), 51 (my translation).

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through these two that the text comes together. So I wish to be both a critic and writer, with all my faculties and all my being.

Thus it is wearing two hats that I express myself today: as a writer (since 1991) and as a "professional" critic, both in the press (notably in *Le Monde des livres* until 2022) and in literary juries—the Prix Femina from 2007 to 2019, the Académie Goncourt since 2020.

Discussing criticism as a writer falls into two categories: the critique I write and the criticism I receive. How do I, as a writer, judge the texts of my peers? But also, how do I myself apprehend the criticism of my books?

The activity of literary criticism is also subdivided into two categories (one could add a third one, academic criticism, but I leave it aside, having had little opportunity to practice it). These two critical practices consist, on the one hand, of writing reviews for a daily newspaper like *Le Monde*, and on the other hand, of taking a critical look at books in order to determine which one will finally receive the Goncourt prize.

I will begin by saying a word about this prize. The choice of the Académie Goncourt has to conform the will of Edmond de Goncourt. This will requested the establishment of a society of ten authors, all writers—this is important: they are not journalists—who would once a year reward "a work of imagination". This clause is a point of contention almost every year. In 2018, Philippe Lançon's work, *Le Lambeau*, was not awarded the Goncourt prize on the grounds that "it was not a novel" because the author related the Charlie Hebdo shooting, which he had survived, severely injured in the face. However, in 2022, it was an entirely autobiographical text by Brigitte Giraud, *Vivre vite* (*Live Fast*), about the death of her husband, that won the award. This criterion is therefore less and less relevant and one can consider that any narrative that does not fall within the genre of the essay is "a work of imagination ".

Edmond Goncourt's "supreme wish", according to the will, was also that this prize "be given to youth, to the originality of talent, to new and bold attempts at thought and form", but it is rare to find these three criteria combined in the same author. The winner of the 2021 prize, Mohamed MBougar Sarr, with *The Most Secret Memory of Men,* fulfills all the conditions. I'll come back to this in a moment. Age is rarely taken into account and usually an established writer is the winner. The historical origin of the prize remains, by contrast, sensitive in the frequent choice of works that could be described as "naturalist". Certainly, the 2020 prize awarded to Hervé Le Tellier's for *L'Anomalie* (English trans.: *The Anomaly*, Penguin-Random House, 2022) is a blatant counter-example since the novel plays with the codes of

mystery, science fiction and OULIPO. But most of the prize-winning novels set a fictional story in a social and/or historical context, as in the case of Michel Houellebecq, who in *La Carte et le territoire* (2010; English trans.: *The Map and the Territory*, Heinemann, 2011), denounces the brutality of neo-capitalism and the excesses of Western society, or the winner of the 2018 prize, Nicolas Mathieu, painter of the lives of ordinary people and the voiceless in his novel *Leurs enfants après eux* (English trans.: *And Their Children After Them*, Other Press, 2020). Another marked characteristic of the novels considered "goncourable" consists in a strong historical and political dominance: people expected *Le Magicien du Kremlin* (*The Magician of the Kremlin*) by Guiliano Da Empoli to win in 2023, because it dealt with immediate current events with its portrait of Putin. However, it was the more intimate novel by Brigitte Giraud that won, proving that all this is not set in stone although still very much linked to the DNA of the prize.

Criticism as a juror for a literary prize is very different from the journalistic criticism such as I could experience at *Le Monde des Livres*. For a prize, it is necessarily macroscopic, because I have to read a hundred novels in order to find the one that meets the criteria of a collective choice. For the press, the readership matters less, and the reading is much more precise.

To speak about this critical work, I have to come back to the particularity that makes me talk to you today: I am a writer. It is from a writer's position that I write my critique. Virginia Woolf, in a 1937 text, humorously evokes the author of a travel guide who only has to put one, two or three stars: thus "the whole of art criticism, the whole of literary criticism could be reduced to the size of a sixpenny bit—there are moments when one could wish it." "But," she adds, "this suggests that in time to come, writers will have two languages at their service; one for fact, one for fiction."[3]

I would argue that writers have only one language for criticism and for their personal work. Whether they create or comment, they use the same language and have the same relationship with it, which is anything but neutral.

Writer-critics as I conceive their role don't read a book with an external viewpoint as a critic would do, because they work with the same medium. As a writer-critic, you delve deep inside the book you have to comment upon or judge. This means not only that you empathize both with the author and with the characters, but also and

3 Virginia Woolf, "Craftmanship," in Collected Essays, vol. 2 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966), 246-47.

first of all that you write while reading, that you slip subliminally into the author's place. However, you are not the author, you are not the one who chose the form or the sentences or the words or anything. Sometimes you didn't even choose the book: you were asked to discuss it. This is where my father's aphorism is reversed. Art is easy but criticism is difficult. Indeed, the blank page gives the writer complete freedom, that of absolute choice of everything. This can be a source of anguish because one has to decide. After having thought about a subject, a form, one has to decide on each word, each comma, and this freedom is a dizzying one. But it is easy in the sense that the only obstacles are internal, you can work to overcome them. On the contrary, when you are faced with someone else's text, you have no room for freedom. You do not act, you react; you do not feel, you sense; you do not create ex nihilo, you interpret an existing text. Reading is a form of rewriting the text, which the reader appropriates. Criticism is only an extension of the reading that critics write with their own words. As the Italian writer Cesare Pavese points out, "everything is language in a writer who deserves this name. It is enough to have understood it to be in a very alive and complex world where the choice of a word, an inflection, a rhythm, becomes at once a problem of morals, morality. Or downright political".[4] Paul Valéry, in his course on poetics recently published by William Marx, goes even further: "The form […], contains by itself a true ethical value, a value of elevation of the individual, because it leads to denying oneself the majority of the facilities which, in some cases, are likely to deprave in some way the aesthetic and literary soul of a nation."[5]

Thus, working with the texts of others, writers-critics are as attentive to the choice of words and rhythms as they would be at the time of composing their own texts, and the literary stake is a capital stake because it is also ethical and political. The critical work will thus consist in assessing the work with the stakes it carries and which it claims to bear witness to.

For example, as a reviewer I am shocked when a novelist features women shorn at Auschwitz just before entering the gas chamber and describes the "immense shimmering carpet" of their hair. I feel this adjective inappropriate, unethical. I agree with Pavese's statement that "the choice of a word becomes a problem of morality." When writing

4 Cesare Pavese, "Lire," in Pavese, *Littérature et société* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 41; "Leggere," in Pavese, *La letteratura americana e altri saggi*, 223-24 (my translation in English).

5 Paul Valéry, *Cours de poétique II*, ed. William Marx (Paris: Gallimard, coll. Bibliothèque des idées, 2022), 505-06.

about a subject like this, it is important to bear in mind the long-standing debate on the representation of the Holocaust.

To stay with Pavese, if it is not words that sound wrong, then it is a form, a rhythm. To take a controversial example, if a writer stages a narrator recounting in a personal notebook the death of her four-year-old son and only reveals on the very last page of the book how her son died, then in my opinion, the form does not suit the literary purpose. To construct a book of mourning as a thriller is to miss the point.

Let there be no mistake. Writer-critics do not wish to censor the work of one of their peers. Simply, you judge as a witness and your testimony answers to a personal perspective and a personal ethic. Writers testify to what a book does to them, to feelings and thoughts that it produces in them. It is an exercise in subjectivity. Certainly, they are enlightened witnesses, they do it and must do it with the help of theoretical tools and knowledge of the socio-cultural context of the publication but also and especially with their own sensitivity. A book is an encounter and as the writer and editor Dominique Aury said: "Books are a way to reach people. When you read a manuscript, you immediately see who is behind it."

The writer-reader that I am is looking for a relationship "from soul to soul", according to Rimbaud's wish. And when I do not find it, or when this soul seems to be little animated by literature, I say so.

On the contrary, great books are not only up to their stakes but these stakes are universal, timeless. Thus, I wrote a review of a new French translation of *Don Quixote* showing how this masterpiece by Cervantes questions us today about the virtual worlds that shape our daily lives. And in August 2021, I wrote the very first review praising Mohamed MBougar Sarr's novel, which went on to win the Prix Goncourt a few months later. At the time, he was unknown, even to members of the Académie Goncourt. In my review, I showed how the novel's labyrinthine form and interwoven narratives reveal the complexity of the world and human history. I highlighted the references that make this text a universal tribute to literature.

Finally, I must specify that in my opinion, literary criticism speaks of literature, but it is not itself foreign to literature. I write my reviews as I write my novels. I pay attention to each word, to the construction of the paper, to the general melody. I reread my reviews aloud, like each page of my novels, to hear them resonate. I write by ear, whatever the type of text. One language at my disposal, remember.

On the other hand, logically, as a writer, I support criticism, even the most searing, as long as it is in line with the same values: knowl-

edge and ethics. Let's take the example of the critique of my novel *Dans ces bras-là* by Pierre Jourde, author of *La Littérature sans estomac*. Jourde is exasperated by the "general truths" that the narrator (whom he calls "the documentalist" because it is her job in the novel) claims to reveal about men. I quote him: "They are so made—it is their nature. There are people who know. Camille Laurens knows. It is normal, she is a documentalist. She is informed. She conveys a message: since the beginning of time, man is man, and he will always be man."[6]

Not only does the critic Jourde confuse the narrator with the author (I am not a documentalist, I have the same university degrees as he does) but in his critical rage he forgets all his knowledge. Thus, in the incriminated passage, I mixed sentences from women's magazines and quotations from moralists and great classic authors (for instance, "They are so made, it is their nature" appears in *Les Caractères,* by La Bruyère. And there are a lot of other ones in the text. Blinded by the desire to see only what he wants to see, the critic misses the irony, the sarcasm that has to be taken with a grain of salt, the parody, the quotes, in short he misses what is at stake in my text, which is itself critical. The tools of analysis which he has and uses elsewhere are not solicited for my novel. The misogynistic bias is obvious and I have the weakness or naivety to believe that Jourde's book, which got a lot of attention 20 years ago, would be received more coolly today.

To conclude, I will end this presentation with a form of pirouette that I borrow from Virginia Woolf, often a sharp literary critic but a writer above all:

> At any rate, where books are concerned, it is notoriously difficult to fix labels of merit in such a way that they do not come off. Are not reviews of current literature a perpetual illustration of the difficulty of judgement? "This great book," "this worthless book," the same book is called by both names. Praise and blame alike mean nothing. No, delightful as the pastime of measuring may be, it is the most futile of all occupations, and to submit to the decrees of the measurers the most servile of attitudes. So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters; and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say. But to sacrifice any detail of your vision, a shade of its colour, in deference to some Headmaster with a silver pot in his hand or to

6 Pierre Jourde, *La Littérature sans estomac* (Paris: L'Esprit des péninsules, 2002), 149-50.

> some professor with a measuring-rod up his sleeve, is the most abject treachery.[7]

Criticism is therefore neither easier nor more difficult than art. In both cases, whether you are a writer or a critic, the same motto applies: do not sacrifice your vision, and avoid treachery.

7 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* (Oxford, U. K.: Oxford University Press, 1992), 138-39.

Juan Gabriel Vásquez

Fiction as Criticism
Notes From a Novelist's Diary

Thursday

I begin taking these notes on the plane to New York, in the middle of the night, while the other passengers sleep in this gigantic soulless tube, and only one or two lights in the whole plane give away those who still have the strange habit of reading paper books. I am usually one of them, but not today: I am reading Edith Grossman's translation of *Don Quixote*, which I'm using like a first aid kit to prepare a paper that I must write. There is no sin in reading it in English: Jorge Luis Borges used to say that the first time he read *Don Quixote*, he read it in English, and then, when he discovered Cervantes' original, he thought it was a bad translation.

In the second part of the novel—which Cervantes published in 1615, ten years after the first—the bachelor Samson Carrasco meets Don Quixote and Sancho. The bachelor has read the first part with admiration, but he thinks that perhaps the author could have omitted some of the endless beatings Don Quixote suffers. Sancho disagrees: "That's where the truth of the history comes in," he says. "They also could have kept quiet about them for the sake of fairness," replies Don Quixote, "because the actions that do not change nor alter the truth of the history do not need to be written, if they belittle the hero. By my faith, Aeneas was not as pious as Virgil depicts him, or Ulysses as prudent as Homer describes him." And the bachelor concludes: "That is true. But it is one thing to write as a poet and another to write as a historian: the poet can recount or sing about things not as they were, but as they should have been, and the historian must write about them not as they should have been, but as they were, without adding or subtracting anything from the truth."

In Samson Carrasco's words there is a whole system of poetics. Cervantes expects us to understand that this book, the book of Don

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Quixote's adventures, belongs to history, not poetry; and he wants, therefore, to make room for all the life left out by other genres. In this conversation, fiction becomes aware of itself, discusses its mechanisms, and begins to consider its place in the world. Cervantes was very clear about his aims: his critique of books of chivalry was also the desire to invent a space where real life, life as it is, could be worthy of the sustained attention of readers. A space where he could stage his mistrust of what he calls, in the opening pages of the novel, the "impossible absurdities."

Today, flying in the middle of the night over (I think) the island of Cuba, it occurs to me that this page is one of the places where the modern novel is born. A reader has read a book, and comments on it.

The modern novel is born with an act of literary criticism.

Friday

Conversation with Valeria Luiselli in a Jewish restaurant on the Upper East Side. We discuss her latest novel, *Lost Children Archive*, in which a couple whose relationship is in trouble embark on a road trip to the southern border of the United States, taking their children with them, and fill the trunk of their car with boxes of documents, as they are both writers and travel under the pretext of working on their projects. The novel likes lists; it exhaustively enumerates the books the woman carries: *The Gates of Paradise*, by Jerzy Andrzejewski; *The Children's Crusade*, by Marcel Schwob; *Belladonna*, by Daša Drndić; *Le goût de l'archive*, by Arlette Farge; and *Elegies for Lost Children*, by Ella Camposanto. The latter is fictional or apocryphal, but it serves the same purpose as the others: to construct meaning. In indirect ways, all the books the woman carries are a commentary on the facts of this fiction: they are the critique of the action, just as Don Quixote used romances to construct his adventures.

The wife, for her part, realises that the husband also carries his box of books, which "at first glance seems like an all-male compendium of 'going on a journey', conquering and colonizing: *Heart of Darkness*, the *Cantos*, *The Waste Land*, *Lord of the Flies*, *On the Road*, *2666*, the Bible". I tell Valeria that these choices are also a commentary on the couple's conflict, whose personal library is a metaphor for who they are: their books are a critique of their life. Ricardo Piglia once said that criticism is a form of autobiography: you write your life when you think you're writing about your readings.

In James Wood's *The Nearest Thing to Life* the reverse argument is wonderfully built: the penetration of life in criticism. "Literary evalu-

ation—deciding whether you like or not a work, how good or bad it is and why—could not be separated from the general messiness of being alive." The essay ends with an evocation of the pianist Alfred Brendel, who, when giving his lectures on music, used to sit down at the piano when he wanted to illustrate a particular opinion. "But something remarkable occurred when he quoted," Wood writes. "Even to play a short phrase, he became not a quoter but a performer, not merely a critic but an artist-critic". It occurs to me, perhaps excessively, that certain pages of some of my favourite fictions, when they reflect on literary matters, are like performances by an artist-critic. This is what happens in chapter 47 of *Don Quixote*, when the priest and the canon discuss the virtues and defects of novels of chivalry; it happens in "Pierre Ménard, author of *Don Quixote*", Borges short story, in which a man decides to rewrite Cervantes' novel using the same words, one by one.

This warrants further thought.

Saturday

For Baudelaire, there is no artist of value who is not at the same time a critic. In "What is Criticism For?" he goes even further: "Just as a beautiful painting is nature reflected by an artist, the best criticism will be that same painting, reflected by an intelligent and sensitive spirit. Thus, the best chronicle of a painting could be a sonnet or an elegy." Is this true? In a brilliant essay on Kafka, George Steiner says: "There is a sense in which works of the imagination of sufficient seriousness and density always enact a reflection on themselves … Incomparably, our truest analyst of drama is Shakespeare, Cézanne's paintings enforce a persistent consideration, unrivalled in depth and economy, of the nature and modalities of pictorial representation."

In the century of *Don Quixote*, European arts become strangely disposed to self-reflection: *Hamlet* reflects on theatre; Velázquez's *Meninas* reflects on painting; in a lighter mood, almost insolently, Lope de Vega writes a sonnet whose only subject is the writing of the sonnet itself. The novel, when it was not yet called a novel because the word designated other genres, reflects on itself from its very first pages, and does so through criticism of the genre that precedes it. When I say that the modern novel is born with an act of criticism, I am also thinking about the obvious: Cervantes interrogates the romance of chivalry that has dominated prose fiction for decades, and he finds in it something insufficient.

Don Quixote is not only a critique of chivalric romances, of course, but it is that first and foremost: its origin is the essential concern for

a man who cannot distinguish between reality and romances. Don Quixote is not a critic: he is not someone who discriminates. He could have been a writer; we are even told that several times he wanted to "take up his pen" and try his hand at the unfinished romance *Don Belianís de Grecia*, "and no doubt he would have done so, and even published it, if other greater and more persistent thoughts had not prevented him from doing so." Don Quixote is not an author, then; he prefers to be an actor: the protagonist of a non-existent story. When he goes on his first adventure, he imagines the wise man who will one day write them, and goes so far as to compose the beginning in his head: "No sooner had the rubicund Apollo spread over the face of the wide and spacious earth the Golden strands of his beauteous hair, no sooner had diminutive and bright-hued birds with dulcet tongues greeted in sweet, mellifluous harmony the advent of rosy dawn …" These are the worn-out formulas and commonplaces of epic tales. In *Don Quixote*, criticism often takes the form of parody.

But more importantly, we see him reading the book of his adventures: reading, in his present actions, the future book that a wise man will write about him. In short: we see him reading the book of himself. I write these words and think: where have I read them before? And suddenly I seem to remember: aren't they in *Hamlet*, in the scene where we see him walking with his nose in a book, just before a delirious conversation with Polonius? I decide that *Hamlet* will be my airplane reading—my airplane re-reading—for the flight back home.

Sunday

Another red-eye, another night crossing over the dark sea.

Hamlet has always given me the strange impression of being a novel that hadn't found the right form. Sometimes I like to imagine that Shakespeare doesn't die in 1616, but that he lives long enough to know the translation of the second part of *Don Quixote* that Thomas Shelton published four years later. What would have happened? Perhaps nothing, because the spirit of Cervantes' is one of irony and comedy, and tragedy only enters the novel a couple of centuries later: with Stendhal and Flaubert and Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. But it's still interesting to think about.

What book is Hamlet reading when Polonius comes to meet him? We don't know: "Words, words, words," he says when he's asked. I, on the other hand, can't seem to find those words, the words I vaguely remember: a reference to Hamlet reading his own book, perhaps by Polonius, perhaps by the kings who see him enter the room. Where

do they come from? I remember a passage from *Time Regained*— which I read again last year, in the days when readers of Marcel Proust were silently (or otherwise) commemorating the anniversary of his death. Marcel reflects on the novelist, who is not a creator, he says, but a translator: since we all carry a book inside us, the novelist's task is not to invent it, but to translate it. Elsewhere he says, if I remember correctly, that a novel is like an optical instrument that helps us to see what we have not been able to see. But each reader, he says, is the reader of himself.

Time Regained is one of the great works of criticism I've ever read.

Perhaps I'm confused; perhaps my memory is attaching Marcel's words to the scene in *Hamlet*. Another sentence from Borges's short story comes to mind. "Menard has enriched, by means of a new technique, the arrested and rudimentary art of reading", Borges writes: "the technique of deliberate anachronism and erroneous attributions". And then, just when I am giving up, I suddenly remember: I remember the words I was looking for, their origin and even the title of the book where I read them, which appears to me as if written in fire on the black background of the night sky.

Monday

Early in the morning, at my apartment in Bogotá, I reach for my copy of Joyce's *Ulysses*, a novel that can be read entirely as an intricate act of literary criticism: not only because each chapter evokes an episode of *The Odyssey*, but also because its proceedings are often a parody of the styles of English literature, just as *Don Quixote* parodied novels of chivalry. The episode *Oxen of the Sun*, as Don Gifford and Robert Seidman inform us in their annotations to the novel, is built exclusively with parodies. There is the Anglo-Saxon alliterative prose: "Before born babe bliss had. Within womb won he worship". There are the Arthurian legends: "This meanwhile this good sister stood by the door and begged them at the reverence of Jesu". There's Jonathan Swift: "An Irish bull in an English china shop". The rest of the paragraphs are parodies of Laurence Sterne, of Charles Dickens, of Walter Pater, of Thomas Carlyle.

In the chapter we know as "Scylla and Charybdis", Stephen Dedalus has arrived at the National Library, and we catch him in the middle of a conversation about Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. "And we have, have we not, those priceless pages", says the Quaker librarian. The pages he refers to are those in which Wilhelm, after translating *Hamlet*, stages his own version of the play; Goethe's readers tend to assume that the

passage is not as fictional as it seems, that Goethe uses Wilhelm to write his own piece of criticism about Shakespeare. "A great poet on a great brother poet", says the librarian. The conversation continues; a couple of pages later, a man called Mr. Best, who turns out to be the Deputy Director of the Library, recalls a poem by Mallarmé, *Hamlet and Fortinbras*, in which the poet describes a staging of Shakespeare's play in a village in France. The impresario subtitles it *Le Distrait*, the poem says, because he understands that no one else matters in this play: there is only a hero, surrounded by extras. Mr. Best recalls a line from the poem: *il se promène, lisant au livre de lui-même*. He walks about, reading the book of himself.

Stephen then begins to expound his personal theses on *Hamlet*. His point of departure is what we may call his theory of ghosts: "What is a ghost?", he asks. "One who has faded into impalpability through death, through absence, through change of manners." An then he asks: "Who is king Hamlet?" He then recalls the premiere of the play, in which Shakespeare played the role of the king and the prince was played by the great Richard Burbage. And Stephen wonders: "Is it possible that that player Shakespeare, a ghost by absence, and in the vesture of buried Denmark, a ghost by death, speaking his own words to his own son's name (had Hamnet Shakespeare lived, he would have been prince Hamlet's twin), is it possible, I want to know, or probable that he did not draw or foresee the logical conclusion of those premises: you are the dispossessed son: I am the murdered father: your mother is the guilty queen, Anne Shakespeare, born Hathaway?"

In other words: Shakespeare uses *Hamlet* to accuse his wife of adultery. Stephen's biographical criticism meets some resistance when the others censure him for prying into Shakespeare's life. But he insists: Anne Hathaway's betrayal was so painful for Shakespeare that his plays can be interpreted as a lifelong attempt to erase that suffering. Then comes his final theory: Anne Hathaway's lovers, he argues, were none other than Shakespeare's brothers, Richard and Edmund. Is it perhaps a mere accident that these are two of the most loathsome characters in all of Shakespeare's work (in Richard III and King Lear)? Is it not too much of a coincidence that Richard seduces a widow named Ann, and ends up keeping her?

Stephen the critic has finished presenting his argument. He has identified the victim of the crime, the accused and the accomplices, and has determined who the culprits are. And suddenly I remember: the word "critic" comes from the Greek *kritēs*, meaning *judge*.

Zeruya Shalev

Fate and Judgement

My father, Mordechai Shalev, was a literary critic. By the time he was twenty he had already published a number of scathing reviews of the new Israeli literature, claiming it suffered from a poverty of ideas, confusion and vacuity because it had broken away from the cultural heritage of ancient Jewish literature. He was an ambitious critic who strove to shape public opinion rather than simply judge it.

For this reason, it is of no surprise that when he became a parent, my father took extreme care when choosing bedtime stories to read to his children. He regarded conventional children's stories as inferior in quality. By the time I was three years old, he was already introducing me to the heights of world literature. He read us biblical stories, as well as stories by S. Y. Agnon, the only Hebrew writer ever to win the Nobel Prize. He read us excerpts from *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*; by the age of five I was already listening to Franz Kafka at bedtime.

I remember one particularly turbulent winter evening of rain and thunderstorms, when there was a power outage in the village where we lived. We lit candles and gathered together around the dining table and my father began reading to us in a clear voice, his face illuminated by the candles and the lightening. He was reading Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. I do not recall how far through the book we got, but by the time the power returned, I was a different person. The gates of consciousness had opened and a new guest had entered, ushering in a gloomy, threatening and confusing world.

Not long after this stormy evening I encountered Kafka's *Before the Law*, the disturbing paradox of the man from the country, who dared not break the rules in order to enter the gate of Law. I still recall how much I identified with this poor man and how concerned I was for his fate. What was his sin and why was he being punished? I wondered with fear in my heart, because he had

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acted in accordance with what the doorkeeper said at the entrance to the Law.

Occasionally our father would explain these literary masterpieces to us, not just the language, but also the hidden meanings. He regarded these literary works as riddles that must be solved, and he regarded the literary critic as someone able to read the hidden meanings, someone who knows better than the writer himself the underlying layers of the text.

I clearly remember visits of writers to our home, particularly Amos Oz and A. B. Yehoshua, whose works my father frequently critiqued. He interpreted their hidden intentions with jubilance, and they sat facing him, shocked by aspects of their work that had never occurred to them. A. B. Yehoshua even referred to this as "mini psychoanalysis".

I am not convinced it is a good idea for a writer to grow up in the home of a literary critic. Not that I regarded myself as a writer during those years, I simply wrote. As soon as I had mastered the Hebrew alphabet I began writing poems and short stories. It was as Kafka described in Max Brod's ear—a badger digging itself a burrow. Inside my own burrow of words I felt safe and protected. But outside of the burrow, literary criticism prevailed. From time to time I would copy my poems and short stories in legible handwriting on a clean page, so that another pair of eyes could read my words. Why exactly, I wonder now, could I not make do with the unadulterated pleasure of writing? With that transcendental feeling of inspiration, when words flow of their own accord, one after the other? I probably needed positive reinforcement. Despite the anxiety, I also needed recognition, or just a reality check. The hierarchy was clear—I first showed it to my mother, who was always quick to enthuse. If she liked it, I showed it to my brother and only then did I dare show it to my severe father. Sometimes, as I stood in front of him while he read my text, I felt like that man from the country who stood before the Law.

At the age of twenty-nine, I published my first book of poetry. It was a little late coming, considering I had already accumulated a vast number of poems, many of which had been published in newspapers and journals. Moreover, I had been awarded a literary prize some years earlier that was intended to fund publication of a book. But I hesitated, year after year. This was mostly due to my father's advice to wait awhile, to let my writing mature. He believed that each literary creation (including literary criticism, which he regarded as an artistic creation in and of itself), required breathing space, a hiding away to facilitate a moment of reacquaintance with the text. It took him months to write his critical essays, rewriting them over and again before they

were finally published in the newspaper, and indeed they were read with bated breath.

I followed his advice, I matured so much I began to feel I was rotting away. It was that same need, so familiar from my childhood, that won the upper hand: the need for recognition, for positive reinforcement, a reality check. Finally, after carefully selecting poems, I approached publishing houses. To my immense joy, the manuscript was accepted.

This first slender book of poetry won prizes and critical acclaim. Finally, I was satisfied, after years of hesitation and doubts standing before the Law. When I was offered the chance to move over to the other side—as a literary critic of a local newspaper in Jerusalem—I agreed with alacrity. I told myself that getting paid for reading a book could not be such a bad deal.

I failed to consider that reading four books a week might be too intensive and might well affect my appreciation of each book. Soon enough, I became a scathing critic; my eyes hunted down and invariably found weaknesses in literary works; I even took pride in exposing them.

Luckily for both the books and their writers, I quit this job after only a short while and began working as an editor in a publishing house. Every so often, when a literary magazine approached me, I wrote a review, enabling me to dedicate more time to the work and the words, experimenting with a psychoanalytical interpretation and revealing the motives hidden even from the writers.

For better or for worse, this is how I met my husband. I was asked to review his poetry collection. I read it with excitement and a deep sense of familiarity. My analysis of his hidden motives disturbed him, and he contacted me. That, in fact, was the last time I ever wrote a review.

From that time onward, I chose to apply my critical tools to editorial work, where improvements and corrections can still be made, not only to highlight weaknesses in the text but to address them. To this day, I prefer to read my writer friends' unpublished manuscripts rather than their finished books.

Soon after that, I penned what is likely to be my last poem. Surprisingly, what seemed to me to be a poem was, in fact, the beginning of a novel. The lines grew longer, and the pages multiplied. I dug a burrow, devoting myself to the protagonist who cried out from deep within me, a young and wild woman who dares to rebel against her maternal duties and challenges both herself and the readers in a kind of tragic stand-up comedy.

Two years later, when the novel was accepted for publication, my father asked to read it. It was a provocative novel, not the kind of

novel a daughter would want her father to read, and yet I couldn't give up hope. I procrastinated as long as possible, and just to be sure, I handed it over to him only after final editing and proofreading, when it was impossible to change anything or halt publication.

And yet, my father said it was a great pity the book had already been sent to press. He said I should have put the book away for a few months, returned to it, reacquainted myself, and worked on it some more. The book has potential, he said, but it needs to mature. If it is published in its present form, it will be a miscarriage, he said.

I panicked but did not follow his advice. My editor loved the book, my husband too. The publishing house had big hopes for it, and so did I. However, in August 1993, when the book saw the light of day, I had my fair share of darkness. The reviews focused on the protagonist's moral judgment, character, and choices. The protagonist's aggressive attitude triggered counter-aggression, and her lack of empathy alienated her from the critics. Unlike my poetry collection, this debut novel was received with antagonism and miscomprehension.

Back then, book reviews were reserved for weekend newspapers, and I remember the anxiety of waiting for those reviews. For months, I shuddered at the sight of newspapers stacked in local stores. In each of these newspapers, another public humiliation might be lurking, more mockery and insults for the book I wrote with such enthusiasm. Sometimes I thought of the reviews I myself once wrote, and felt shame.

One weekend, an incredibly humiliating review was published. This upset me so much that I went back to bed, and only the insistent ringing of the phone forced me out of bed a few hours later. To my surprise, it was my father. Don't despair, go on writing, he said, don't give them that power over you. Years later, my husband told me how he stood beside my father, begging him to give me encouragement.

This failure left me hurt and anxious. I was afraid the editors at the publishing house would no longer trust me and that I would be fired. I lost faith in my new book and lost faith in myself as a writer. I decided to write only poetry, but the words would not come. Occasionally, I tried my hand at short stories; most of them I never finished. I focused on editing other writer's books and tried to be content with that. Occasionally, readers told me how much they enjoyed my book, but this only deepened my sense of a missed opportunity.

More than two years passed before I felt another strong wave of inspiration, an alertness of words that gathered around me. Suddenly, my writing flowed again and, much to my surprise, I found myself liberated from the anxieties and expectations that had accompanied the writing of my first novel. I probably "breathed deep" the "vivifying

air" of failure, as Samuel Beckett so ingeniously put it. It had already happened; I had overcome it, I thought to myself. But most of the time, I did not think. I was simply happy that the words were back, that I had found my way back to my burrow.

It was precisely then, when I was not expecting anything, that I suddenly became popular again. Everything turned upside-down. Even my father, who received my book only after it was bound and printed, was almost satisfied. The dreaded newspapers overflowed with compliments. I was beside myself, although I still flicked through the reviews with suspicion. After all, if I let myself believe all their words of praise what would I do with the words of condemnation that would surely follow. Don't give them that power over you, I told myself.

Thirty years have since passed, and six more novels. I have yet to develop a Buddhistic attitude of temperance toward literary reviews, and I tend to shield myself from them, particularly during the first vulnerable months after a new book is released. I read these reviews long after they are published, when my feelings are less raw, by then I find them of interest irrespective of my own self-judgement. I have no cause to complain. Since my debut novel, all my books have been well received, but the trauma still stings. Whenever the time comes to exit the burrow with a new book, I always feel as if I am about to stand trial.

Meanwhile, my debut novel has been the subject of many academic research papers, but I remain alienated from it. Occasionally I come across it in the library, and I peek into the book and then close it abruptly, like a bad memory.

It was only earlier this year that I had the nerve to read it from beginning to end. For the first time, I felt able to see that this book is a part of me, to embrace the wild and confused protagonist, to feel compassion for her and to even marvel at her bravery. Having said this, it was easy for me to pinpoint sections of the book that had not fully ripened and, furthermore, the potential that lay between the lines. Almost imperceptibly, I began rewriting the book, giving it a motherly caress I had been unable to give it back then. Or perhaps it was a fatherly caress?

Is this what my father meant in that difficult conversation so long ago? I wondered, is this what I would have done back then, if I had taken his advice? At the end of the day, he was right for the most part. It was bitter and painful like a miscarriage. He wanted to save me from this. On the other hand, isn't failure sometimes a milestone on the way to success? Perhaps if I had listened to him I would have missed my chance?

As I rewrote the book, I came across a body of writing on Kafka's trial which my father completed before I was even born. In it, he points

out how Kafka annuls the notion of fate since the external progression of events depends entirely on the protagonist. The only judge exists in the protagonist's inner self; it is here that the power of judgement lies. The same thing applies to the doorkeeper — after all, the gate was wide open and this is why the sin of the man from the country was his very request for permission. Instead of listening to the doorkeeper he should have overcome the internal obstacle and continue on his way.

Is there consolation, or even redemption, or is it an insufferable existential journey? This is the question that will likely remain open, just like that gate of Law.

Daniel Kehlmann

On Being Criticized — *A Few Psychological Remarks*

In 1959, the legendary Austrian comedian Helmut Qualtinger performed a surreal skit about a plumber, a car mechanic, and a telephone operator, anxiously waiting for their reviews in the evening papers. "The critics came to the house yesterday," the plumber, played by Qualtinger, says in a heavy Viennese dialect, "so something will be in the papers today." To which the car mechanic replies: "I don't care. I never read that stuff."

Then someone brings the papers, the plumber eagerly starts his search and presently reads out: "Mr. Zargitsch displays good plumbing skills and a solid performance, as we already know from his extensive activities in the suburban communities. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for his faucets to become leaky and drip after a short while." At this, the plumber flies into a rage: "What can I do with such bad material! That guy should try to do my job! He can't do anything but criticize!" But the next review is even worse. "The only truth that can be stated about Mr. Zargitsch's seals is that they are sloppily installed. There's dripping, and what drips is not humor, only water." — "My God," the plumber shouts, "is this supposed to be witty? That man is ruthless. He'll destroy a livelihood for the sake of a joke!" An actor comes in. The car repair man asks him whether you just have to sit back and let reviewers insult you, to which the actor calmly replies: "Oh no, *you* don't! Look, you can set up a bathroom for that guy that will annoy him his entire life. And if he wants to have dinner here, Mr. Waiter, what can I tell you, you know what to do! You all know what to do. There is only one group that can do absolutely nothing. You see, and that's why only artists get reviewed."

The funniest thing about this skit is, of course, that its surreal premise has become reality. In a world of Yelp and Google and Amazon, every contractor, every restaurant, and most taxi drivers live under the constant pressure of reviews. So, we, the artists who have

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always lived with them, can actually be helpful and tell the rest of humanity what it feels like.

Of course, a big piece in *Le Figaro*, the *New York Times* or *Frankfurter Allgemeine* is still slightly more powerful than a Yelp review. Or maybe not. I do still buy books that the New York Times hates, but I do not go to a dentist some stranger on Google Maps tells me is a dilettante. Of course, long articles in serious papers are still better written than the best reader reviews on Amazon—except quite often, they are not. At a time when the whole world gets reviewed, somehow the spark has left the world of cultural reviewing. As we all know, even rave reviews do not sell books anymore. We, the artists who love to claim we do not read them, are now often the only people left who still read our reviews.

My first book was published by a small Austrian publisher when I was 22 years old. The first review appeared in a large Austrian newspaper. Reviews were still a big deal back than, and obviously I had no coping mechanisms in place and I was very nervous. My first reviewer said my book was so bad that it should be flushed down the toilet and, hopefully, I would never write anything again. That same afternoon I got a phone call from a friend, an experienced actor, who just said: "Get used to it!"—"But listen," I answered in an unsteady voice, "this is so unfair, it's so mean, it's so … Who does something like that, and how can they publish that, and, no, I have never met that guy, never even heard of him, and …"—"Daniel!" he interrupted. "Just get used to it." Then he hung up.

Did I? Do we ever? All my adult life, I have heard writers talk about reviews; over and over, I have heard them say things like: "I don't mind bad reviews. I just don't like *unfair* reviews. I want a reviewer to try to understand the book on its on own terms, try to understand what I wanted to do, try to not impose rules that were not the rules I was going by when I worked on it—if someone does that, I don't mind any criticism." This is, obviously, wrong. Writers want to be praised. As long as they are praised, they are basically fine.

And on the other hand, I have heard professional critics say over and over: "It's all pretension. Writers just want to be praised. As long as they're praised, they are fine." Which is, obviously, wrong. Writers are not that simple and not that vulgar. As long as a reviewer tries to understand the book on its own terms, we really do not mind criticism … that much. Even though we still prefer praise. Who wouldn't?

Writers definitely want reviews to exist, otherwise anyone could be a writer, but we are also deeply scared of them, because we think

bad reviews are really harmful to us—except we know that no one reads them anymore, and we know that being reviewed well is a matter of pure chance, except, of course, we also know that creating good work will exponentially increase our chances of being reviewed well, except we still know it is basically a matter of luck.

And, despite all that, we absolutely want to be reviewed. A book that does not get reviewed is considered as good as dead. It is not true that a bad review is also helpful, that is something people will say to you when they try to console you, but do not believe them: a bad review is bad. But it is true that no review at all is worse than a bad review, except if it is a devastating review. In that case, no review is indeed better.

The eternal question is, of course, how much harm such a negative review will do in terms of real and symbolic capital. The obvious answer is: none. Except it is also: a lot. But then ultimately none whatsoever. Except it will keep some people from reading you, which is the ultimate harm the world can inflict on a writer. "Not the sting," as Norman Mailer put it, "but the pressure."

"Don't worry," friends will say to you. "This thing in the *Guardian* was mean, but no one will take it seriously. It's obvious that it has nothing to do with your book. That guy had his own agenda. Really, it's nothing!"

"Yes," you will respond, hopefully and already half-convinced. "That might be true. Yes, yes. So, what did you think about the new Thomas Pynchon? I can't believe he wrote a book again—isn't it great?"

"I don't know," your friend will answer. "I didn't read it. The *Guardian* said it's a trainwreck. Did you see those terrible passages they quoted? My God."

"Yes," you will answer, now half-persuaded to not read the new Thomas Pynchon. "Those quotes really sounded bad."

And they did. Because everything quoted to prove bad style seems like a valid proof of bad style.

The system of cultural reviewing has a paradox at its core. It is an important feature of public discourse, but, at the same time, it is strangely excluded from public discourse. Because if you feel that someone makes an incorrect claim about your work, there is no recourse you can take, no higher court, literal or metaphorical, to which to apply, no king's messenger who will show up to right the wrongs. I could write a review of the last novel of Juan Gabriel Vásquez, in which I state: "It's not too bad, just the Vienna chapter is a failure." How would Juan Gabriel react, what could he do? It is simply my

informed opinion. So, what is he supposed to do with the fact there is no Vienna chapter in his book? He could, of course, write a letter. It might even be printed. Or he could tweet about it. What would then happen? Absolutely nothing, except some people might say, "This Vásquez guy is really thin-skinned; he doesn't take criticism well."

You probably think this example is a bit far fetched. It really is not. I have tales of unbelievable injustice and stupidity and meanness and gross deeds of base hatred committed towards me over a long writing career. Would I like to tell them to you? Oh, yes, in great detail. Would you like to hear them? Of course not. Why would you? That's my point.

But don't get me wrong: This unfairness of the system is—despite being really, really bad—a good thing. Because look at us. As a writer, you are self-employed, you do not have a boss, you never get to experience what it means for most people to get up every day just to spend that day in an office among people you despise, subject to the whims and aggressions of a superior you detest and, worse, who detests you. We are among the few people allowed to surround ourselves exclusively with people who are nice to us. With family and friends who keep telling us that we deserve all the awards and all the praise, and our writer friends, who tell other writers exactly what is wrong with our latest book, but are certainly not going to tell us. The way our world works, only billionaires get the option of living inside such a colorful bubble of narcissism. Which would be fine, it works for the billionaires, but it is really bad for writers. We tend to lose the edge, the despair, the sharpness, and pain that makes the work of young writers relevant. At some point, writers either turn bitter and lose touch or they turn into well-fed, happy, successful celebrities who feel secure and sure of being valued exactly in the moment when the world ceases to value them. So, how do we keep the reality principle from sneaking out on us? It is a not a trivial question.

Well, among the few things that still have the power to puncture that bubble of narcissism are reviews. Not so much because they let us know what is wrong with our work (even though that might be the case), because we all secretly know exactly what is wrong with our work anyway. No, the review game punctures the bubble of narcissism *because* it is so unfair, because it is such a brutal matter of hit or miss. To quote Tom Stoppard: "For every thousand people there's nine hundred doing the work, ninety doing well, nine doing good, and one lucky bastard who's the artist." A truly efficient way society has found to get back at that one lucky bastard is to periodically submit them to an

anxious limbo of waiting for reviews, enduring reviews, and then helplessly plotting revenge against reviewers from a position of utter powerlessness, because while plumber Zargitsch might be able to give them a bathroom that ruins their life, but we are not in the same position. The reviewer is, of course, not the artist's boss, but the review system, in its contingency and its chaotic nature, is in itself the best equivalent any self-employed artist has to what for other people is their superior in the office—feared and coveted and dreaded and thought about in long, sleepless nights.

So we writers live, by our own free will, under the shadow of a constant and ongoing downpour of criticism that we desperately want, except we fear it like death, except we also tell ourselves with some reason that it cannot really harm us, except we are not quite sure that is true, and then we keep telling ourselves—like that actor friend told me at the very beginning of my life as a writer—that we just have to get used to it, which never happens. And, yes, in the meantime, most of us make matters even more complicated by actually writing from time to time and, quite frequently, writing book reviews.

Criticism, Public Spheres, and the Literary Institution

Zoltán Kulcsár-Szabó

Digital Publicness and Textual Authority: *Criticism Debates in Hungary around the Millennium*

Hungarian literary culture is one of those for which — at least from the advent of modernism — weekly and monthly journals were the most dominant fora, even though their audience was more limited than that of less elitist daily newspapers. In journals such as *Nyugat* ('Occident'), considered the most important in Hungarian modernism, literary scholars who published the majority of their work in professional academic journals also appeared among the contributors who wrote reviews on the latest production of Hungarian or European literature. However, the split between these two forms of publicity, which John Guillory traced back to the emergence in the nineteenth century of so-called "professional society" and the concurrent "decline of another occupational type, the 'critic,' whose locus of operation was the periodical public sphere",[1] did not, in most cases, tear apart the unity of œuvres or the identities of critics. In Hungary, it was merely reflected in some literary historians' refraining from a supportive aesthetic judgement of contemporary literary trends — which did not prevent them from entering political alliances with contemporary literary and/or ideological movements. Of course, the distance between the two fundamental ways of understanding the task of criticism, that is — to quote Guillory again — between conceiving it as either a "practice of judgment" or a "method of interpretation", has been steadily growing. This meant first and foremost that professionalised criticism had consolidated its position in the public arena of literary communication. One of the consequences was that since the 1970s, professional literary criticism has been invading literary journals: following the poetry and prose columns, and before the review section, studies of the same type as those that fill academic publications can be found regularly.

1 John Guillory, "Preface," in Guillory, *Professing Criticism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2022), xi.

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This development intensified after the political change in 1989, when the rapid and intense reception of then current theories of literature also found a forum and resonance in literary journals. The consequence was that practices of reviewing—in terms of linguistic and argumentative style—came, in large part, very close to those of scholarly, theoretical articles. Claims were made that the growing ignorance of the distinction between professional and general readers (whatever the latter should mean) blocks access to understanding and, moreover, is not conducive to taking pleasure in contemporary literature. In 1995, an unusually heated debate erupted over the interpretation of the short stories of contemporary author László Garaczi. It focused on the cultural functions of criticism and the threat posed to them by the discourse of professional literary criticism (frequently called "university criticism"), which, as many argued on one side, replaced taste, sovereign judgement, self-cultivation, and similar principles with the authority of methodologies of interpretation. The other side accused a range of influential, but academically unskilled critics (often referred to as "impressionists") of lacking self-reflection and being unable either to cope with the challenges of close reading or to accept changes in the norms and concepts of literary language.[2] In 2007, a second debate, referred to as the "minor criticism debate," took place. This was a period that had already witnessed the partial migration of literature, including reviewing, to non-print media, and this new debate sought to examine how the practice of criticism was being affected by the new structures of the digital public sphere. Several contributors to the debate mainly sought to describe the emergence of new 'genres' of literary criticism—blogs, podcasts, reviews written by anonymous readers on commercial websites and/or different topic fora—with one of the key concepts being "the revolt of the reader."[3] The digital revolution, it seemed at the time, carried the promise, on the one hand, of the decline of theory-heavy or professionalized critical language, and, on the other hand, of the emergence of previously 'invisible' readers in the discourse on and evaluation of literature. More in-depth analyses

2 The quarrel broke out after the publication of papers presented at a workshop on contemporary criticism in the monthly literary journal *Jelenkor*. After a while, discussion moved to the more widely disseminated and shorter contributions to the weekly *Élet és Irodalom* and to the then largest daily newspaper *Népszabadság*. For the most recent of numerous accounts, see Róbert Smid, "A nagy kritikavita (part 1, part 2)" (https://helyorseg.ma/rovat/olvasokalauz/smid-robert-a-nagy-kritikavita-i-resz; https://helyorseg.ma/rovat/olvasokalauz/smid-robert-a-nagy-kritikavita-ii-resz; last access: 05/06/2023)

3 See the title of the related collection: *Az olvasó lázadása?*, ed. Tibor Bárány and András Rónai (Bratislava and Budapest: Kalligram, 2008).

of the debate has shown, however, that the structural transformation of the literary public sphere did not reconfirm the distinction between professional and amateur approaches along the lines of contrasting practices of interpretation.[4] Unsurprisingly, this posed the challenge of thinking about the concept of "lay reading"—bearing in mind that a certain degree of vagueness in this concept is not unrelated, so Guillory argues, to the emergence of literary criticism as a discipline, even if the latter sometimes tends to generalize (and de-specify) its own methodology as "reading as such."[5]

Another aspect of the problem follows from a specific development that accompanied the "digital revolution": The most basic communicative frameworks of critical texts require new definition, above all in terms of addressing. As Yves Citton, among others, has pointed out, the digital technology that enables networked communication makes possible on one and the same platform communication between identified (even if falsely identified) agents on the one hand and publication operations from one source to an anonymous (and incalculable) public on the other.[6] In many cases, professional critics also mix these two speech situations when they form an opinion in digital fora. How this might lead to changes in certain premises of literary communication is still difficult to judge. For an interesting case study, it is worth taking a look at the debate surrounding the unattributed quotations in Péter Esterházy's 2000 novel *Harmonia caelestis* (English: *Celestial Harmonies*, transl. J. Sollosy, 2004), that took place in 2007 and almost exclusively on digital fora. Several arguments outlined in these discussions found their way into the discourse of professional literary criticism and even affected contemporary publishing practices.

In early 2007, writer Zsuzsa Bruria Forgács published an article on Esterházy's novel[7], which—as has become increasingly clear over the years—contains countless, sometimes unusually long, quotations from a wide range of literary works without indicating the sources. This was, on the whole, nothing new or unexpected from Esterházy, since unmarked intertextuality has been a frequently discussed issue in the critical reception of his work since the early 1980s. This time, however, the focus shifted from poetic to legal aspects. Forgács' article

4 See, for example, Tibor Bárány, "Olvasók az online nyilvánosságban," in *Kulturális iparágak, kánonok és filterbuborékok*, ed. Tibor Bárány, Gábor Hamp and Veronika Hermann (Budapest: Typotex, 2020), 79-133.

5 Guillory, "The Question of Lay Reading," in John Guillory, *Professing*, 210-11.

6 Yves Citton, *Mediarchy*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge, U. K. and Medford, Mass., 2019), 131-32.

7 Zsuzsa Bruria Forgács, "A visszaadás művészete," in: *Magyar Narancs* 19 (2007, 1-2): 36-37. Translations of quotations here and below are the author's own.

formulated an accusation of plagiarism and—though only implicitly—raised the similarly old question of the distinction between plagiarism and intertextuality. The tone of the piece was not very well chosen: It portrays Esterházy, among other things, as a charming text-predator and tells of sleepless nights of exploited authors who, out of respect for Esterházy, did not dare give voice to the damage done to them. Equally, its argumentative weaknesses did not seem to be well suited to re-launching the debate on "postmodern citatology", i.e. a practice that "was primarily introduced and legitimized by Esterházy in contemporary Hungarian literature", and, further, "disregards the work, creativity, authorship and feelings of others". Yet, it did trigger a strange and extremely heated debate, which took place, with a moderate level of theoretic reflexiveness, predominantly on internet fora and, ironically, under use of pseudonyms, although with the participation of authors and critics who were also active in traditional print media—as the comments show. Forgács' writing focused on the notion of *vendégszöveg* ('guest text') and described Esterhazy as an extremely rude host whose guests (no longer guest *texts* here!) are neither aware that they have been invited nor, for reasons of anonymity, can they even consider themselves guests. Although neither Forgács nor the vast majority of the participants in the debate questioned Esterházy's status as a writer, many, or at least many voices, joined in her demand that in future editions of *Harmonia caelestis* Esterházy should disclose the exact details of the sources he had quoted.[8] The American edition, which, compared with Hungarian standards, was marketed in a very strictly regulated copyright environment, contained a list of the works used, albeit an incomplete one which lacked, above all, references to the Hungarian texts cited.[9] 'Materials' that provide information in this respect have also been available to readers of the German translation.[10] In 2011, a similar list was published (without the exact data of the sources) in the electronic edition of the Hungarian text on *Digital Literary Academy* (DIA). The highlighting of the legal aspect of the accusation was far from surprising since there are numerous precedents in the European context. Some examples, among others, are the claims of the heirs of Bertolt Brecht who went to Germany's Federal Constitutional Court in 2000 to demand textual changes be made to Heiner Müller's *Ger-*

8 This demand was made less vociferously in print media than in the various public fora of the anonymous internet.

9 Péter Esterházy, *Celestial Harmonies*, trans. Judith Sollosy (New York: Ecco Press, 2005), 843-46. The introduction to the list contains an argument about the inevitably intertextual nature of sentences.

10 Peter Esterházy, *Marginalien* (Berlin: Berlin-Verlag, 2003).

mania 3 (2000),[11] the withdrawal from sale of the volume *Shooting Star* by Austrian author Franzobel due to accusations of plagiarism in 2001,[12] the legal case of Dmitry Yemets' Russian *Harry Potter* clone in the Netherlands (2003),[13] or the controversies around Helene Hegemann's bestseller *Axolotl Roadkill* in 2010.[14] In that same year, the issue of Esterházy's 'method' also resonated in Germany when Sigfrid Gauch claimed that Esterházy had adapted or even copied an entire chapter from his novel *Vaterspuren* (1979; *Traces of My Father*, trans. W. Radice, 2002) in *Celestial Harmonies*.[15]

In Hungary, the debate surrounding Esterházy's citation praxis in *Celestial Harmonies* ran far from legal fora, predominantly on the website of online literary journal *litera*. It began in early 2007 and continued until mid-2008, at least in its most intense phase, since a few comments were added even as late as 2010. Here, it was conducted in a forum under the title "AJTÓ ABLAK NYITVA VAN—SZÖVEGKERESŐ TÁRSASJÁTÉK, ki mit lel a HC-ben" ("Doors and windows open—a textual source searching board game, who finds what in HC").[16] In this context, it was possible to examine questions regarding the distinction between the misuse of intertextuality on the one hand and a more creative use of intertextuality on the other hand. In other words, to what extent can Esterházy's quotations be considered, even in a copyright sense, the results of his own literary production? Somewhat surprisingly, it is precisely this question that has received relatively little attention. Indeed, it has most often been

11 Cf. www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/pressemitteilungen/bvg100-00.html (last access 05/06/2023).

12 See Marietta Böning, "Zwischen Freiheit der Kunst und Urheberrechtsverletzung" (www.ejournal.at/Essay/gruebel.html).

13 See John Neubauer, "How Scandalous is Plagiarism?," in *Literature and Beyond*, vol. I., ed. Eric de Haard, Wim Honselaar and Jenny Stelleman (Amsterdam: Pegasus, 2008), 449-65.

14 See "Axolotl Roadkill: Alles nur geklaut?," (www.gefuehlskonserve.de/axolotl-roadkill-alles-nur-geklaut-05022010.html); "'Axolotl Roadkill': Helena Hegemann und Ullstein Verlegerin Dr. Siv Bublitz antworten auf Plagiatworwurf" (www.buchmarkt.de/content/41393-axolotl-roadkill-helene-hegemann-und-ullstein-verlegerin-dr-siv-bublitz-antworten-auf-plagiatvorwurf.htm); Durs Grünbein, "Plagiat," in: *FAZ* 23/2/2010; Richard Kämmerlings, "Warum haben sie geklaut, Herr Grünbein?," in: *FAZ* February 24, 2010. Translations are the author's own.

15 Sigfrid Gauch, "Die Esterházy-Methode," in: *Die Rheinpfalz* February 11, 2010.

16 www.litera.hu/forum/ajto-ablak-nyitva-van-szovegkereso-tarsasjatek-ki-mit-lel-a-hc-ben. All following quotes are from this homepage. Translations are the author's own. However, the forum is no longer online at the *litera* site (last access 30/11/2012).

limited to the distinction between marked/unmarked intertextuality. For the majority of the participants in the online debate, including the alleged 'victims' of the 'predator' (it is difficult to estimate the actual number of participants because of the general pseudonymity), the central issue seemed to be to separate the layers of the novel's text as precisely as possible, that is, to differentiate Esterházy's 'genuine' discourse from the quoted texts. Such a distinction is as far removed as possible from Esterházy's concept of intertextual literariness, since it takes as little account of the double attribution of quotations as it does of the possibility that the quoted texts cannot, in certain cases, be attributed to a single (or pure) source. "I do not find Esterházy in Esterházy", reads one of the comments. Indeed, the structural principle that defines the concept of the novel—namely, that the first part is a series of loosely connected "Numbered sentences", in which the quotations are linked by the insertion of the word "édesapám" ["my father"] and, among other things, can be understood as a kind of textual basis for the family history in the second part—has been described as a "collection of texts about fathers". In some respects, this is not misleading. Surprisingly, the decisive question in the critical assessment of unmarked intertextuality in Esterházy's work in the 1980s—to what extent knowledge of the sources influences understanding of the texts—has remained mostly unaddressed.

Among the more than a thousand comments and longer contributions, there are suggestions as to how to interpret the composition of *Celestial Harmonies*, which borrows its title from the early eighteenth-century cantata collection of Prince Pál Esterházy, itself also a kind of compilation: One critic, for example, refers to his own offline publication, in which he aims to demonstrate that the structure of cross-references between the two parts is not at all contingent. However, most commenters focus on the demand for transparency regarding quotation sources. Interpretations that seek to explain the way in which quotations were used in the context of the narrative concept of *Harmonia Caelestis*, or that seek to address the extent to which the meaning of different text fragments was altered by their juxtaposition, remain in a significant minority compared to gestures of moral judgement over textual predation. In the context of the latter, Esterházy's compilation technique is mocked in terms which, tellingly, explicitly refer to quotation techniques commonly used in contemporary entertainment or popular culture formats such as remixing or recycling (the author is sometimes referred to as "DJ Esterházy" or even called a "Text Jockey"). Other commenters resort to vulgar moralism: One comment opines that Esterházy may be a "good writer, but

not a decent man", while another goes so far as to regard him as a "criminal".

It follows almost inevitably from such narrowly focused scrutiny that the (by no means unsuccessful) quotation hunt led to legal questions concerning the concept of authorship, among them: Is it legitimate for Esterházy to have received fees for several pages of texts for which he was not the originator? What damage does this cause to the authors quoted? Among the proposed responses to these questions are (fictitious) counter-measures, for example, publishing Esterházy's texts under a different name or compiling an edition of *Harmonia caelestis* which the 'robbed' authors would publish under a pseudonym of their own choosing.

Few participants in the debate express doubts about the aesthetic qualities of the text. Several point out that Esterházy had selected and assembled highly attractive texts with an unerring sense of aesthetic quality. Indeed, this included texts by authors so little known that it was only through the encounter with *Harmonia caelestis* that many readers discovered them; that is, it is thanks to Esterházy that their public profile was raised—which, of course, leads back to the question of the 'damage' caused to these authors through Esterházy's suppression of the sources. One comment, for example, reports on a related experiment: Anyone who enters a quotation from the poem *Apám* ("My Father") by Transylvanian poet Béla Cselényi into an internet search engine will be directed to Esterházy as the author. The function of the unmarked quotation, in the sense of network theory, would thus be to further consolidate the hegemony of a canonised author through *googling*.

Demands to disclose the sources are not only supported by arguments citing the American and German editions of the novel and the legal responsibility attributed to Esterházy; sceptical diagnoses of the present state of culture also appear with remarkable frequency in the debate, focusing on the one hand on alleged shifts in literary conventions and on the other on the conditions of the media environment. For example, commenters remark variously that intertextual writing has become scarce since the turn of the Millennium, that there are authors who want neither to rely on quotations nor to be quoted, that "postmodernism is dead", and even that: "Today there are authors again! There is, again, original literature which takes its starting point from life and not from text, there are characters again, conflicts which are drawn from life and not created by the text", and so on. Several statements give the opinion that, in the age of the Internet and its concurrent 'revolution' or 'democratization' of information distribution, the notion of intellectual property has lost much of its relevance.

It is an argument that could be made both for and against Esterházy, as well as for and against the quote-hunters in the forum.

Esterházy's reactions to the debate[17] could be described as either largely superficial or not particularly skillful. Statements like "In short: she [Forgács] is right. Seen more broadly: beyond that, she is wrong," or references to a 30- to 40-page essay on the subject that would have to be written but is not really planned, did little to shed light on the author's position. However, he did admit that his approach is indeed "brutal" and breaks with certain conventions, further commenting that "times have changed in the meantime" and that, since "it all developed outside the rule of law [that is, in the late Communist regime of the 1980s], a non-legal framework, considerations of law do not apply". Nevertheless, the crucial point remains that "I look at everything from the viewpoint of the text that is being produced," i.e. only the text itself can account for the techniques it employs, which also means that a strictly legal approach to the problem would not serve the interests of literature.

This is far from revealing the reasons behind recent developments in the judgements on "postmodern" citation. Yet, one possible explanation could be found in the fact that since 1989 there have been rule-of-law norms in Hungary, which has increased the significance of the copyright aspects of literary quotation techniques. In the forum of *litera*, for instance, the fact that Esterházy's earlier volume *Bevezetés a szépirodalomba* ('Introduction to Literature', 1986) did not provoke similar discussions at the time was explained in retrospect by the fact that "at that time nobody cared about property, including intellectual property. We lived in a world of everything for everyone." However, bearing in mind that in that same period the same problem was as rampant in Western European countries as it was in Hungary, such an explanation hardly seems satisfactory. Given the question of what would have been prevented if Esterházy had always revealed all his textual sources,[18] the answer could only point to one possibility: the indeterminability of whether a text or a statement

17 The following quotes are from these interviews: László Valuska, "Nem vagyok mutogatós író. Interjú Esterházy Péterrel" (http://index.hu/kultur/klassz/ep0413/); András Greff, "'Minél idegenebb területekre menni'— Esterházy Péter író," in: *Magyar Narancs* 20 (2008, 17): 27. Translations are the author's own.

18 The notes and self-commentaries that pervade Esterházy's 2013 novel *Egyszerű történet vessző száz oldal—a kardozós változat* ["Simple Story Comma One Hundred Pages—the Duel-Version"] may be a reaction to the demands of the debate and in a sense realise this option, putting it in a sharply ironic perspective.

should be attributed to the text's author or instead to one or more external sources would become untenable and thus, from another angle, the experience of it being impossible to identify one's own text or voice would become unavailable (or repressed)—in a sense, a radical conception of irony that preoccupied Esterházy's reception in the 1980s would be rendered ineffective. Viewed from this perspective, the whole debate on the quotations of *Harmonia caelestis* is less a sign of a disillusionment with postmodern citatology or a demand for stricter legal regulation of the literary field, but rather expresses the fear that, under certain conditions, the disposal of one's 'own' voice or text as such might be challenged.

It is therefore probably not entirely coincidental that the debate has focused so much on the contemporary media environment of communication and the altered conditions for the creation and use of texts in general, in short, the copy-and-paste culture that is characteristic of the so-called digital age. In Helene Hegemann's case, for example, it was not only the author—who is also known as a film director—who referred to the fact that her background lies in a field where "one tends to approach the writing of a novel in a directorial way, i.e. one helps oneself wherever one finds inspiration," and to the fact that her novel was written in (and represents) a decade in which "the right to copy and adapt has replaced this whole copyright excess". Even the publisher's statement contains a sentence about the questionable responsibility of a young author who "grew up with the 'sharing' culture of the internet."[19] It is thus not a little ironic that the debate on the *litera* webpage was conducted under compulsory pseudonymity and with the use of numerous unmarked quotations: even those contributors who revealed their offline identities on the forum insisted, in the spirit of current 'netiquette', on being addressed by their pseudonyms. A similar textual anonymity or pseudonymity was sharply criticised in *Harmonia caelestis*. Having served, in the 1980s and 1990s, as a home (in Hungary perhaps also as a refuge) for ironic discourse, literature now seems to be confronted with a need for authenticity and originality; a need, which, however, belongs to a society that is itself increasingly reluctant to maintain these categories in the everyday practice of processing texts or information.

19 Neubauer, "How Scandalous is Plagiarism?."

Lionel Ruffel

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.

* * *

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.

* * *

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.

Magnus William-Olsson

REPLACING. REPLANTING. REACTING.

Nobelsymposiumpaper Re-edited for Speech Choir

♩ = 114

In an economy of abundance
[*Choir*] A WAVE A WAVE A WAVE
Literature can't be but literature-to-someone.
– A body. Really? Playing on the beach I suppose …?
– It's how it works.
– Is it?
…. Mmmm

[*Choir*]
PLEASE DISTINGUISH BETWEEN LITERATURE IN ACT AND LITERATURE IN POSSIBILITY.

ALMOST ALL LITERARY WORKS WE RELATE TO WE'LL NEVER READ.

INTERNET MADE OUR LIVES STUFFED WITH THE POSSIBLE.

IS THE ACTUALIZED POSSIBLE TAKEN FOR BEING THE ACTUAL?

THE UTMOST AIM OF LITERARY CRITICISM IS TO MAKE UNREAD BOOKS THINK- AND TALKABLE.

PEOPLE READ A LOT OF BOOKS AND NORMALLY FORGET THEM.

LITERARY WORKS KEEP WORKING WHITHIN AND OUTSIDE US, EVEN WHEN WE CAN'T RECALL THEM. WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT IT.

ARE YOU QUESTIONING THE LITERARY OBJECT?

WHAT IS NEW DOESN'T REMAIN. THAT'S THE POINT OF THE "NEW PUBLIC SPHERE."

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ARE WE STILL LIVING IN "DAS EIGENTLICHE ZEITALTER DER KRITIK" AS KANT FOOTNOTED 1781?

LITERARY CRITICISM IS NOT JUST ANY RESPONSE TO A LITERARY WORK.

LITERARY CRITICISM COMES WITH A RESPONSIBILITY TOWARD THE CRITICIZED, DUE TO THE FACT THAT THERE IS NO CRITICISM WITHOUT AN OBJECT.

THE DEPENDENCE ON THE OBJECT IS THE "BLIND SPOT" OF CRITICISM. THE CRITIC HAS TO OBEY TO IT.

WHY DON'T YOU START BY OFFERING YOUR FULL ATTENTION?

"THE NEW PUBLIC SPHERE" IS BEST CHARACTERIZED BY LACK.

IS IT, THUS, JUST ANOTHER NEGATIVE CONCEPT? IF SO, OF WHAT USE?

BY CHANGING IT REMAINS THE SAME.

MOST URGENT IS THE LACK OF EDITORIAL ROUTINES.

THE EDITOR AND THE EDITORIAL PRACTICE, SOMETIMES CALLED CARE, IS A PRETTY POTENT ANSWER.

TO WRITE IS EASY. BUT IN ORDER TO READ THE WRITTEN EVERYBODY DEPEND ON ANGELS, TEARING THE VEIL FROM THE REAL.

THE BOOK REVIEW WAS NEVER WIDELY READ.

NO ONE WILL EVER PAY FOR BOOK REVIEWS.

MAY ONE SPEAK OF THE BOOK REVIEW AS A KEY PIECE IN THE LITERARY ECOSYSTEM, KNOWING THE ANALOGY DISFIGURES THE STATEMENT IN THE ERA OF HYPERCAPITALISM?

NEVER TRUST A CRITIC BEFORE YOU'VE SEEN THEM DANCE.

PROFESSIONALS TURN INTO AMATEURS. IT'S INEVITABLE.

NON-PROFESSIONAL LOVERS. LIKE OR DISLIKE?

THE PUBLIC BECOMES COMMUNITY. THE OPEN SPACE IS OVERCROWDED. HOW COULD ANYONE TODAY DEFEND THE CONCEPT OF THE AGORA?

WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM WITH LOVING LITERATURE?

LIGHT IN LITERATURE HAS TO BE LIT. SCENT SMELLED. MUSIC PERFORMED. IN ESSENCE IT'S AS EASY AS THAT.

SELECT. VALUE. PRESERVE. DISTRIBUTE. WHO SAYS LIBRARIANS ARE NOT CRITICS?

REACHING OUT. LEANING FORWARD. SQUAT DOWN. CLIMB THE LADDER. RECALLING A COLOR, A FORMAT, A NAME. BOOKSHELF-CHOREOGRAPHIES REPLACED BY TAPPING AND SWIPING ON DIGITAL PROSTHESES.

WHERE ELSE BUT IN THE PUBLIC LIBRARIES IS LITERATURE ACCESSIBLE AS LITERATURE FOR EVERYONE?

HEADLESS PUBLISHING IS ON THE ONE SIDE A CURSE, ON THE OTHER A RIGHT. FLIP-THE-COIN-ADDICTION.

THE AUTHOR AS THE GHOST OF THE SIGNATURE IS AN OBSOLETE IDEA.

MOBILIZING CRITICAL ATTENTION THROUGH COLLABORATIVE ACTION.

THE LIBRARIANS WE TAUGHT WRITING AND EDITING REVIEWS, TURNED OUT BRILLIANT CRITICS. OR AT LEAST SOME OF THEM DID.

IN MAKING THE POSSIBLE LITERATURE THINK- AND TALKABLE, THEIR EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE MADE THE CRITICISED WORKS WORK IN A SOMEWHAT DIFFERENT LIGHT.

– But libraries, Magnus …? Public employed critics! Is it really a good idea?
– I don't know. But think of academics …
– They're not critics, are they?
– Sort of, sometimes.
– Are you serious?
– Mmmm …

Critical Readings: Contemporary Perspectives

Florencia Garramuño

Critical Intervention and Literary Criticism: *Reading Literature in the Twenty-First Century*

The aim of this essay is to raise questions regarding recent changes in contemporary literature and art, and the challenges these transformations pose to contemporary art and literary criticism and scholarship. While a contested and diverse field, some contemporary art and literature engage in heterogeneous interventions by incorporating elements from different disciplines, geographical regions, and cultures. I have dwelled in another work on the way certain transformations in contemporary Latin American literature and arts are favoring modes of organization of the sensible that call into question notions of belonging, specificity, and autonomy.[1] The field of visual arts has extensively analyzed this horizon for several years, particularly in response to the profound impact of conceptual art and installations on the art world.[2] Similarly, contemporary literature has also expanded its boundaries and media during the last decades. There is an increasing number of literary explorations that establish connections between fiction and other forms such as photographs, images, memoirs, autobiographies, blogs, chats, emails, essays, and documentaries. The questioning of a medium's specificity and the complex and fluid field of artistic practices have posed new questions to critical judgment.[3] Works by various authors, including Mario Bellatin, Bernardo Carvalho, João Gilberto Noll, Fernando Vallejo, Diamela Eltit, Tamara Kamenszain, and Nuno Ramos, demonstrate a growing exploration of sensibility that questions notions of belonging, individuality, and specificity. Writing has also reemerged in formats and media such as cinema, theater, and artistic

1 Florencia Garramuño, *Mundos en común. Ensayos sobre la inespecificidad en el arte* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura económica), 2015.

2 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All. Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013).

3 Osborne, *Anywhere,* 3.

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installations, often blending with other art forms, highlighting the porous boundaries between different aesthetic fields.

Georges Didi-Huberman, in a discussion on Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar and his conceptual use of photography in installations, speaks of a documentary drive in contemporary art. According to Didi-Huberman, "Artists not only use documents, thereby remaining 'in front of history', but also produce them entirely, thereby not only contemplating the event, but intervening in it, in contact with it."[4]

Sergio Chejfec's *Modo linterna* (*Flashlight Mode*) employs stories that incorporate photographs and references to photographs, resulting in a writing style that interrupts the linear progression of the plot. It seems as if writing—literature—has been imbued with a strong documentary impulse that disregards the traditional narrative structure with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Instead of constructing a continuous narrative plot, Chejfec's stories focus on capturing fragments of the world—in flashlight mode –, illuminating the life pulsating within those fragments. The most interesting thing about the photographs is precisely how the stories refer to photographs, and even seem to depend on these photographs, which in the text are not actually taken. In the absence of those photographs the story seems to take their place. In "Una visit al cementerio" the story is interrupted at the precise moment in which the photograph was to be taken, in the same way as in "Novelista documental" the writing is interrupted at the moment when the narrator walks to some racks that, throughout the story, he tried to photograph without being able to do so. The stories, as if they were photographs, seem to cut out of an experience only what the *flashlight mode* allows to expose: a fragment, a piece, a remainder.

Brazilian art historian Lorenzo Mammí describes the changes in contemporary art and the challenges they present to art criticism in the following terms:

What is more complex today is the fact that, although the formal aspect is important, the analysis is no longer able to rely solely on it. It is necessary to understand how the work fits into various image systems, whether scientific, media, or everyday life. So, it is a precarious situation for critics as well. It cannot find such a specific methodology of its own.[5]

4 Georges Didi-Huberman, "La emoción no dice yo," in *Alfredo Jaar. La política de las imágenes*, ed. Adriana Valdés (Santiago de Chile: Metales pesados, 2014), 62.

5 Lorenzo Mammi, *O que resta. Arte e crítica da arte* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2012).

Josefina Ludmer, in *Aquí América Latina. Una especulación* (*Here Latin America, a Speculation*), describes contemporary Latin American literature as a producer of reality rather than a mere representation of it. I quote:

> Let us suppose that the world has changed and that we are in another stage of the nation, another configuration of capitalism and another era in the history of empires. To understand this new world (and to write it as testimony, documentary, memory, and fiction), we need a different apparatus than the one we used before. Other words and notions, because not only has the world changed, but also the molds, genres, and species into which it was divided and differentiated. Those forms ordered reality for us: they defined identities and founded politics and wars. This book looks for words and forms to see and hear something of the new world. To speculate, because how else could Latin America be thought if not from here?[6]

Taking its cue from speculative fiction, Ludmer postulates speculation (and not analysis or criticism) as a new method "to see and hear something of the new world" from Latin America, and through literature as a lens or machine of vision, conceiving writing, in the words of Sandra Contreras, "as an experimentation with the present", and the method of speculation as an instrument to think the new world and today's writings from here, Latin America.[7]

If, as Lorenzo Mammí pointed out, contemporary art is no longer the realm where the world is organized but merely where things appear, it becomes evident that criticism of that art must also forge a path between those things and that realm. It must transform itself into a cartography capable of traversing the borders that separate the world, things, and art.[8]

A series of recent critical interventions, often resonating with the contemporary forms they analyze, finds in the assemblage of materials, and objects the defining characteristic of a unique type of critical intervention. Following Raúl Antelo, "the critical gesture takes place

6 Josefina Ludmer, *Aquí América Latina. Una especulación* (Buenos Aires: Eterna Cadencia, 2010), 9.

7 Sandra Contreras, "'El Diario Sabático': estructura histórica y experiencia del presente en la especulación temporal de Josefina Ludmer," in *Cuadernos LIRICO. Revista de la red interuniversitaria de estudios sobre las literaturas rioplatenses contemporáneas en Francia* 24 (2022): 2.

8 Florencia Garramuño, "Devires da crítica," in *Ieda Magri et al. Literatura e artes na crítica contemporânea* (Rio de Janeiro: Eduerj, 2016), 81-89.

at the assembly table."[9] These investigations exemplify a new form of transdisciplinary research that defies categorization as purely literary criticism, visual criticism, cultural history, or even cultural studies.

It is possible to assert that a significant portion of the criticism accompanying this transformation of art's status in contemporary times has managed to transcend disciplinary boundaries, fields, regions, and countries. These critical interventions are conceived more as interventions themselves rather than mere acts of hermeneutics or analysis. At a meeting held in Buenos Aires a few years ago, titled "Destinies of Criticism" and organized by Mario Cámara and Gonzalo Aguilar, we engaged in discussions about texts such as the latest interventions by Flora Süssekind. She examines textual and visual forms from her own object (the art and literature of Nuno Ramos), which intertwine multiple languages. We also discussed a text by film critic Ivana Bentes that analyzes homemade documentaries and delves into the lives and languages of the filmmakers, and a text by Eduardo Sterzi that navigates between poetry and films created by poet-filmmakers like Pasolini, uncovering philosophical dimensions along these paths. These, I thought at the time, are three unorthodox paths that possess a certain non-specific quality, much like the languages employed by the artists analyzed in these critiques.

However, I would like to pose a different type of question: does the very transformation of art and literature in contemporary times create a distinct distance between criticism and art? Does it not engender another mode of relationship, one that would post a different positioning and a different kind of complicity between criticism and art? The transformation of art and literature extends beyond the form of art itself and encompasses its function and societal position. In that case, it is insufficient for criticism to merely alter its form, strategies, and methods of interpretation. Criticism's role and position about its perspective on art should also transform. Thus, it entails not only diverse ways of reading but alternative modes of complicity between criticism and art.

What is certain is that when examining certain contemporary texts, a new blurring of boundaries between criticism and artistic practices becomes evident. This instability is apparent not only in criticism itself but also in literature and other forms of artistic expression.

To illustrate this point, let us consider two examples that come to mind. This fluidity of boundaries takes on intriguing dimensions in Teixeira Coelho's *Natural History of the Dictatorship* and Silviano Santiago's *Machado*. These books intertwine fiction and reality, biogra-

9 Raúl Antelo, *Archifilologías latinoamericanas* (Villa María: Eduvim, 2015) 113.

phy, and essay, resulting in works that have garnered prestigious literary awards in the Portuguese-speaking world, such as the Océanos and the Camões awards.

In *Machado*,[10] Silviano Santiago, who transitions from reader to author in the book, redefines the literary landscape of nineteenth-century writer Machado de Assis through a curation of documents, images, and accounts. The novel explores fictionalized acts of reading, placing the temporal relationship between the character-writer Machado and the present at the forefront of Silviano's work.[11]

On the other hand, *Natural History of the Dictatorship* by Teixeira Coelho begins with the narrator's visit to Walter Benjamin's grave in Port Bou. From a distance, the narrator spots the memorial created by Dani Karavan in 1994 and observes:

> I approached, stopped in front of the entrance: as if it were a rusty iron corridor descending through the land, towards the sea below: two walls of iron plates forming, with the ceiling, a box that extended along a few meters underground, then continuing its descent to the open sky in a narrow, rusty corridor, and the blue sea down there at the end of the funnel. […] I looked back and now a strong sun, despite the wind, with the wind, was entering through the opening of the Passage: I felt like I was in a foundry, as if the material to be melted were me, with that yellow jet behind me. Ahead, down below, the sea. I did not know the monument, I had not seen pictures of the monument, I did not know what to expect […] I commented on the power of experience: an anti-monument, a monument facing downwards, a buried monument, a monument that descends to the depths, a monument to the fall. A monument that was not an exaltation of the memory of those who died in the city below: a monument that seemed an extension of that death: no metaphor in that monument: metonymy, rather: the monument attached to the death of Walter Benjamin, a monument that was the death of Walter Benjamin, which was the direct, physical extension of his death.[12]

The narrative describes the visit to the memorial. The memories and the emotions they evoke envelop the description of the tomb with an

10 Silviano Santiago, *Machado: romance* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2016).

11 Helder Santos Rocha, "Leituras, tempos, convulsões: o romance Machado, de Silviano Santiago," *Acta Scientiarum. Language and Culture* 43,1 (2021).

12 Teixeira Coelho, *História Natural da Ditadura* (São Paulo: Iluminuras, 2006), 20–21.

affectivity that only literature can convey. However, it is also evident that the text can be interpreted as a critique of Dani Karavan's work as the creator of the memorial. The inclusion of photographs of the tomb in Teixeira Coelho's text further reinforces the critical tone of the quoted passage, mixing narrative with a distinct art criticism intonation.

It is fascinating to observe the parallels between this fragment by Teixeira Coelho, who is not only a writer but also a curator and art critic, and another depiction of Benjamin's grave found in a text by anthropologist Michael Taussig. "Looking over these essays written over the past decade," writes Taussig, "I think what they share is a love of muted and defective storytelling as a form of analysis."[13] The mixing of storytelling and critical analysis defines both the text by Taussig and that of Teixeira Coelho.

Hence, storytelling emerges as a form of analysis. Or analysis as a form of storytelling.

In a similar vein, contemporary studies on Latin American literature diverge noticeably from previous models of Latin American criticism. In his article "Liberian Signifiers and the Crisis of Latin America in Cosmopolitan Imaginaries" Mariano Siskind explores the intellectual paths that Latin Americanist humanities have embarked upon in recent years to reconceive the cultural traces of the region's global inscriptions beyond its conventional boundaries. According to Siskind, "These scholars posit the porosity, artificiality, and asphyxiating nature of conventional linguistic, cultural, and identitarian borders."[14]

Within these contemporary critical perspectives, we may discern a framework grounded in an ethics of solidarity that displaces narcissistic preoccupations with identity (national, Brazilian, Latin American, gay, homosexual, literary, etc.), in favor of a quest for the in-between, for relationality, for shared existence. Silviano Santiago in *The Space in Between*[15] builds a theoretical reflection that transcends the study of national literatures in their specificities, where we can see the lucidity of a method that tries to understand the text in its play with other texts, with the world, with its history and not with its individuality or national identity. Santiago criticizes the study of sources and influences,

13 Michael Taussig, *Walter Benjamin's Grave* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006), chapter vii.

14 Mariano Siskind, "Liberian Signifiers and the Crisis of Latin America in Cosmopolitan Imaginaries," in *The Routledge Companion to Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Latin American Literary and Cultural Forms*, ed. Guillermina De Ferrari and Mariano Siskind (London: Routledge, 2022), 192.

15 Silviano Santiago, *The Space in Between. Essays on Latin American Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001).

pointing to what Emily Apter would designate, many years later, "the racist unconscious within humanist philology".[16]

Rachel Price's *The Object of the Atlantic* serves as an exemplar in this regard. The book explores how concrete aesthetics from Cuba, Brazil, and Spain draw inspiration from global forms of constructivism and intersect with the histories of empire, slavery, and media technologies within the Atlantic world. Price's work makes a notable contribution to multiple disciplines, including trans-Atlantic studies, Latin American studies, art history, and African diaspora studies. Through its examination of Jose Marti's notebooks, Joaquim de Sousandrade's poetry, Ramiro de Maeztu's essays on things and slavery, 1920s Cuban literature on economic restructuring, Ferreira Gullar's theory of the "non-object," and neo-concrete art, the book weaves together diverse threads and could be simultaneously embraced by numerous fields.[17]

Like Price's book, many recent works of Latin American literary criticism challenge the dominant hermeneutical paradigm, reframing the scholar's task as an act of complicity. Instead of seeking to diagnose, deflate, or analyze, these critics aim not to expose hidden truths but to follow the paths suggested by the texts. Rather than offering philological or historical explanations, they closely scrutinize ideas, posing affective and intellectual questions to the text. Sandra Contreras highlights Ludmer's book as an example, emphasizing that it entails a practice of theory as an exercise in community, interwoven with narratives of friendship and literary "families".[18]

I would like to draw attention to one final phenomenon in this discussion. In certain contemporary Latin American practices, there is a notable incorporation of Amerindian inspiration and knowledge, which serve as potent materials that expand the possibilities of contemporary art and writing. By repositioning alternative genealogies and drawing upon ancestral knowledge and practices, these artists and writers diversify the historical narratives of Latin American culture, its legacies, and, I would argue, the very forms, materials, and repertoires that define contemporary art and writing in the region today.

16 Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 30.

17 Rachel Price, *The Object of the Atlantic. Concrete Aesthetics in Cuba, Brazil, and Spain, 1868-1968, (*Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014).

18 Sandra Contreras, "El Diario Sabático": estructura histórica y experiencia del presente en la especulación temporal de Josefina Ludmer," in *Cuadernos LIRICO. Revista de la red interuniversitaria de estudios sobre las literaturas rioplatenses contemporáneas en Francia* 24 (2022): 9.

They restore aesthetic value to practices that were once solely attributed to ritual, rescuing the ambivalence between the ritual and aesthetic function of objects and practices that were stripped of their significance by colonial plundering to turn them into spoils of war. The act of returning these practices to museums or incorporating them into writing represents an empowering gesture, disentangling them from their exclusively ethnographic value. In doing so, it demands recognition of the profound impact that indigenous practices and knowledge have on the rhythms and expressions of Latin American art and writing.

Reimagining Latin American literary criticism considering these previously silenced and suppressed paths not only entails a revision of their histories and genealogies, but also invites us to envision alternative futures. This approach encourages a more affirmative and engaged relationship with literary works, prompting critical reflection on the world, the text, and the critic, to use Edward Said's words. It beckons us to considering reading literature and art as an act of speculation, maybe for a different world.

Christopher Odhiambo Joseph

Postmortem as a Critical Trope of Reading War Literature in Eastern Africa

Introduction

There have been copious debates and discussions as to how literary imaginaries of war should both register and represent post-war and post-violence situations and experiences. These debates and discussions emerged in response to the way that Rwanda's 1994 genocide had been represented in various artistic modes such as poetry, novels, drama, film, music, and fine arts. Those involved in this debate felt strongly that most writings on war experiences were obsessed with victimhood and "victimology", depicting horrifying and macabre images of dead bodies, mutilated bodies, and bodies in pain to elicit shock/effect, catharsis, fear, grief, and sympathy. The connoisseurs of pre-emptive visions of imaginaries of war argued that, though memory and remembering are paramount in bearing witness, these should not be an end in themselves, but instead, should reveal conditions that make violence possible by simultaneously imagining post-violence cultures of peace and provide the impetus to pre-empt future tragedies. These connoisseurs of pre-emptive writing of war and violence, according to Michael C. Montesano (2015), include Patrice Nganang, Achille Mbembe, and Wole Soyinka.

Though there are numerous artistic imaginaries exploring war in Eastern Africa, the attention of this article is on only three such imaginaries which ostensibly privilege pre-emptive visions of wars. The pre-emptive vision of war assumes that it, just like death, can only be understood in its aftermath. It is this paradox of engaging with the aftermath of things that makes postmortem a profound trope in theorising imaginaries of war.

Postmortem as a theorising metaphor of war literature resonates well with Patrice Nganang's (2008) concerns on the role and responsibility of a creative writer when he asks:

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> Is it not time to practice a form of writing that forcefully addresses the death that rushes across our continent; that is to say, is it not time to write in a manner, to create *a posteriori* production of testimony? Is it not time to think about a body of writing which will render a genocide, like the one which took place in Rwanda in 1994, impossible?

Nganang's concern requires that imaginaries of war should go beyond *a posteriori* production of testimonies of conflict, war, and violence and envision alternative registering and representation of post-war societies imbued with new transformative possibilities and futures. His sentiments align very well with Elisabeth Krimmer's observation that: "Texts about war are written to work through its trauma, to settle questions of guilt and responsibility, to promote pacifism, to celebrate the intensity of life under duress, or to gain a better understanding of the origin and mechanisms of war." (Nganang 2010, 1)

It is in fact the attempt to gain better insight into the origins and mechanisms of war that postmortem as both a creative and analytic theoretical framework becomes privileged in writing and reading of the selected imaginaries of war.

Postmortem as Theorising: Unravelling the Aftermath of Things

The focus here is mainly on three texts*: Thirty Years of Bananas* (a play) by Alex Mukulu, which explores the violence and wars that defined Uganda from 1962 to 1992; *Murambi* (a novel) by Boubacar Diop, which portrays the atrocities leading to the Rwandan genocide of 1994; and *Ni Sisi* (a filmic adaptation of theatre for community development intervention) by SAFE (K), which draws from the Post-Election Violence (PEV) that rocked Kenya in 2007/2008. What is interesting about these artistic imaginaries is that, although they are very different artistic modes, they manifest similar structures in the ways they register and represent war experiences, as well as in their projections of the vision of culture(s) of peace.

War, much like death, is often only interpreted and most likely understood in its aftermath. To "know" and to "understand" war, and to avert its recurrence in the future, is akin to conducting a postmortem examination of a dead body to prevent similar deaths or wars from happening again. The artistic imaginaries of war that are of interest here are those that do not fall into the category of "wartainment." By "war-

tainment," we mean an amalgamation of "war" and "entertainment," referring to the portrayal of war in media and entertainment formats. This concept captures how war-related content is dramatized and packaged to entertain audiences, often blurring the lines between serious historical events and sensationalized storytelling. It highlights the potential for war narratives to be commercialized, sometimes at the expense of the gravity and authenticity of the actual events being depicted. In contrast, the texts we focus on consciously explore war experiences and their consequences in a reflexive and reflective manner to pre-empt future wars. Just as a postmortem examination is anticipated to elicit knowledge that will save lives in the future, pre-emptive writing in this context is envisaged to avert future wars. This constitutes the paradox of these imaginaries, as they must always be entangled in the dramatization of war while simultaneously providing a vision for a culture of peace.

The concept of postmortem as a 'theorizing trope' in this article is inspired by Wole Soyinka's similarly titled poem in his anthology, *Idanre and Other Poems* (1967). Soyinka's poem satirically dramatizes humanity's attempt to understand and gain knowledge of death to prevent future deaths.

Postmortem

there are more functions to a freezing plant
than stoking beer; cold biers of mortuaries
submit their dues, harnessed-glory be! –
is the cold hand of death …
his mouth was cotton filled, his man-pike
shrunk to sub-soil grub
his head was hollowed and his brain
on scales—**was this a trick to prove**
fore-knowledge after death?
his flesh confesses what has stilled
his tongue; **masked fingers think from him**
to learn, how not to die.
Let us love all things of grey; grey slabs,
Grey scalpel, one grey sleep and form,
Grey images.

(Soyinka 1969, 31)

Soyinka's teasing question, "was this a trick to prove fore-knowledge after death?" and the affirmation that "masked fingers think from him to learn, how not to die," analogically reflect an artist's imaginative

vision in dissecting experiences of war to preempt future wars or violent conflicts. This process 'prove[s] fore-knowledge after war,' enabling us to 'think from him to learn, how not [to start war].' To push the analogy further, the knowledge of war, like the knowledge of death through postmortem examination, is not an end in itself. It is significant only when it provides insight into how to avoid war and death. According to Knepper (2006), the postmortem presumes that the subject is dead, but the examination results can still affect and determine life and the living. Thus, postmortem examination is not an end in itself but a means to gain new knowledge and insight that could likely be used to avert the recurrence of similar causes of death.

It is in this regard that the concept of postmortem becomes a fundamental trope for critically scrutinizing these imaginaries of war. As such, the artists who create these imaginaries and their critics are akin to pathologists performing postmortem examination on a dead body. This is because, in forensic or medical terms, a postmortem is the examination and reporting process that aims to identify the cause of death. This process includes an autopsy of the body, a preliminary report (normally within a few days), and a full postmortem report (which may take several weeks or months to submit). During an autopsy, all parts of the body undergo a detailed inspection to determine the presence, nature, and extent of any disease or damage: "A post mortem is typically required as part of modern murder investigation and serves as part of overall evidence used to establish the time and cause of death." (Knepper 2006, 37)

In an attempt to understand war, the artist follows a procedure similar to that of forensic pathologists conducting a postmortem. This analogy highlights that a postmortem is not only concerned with identifying the cause of death or damage but also implies recommendations for preventing similar occurrences.

In her study on the literary postmortem of crime fiction, Knepper argues that the postmortem or autopsy, much like the art of creative writing, involves the act of "eye-witnessing" or "seeing with one's own eyes," and serves as a figure of speech referring to any "*critical dissection" or act of analysis* (2006, 38; author's emphasis). Thus, the artistic process of imagining war in a text is akin to a postmortem, as it involves interrogating how the textual organizing structures make sense of war through reflections, narration, re-ordering and re-arrangements of the past, testimonies, witnessing, alibis, confessions, and dreams.

The rationale for deploying a creative work of art such as Soyinka's is consistent with Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (2012) argument on the formulation of theory that indeed, "it was fiction that first gave us a

theory of the colonial". Ngugi asks if in fact fiction—specifically: the novel—can be construed as writing theory. He further argues that the original meaning of theory, following its Greek root, *theoria,* simply means a view and a contemplation, and goes on to note that explanations and meanings of phenomena are found in myths and stories. Accordingly, "the novelistic is akin to the scientific outlook in the method. The scientist collects data in the lab or in the field. They observe it, try out different combinations, and come up with a theory" (Ngugi, 2012, 25). Thus, if science is a theory of material nature, literature in general, as a fictive imagination, is a science of nurture, which can be seen as a theory of felt experiences.

The imaginaries of war analyzed here closely follow Chinyere Nwahunanya's (1997, 14) read in Emnenyonu (xi) on conception of war texts referring to the Nigeria civil war and the role and value of artistic imaginaries inspired by war. Nwahunanya aptly reminds us that:

> In its creation and interpretation of history, Nigerian war literature has enriched the existing body of historical writing from Africa, especially historical fiction. In this way, the writers have made literature continue to function as a mirror of society. In the process of mirroring society and criticizing its pitfalls, the war literature also serves as a compass for social re-direction. A didactic function emerges in the process, especially portrayal of death, devastation, avoidable mistakes and sufferings engendered by the war. The ultimate intention of course is to see whether these records of a sour historical moment will enable the modern African to see futility of wars as a solution to national problems which could be solved without recourse to war, carnage and bloodshed. The suggested mistakes of the war initiators and administrators portrayed in these writings thus become invaluable guides to meaningful national growth and a stable and progressive society. If this lesson comes through, then African nations (and indeed the world) would have gained immensely from this harvest of tragedy.

As such, according to Nwahunanya (1997), war-based imaginaries are actually agents of cultures of peace. This means that these imaginaries must follow a particular structure, beginning with depictions of rituals of everyday life, disconnection from those rituals of everyday life or normalcy, then the delineation of war with its debilitating consequences, and finally the depiction of a grammar of agency leading to a vision for a culture of peace. At this juncture, it is important to provide brief synopses of the three imaginaries of war under scrutiny.

Thirty Years of Bananas (drama, Uganda)

The play *Thirty Years of Bananas*, conceived as a *dance drama*, unravels the turbulent history of Uganda marked by wars (civil wars, coups, violence, and other types of conflict). The play renders its message through dance, music, dialogue, characters, narration, time, and symbolic spaces. The play's structure assumes a Socratic method where questioning is paramount in the search for answers and knowledge of the factors that led to three decades of chaos and violence. The title of the text, with its play on the pun of bananas, is significant: Uganda as a major producer and consumer of bananas, on the one hand and the notion of the banana republic in the political sense and going banana which also connotes madness. That is what Uganda was, during these thirty years of chaos and disorder. It is instructive to note that this play was scripted and performed in 1992, when normalcy had already begun to return to the country and the nation was in the process of writing a new constitution that was anticipated to restore stability and nurture a culture of peace. This musical dance drama is structured into three broad acts and each act is set in a public space: the City Square is associated with morning; the National Museum with the afternoon; and the Playground in the evening.

Murambi, The Book of Bones (novel, Rwanda)

Murambi, The Book of Bones by Boubacar Boris Diop, the Senegalese novelist, teacher, and journalist, dissects the Rwandan genocide of 1994. Boris Diop was among a group of ten writers who were invited to Rwanda in 1998 to contribute to the "Writing in Duty to Memory"[1]

1 In 1998, the "Writing in Duty to Memory" project was initiated, organized and funded by the Fest'Africa literary festival. Fest'Africa, based in Lille, France, is known for promoting African literature and cultural exchange. The festival aimed to foster a deeper understanding of the Rwandan Genocide and its aftermath through the lens of African writers, encouraging them to reflect on and document the tragedy in their works. Ten African authors were invited to Rwanda to engage with the genocide's history and its impact on the survivors and the country. The participating authors used their experiences to create literary works that would contribute to the collective memory and understanding of the genocide. The ten African authors who participated in this project were: Alexis Kagame (Rwanda), Boubacar Boris Diop (Senegal) Tierno Monénembo (Guinea), Meja Mwangi (Kenya), Ahmadou Kourouma (Ivory Coast), Nouréini Tidjani-Serpos (Benin), Kossi Efoui (Togo), Kangni Alem (Togo), Veronique Tadjo (Ivory Coast), Abdoulaye Sadji (Senegal) These authors produced various

project. *Murambi*, though structurally divided into four parts—Part 1: 'Fear and Anger'; Part 2: 'The return of Cornelius'; Part 3: 'Genocide'; and Part 4: '*Murambi*' –, is not dissimilar to other avowed pacifist-driven war texts from Eastern Africa. The intrinsic structure of *Murambi* follows a three-tier trajectory: calm, anxiety, and tension; war and violence; and agency and vision for a culture of peace. It begins with a sense of calmness or the order of usualness, which is then abruptly disrupted, leading to fear, anxiety, and tension. This stage is marked by the usual rituals of the everyday, but with subtle indications and signs that the rhythms of these rituals of everyday of life are bound to be disrupted. The second stage dramatizes the pornography and vulgarity of violence through war/conflict, pitting antagonistic, mainly politicized ethnic identities against each other. The final stage is the manifestation of agency framed in the redemptive grammar of forgiveness, reconciliation, children, and peace culture.

The novel does not follow this three-stage pattern linearly since, structurally, it is an extremely fragmented narrative with multiple, shifting perspectives on the genocide. These first-person perspectives are narrated through the voices of the victims, perpetrators, witnesses that tells the story of the figure of Cornelius, who was absent from Rwanda during the entire period of the genocide. The different points of view and narrative voices are consciously deployed to provide contrasting perspectives on the genocide as well as on the on-going war, which is frequently referenced but never directly portrayed. The novel is structured such that it begins in the past, shifts to the present, back to the past, and eventually ends in the present moment.

Ni Sisi (film, Kenya)

Ni Sisi was filmed in Swahili and the title translates directly into English as "it is us". Produced in 2013, in the run up to the 2013 elections and inspired by the experiences of the 2007/8 post-election violence (PEV) in Kenya after the disputed presidential election results. The film is an adaptation of an intervention community theatre performance that toured different parts of the country from 2010, and which frequent references are made to in the film. The film is about the story of a young adult character and narrator called Jabali who reveals how a politician, Mr. Mzito, has manipulated ethnic stereo-

works, including novels, essays, and reports, that addressed the genocide's events and their repercussions

types to cause division and animosity in order to gain political mileage. However, his evil schemes are averted by a group of young people led by Jabali. The film is, in a sense, highly post-modernist in style as it continuously shifts from the screen play to the community theatre performance.

Rituals of Everyday Life and the Rupture of Usualness

As has been implied, these artistic imaginaries of war share intrinsic structures even though they represent different genres with distinct forms. There is a way in which they all begin by depicting a sense of calmness and tranquillity (*cosmic equilibrium*), which is subsequently disrupted (*cosmic disequilibrium*), lead to anxiety and tension before the eventual eruption of war and violence.

For instance, the play *Thirty Years of Banana* begins with Uganda in the process of regaining normalcy after thirty years of disorder and chaos. To understand how Uganda reached this state, Mukulu takes the audience/reader back in space and time to independence, presenting it as the genesis of the problem. As the play opens, the audience encounters characters in a public sphere, the City Square, questioning how and why their country ended up in such a state. This questioning is driven by the fear that the nascent peace they are currently enjoying might be disrupted again. The characters are both surprised and enchanted that their everyday practices of life are gradually and slowly returning to normalcy.

In Boris Diop's *Murambi*, from the start, the reader is confronted with contrasting auras and practices of everyday life, reflecting the antagonistic ethnic identities of the Hutus and Tutsis. Significantly, the novel begins with the historical death of President Juvenal Habyarimana in a plane crash in April 1994, which many suspected at the time to have been caused either by RPF guerrillas, mainly comprising Tutsis, or by extremist Hutu soldiers. As the title of the section in the play aptly indicates, this death instills fear in the Tutsis while provoking anger among the Hutus. Through the conversations of various characters, it emerges that since 1959, everyday life in Rwanda has consistently been disrupted by residual tensions and mistrust between the dominant ethnic identities, the Hutus and Tutsis.

Reading the novel, one readily perceives a 'cold war' situation in a sense implying superficial of peace that inevitably implodes into a 'hot war' with the announcement of the president's death. The novelist captures this situation most effectively through juxtaposition

and contrast, employing the first-person narratives of Michel Serumundo, a Tutsi; Faustin Gasana, a Hutu; and Jessica, a Tutsi RPF spy masquerading as a Hutu.

Serumundo, who has been oblivious to the events around him as he is more interested in his own business, fails to hear the news of the president's sudden death. He describes the disruption of the usual day's routine as follows:

> The market bus station was almost deserted. I climbed onto the only vehicle parked there. The atmosphere was heavy inside the bus, but the passengers sat in silence. After a few minutes, the driver called his apprentice. "OK. Let's go." It was only when a group of nervous soldiers stopped our bus from passing in front of Radio Rwanda that I started to suspect that this was a day unlike any other. (Diop 2000, 5)

While Faustin Gasana, a Hutu Interahamwe Militia leader, describes the day as follows:

> He sets off in a cloud of dust. In normal times, the traffic is very heavy in this part of Kibungo. This afternoon the streets are deserted. The inhabitants have been cloistered away at home for two days. The only people moving around are security forces and Interahamwe militia like me. I sense a discreet excitement in Danny. I haven't told him anything about it, but he knows that some very important events are going to take place. (Diop 2000, 12-13)

Jessica, a Tutsi military spy camouflaging herself as a Hutu, on her part, describes the situation:

> "They love each other like crazy, those two. And now events are forcing them to postpone the date of their marriage again." "Ah, Lucienne and her boyfriend Valence Ndimbati … It's so sad," I say distractedly. You get used to anything fast. In her hometown of Nyamata, where my friend Theresa Mukandori is looking for refuge, we find a way to chatter on like two old women. She asks me suddenly, stopping. "Do you really think they are going to do it?" I've learned to lie. "It's impossible, Theresa. They're looking mainly to scare people. It'll calm down in a few days." The idea that from now on she could be killed at any moment by anybody seemed very odd to her. (Diop 2000, 24)

All three points of view confirm in a way that the news of the president's death disrupted the usual routines of everyday life, and poignantly predict inevitable doom and tragedy.

The film *Ni Sisi* begins with a popular Safaricom advertisement that provides a panoramic view of Kenya's diverse geographical landscapes. These images suggest a Kenya whose landscape is pastoral, idyllic, and romantic. The advert, with its signature tune "Naweza" (I can), depicts Kenyans peacefully engaging in the project of nation-building and development, presenting a Kenya that is splendid, serene, and in harmony with itself. The advert seems to magnify the tourist mantra: "Kenya 'Inchi Nzuri Hakuna Matata'" (Kenya is a peaceful country without troubles). It celebrates a Kenyan nation where all kinds of identities are connected, creating a sense of unity in diversity through Safaricom mobile telephone services.

The film proper begins, after the Safaricom advert that acts as a prologue, with the raising of the national flag to the singing of the national anthem, symbolizing the achievement of independence and the birth of the Kenyan nation. The camera then zooms in on the capital city of Nairobi and focuses on citizens engaged in their everyday life routines. This scenario is meant to signify the fundamental values of a culture of peace and harmony. Given this state of cosmic equilibrium, contented citizens appear to participate undisturbed in the project of nation-building and development.

The camera then zooms in further to a group of community theater performers in a slum or low-class urban area, mobilizing the community in preparation for an anti-war/peace culture forum theatre. The performance begins instructively with Eric Wainaina's popular song 'Daima,' which extols patriotic values. This moment, however, is abruptly disrupted by gunshots, leading to pandemonium among the animator-actors and audience members assembled to watch the performance of *Ni Sisi.*

This scene then transitions into news clips and footage of the 2007/08 post-election violence (PEV), showing state security forces brutally beating citizens, wounded bodies and people in pain, aggressive gangs carrying crude weapons and chanting for justice, baying for the blood of perceived enemies.

Ethnic Consciousness and the Suspension of National Identity

Another striking feature of these war/anti-war imaginaries is their similar approach to the causes and effects of war. In all three texts, the creators identify the selfish struggle for political power and the incitement of ethnic nationalisms as major catalysts of the ("un)civil war," conflicts, and violence. In each case, politicians take advantage of the fluid and elusive sense of the imagined nation and the yet-to-be-fully-crystallized impulses of nationhood.

For instances in *Thirty Years of Banana* Mukulu dramatizes, through the musings of his mouthpiece, Kaleekeezi, how ethnic nationalisms and the culture of "our time to eat" created frictions that resulted in conflicts and wars in Uganda. Kaleekeezi cynically narrates how every time a ruler took over political power, it became the time for his ethnic community to benefit from the state. He humorously describes how, with each change in leadership, he would immediately find out the ethnic identity of the new leader and look for a job from a prominent member of that leader's ethnic community. As an outsider, he could adapt himself to any ethnic community that came into political power. This postmortem engagement with Uganda's war experiences explicitly reveals that the causes of war and conflict were prompted by selfish political power struggles, as well as the endless manipulation of ethnic identities and strong feelings of ethnic nationalism.

In *Murambi, The Book of Bones,* the cause of friction between Hutu and Tutsi is also traced back to political power struggles and the exploitation of ethnic identities. According to Simeon Habineza, one of the main characters, the roots of the war in Rwanda can be traced back to the arrival of colonialists and Christian missionaries. Their proselytizing and civilizing efforts categorized Tutsis as racially superior to the ethnic identities of Hutus and Twa. For instance, Simeon observes that in the past, foreigners told the Tutsis, "You are superior, your noses are long and your skin is light, you are tall and your lips are thin, you cannot be blacks, a twist of fate led you to be among these savages. You come from somewhere else" (Diop 2000, 170).

The conversation between Faustin Gasana and his ailing father reveals that this different categorization and treatment apparently created hostility between Tutsis and Hutus. With the 1959 revolution that brought President Kayibanda to power, a systematic decimation of the Tutsi population through intermittent massacres began. This eventually culminated in the most tragic genocide in history in 1994 after the plane carrying President Habyarimana, a Hutu, was brought down, killing not only him but also the Burundian president, Cyprien

Ntaryamira. The hatred and hostility felt by Hutus towards the Tutsis were fuelled by perceived marginalization, crystallizing into Hutu ethnic nationalism.

Boris Diop thus identifies the cause of war between the Hutu and Tutsis as one that is implicated in complex historical processes. According to Diop, as far as the Hutus are concerned, this is a justified 'war' to regain their country from the Tutsis who, having been categorized as a favoured race by the colonial powers, are now imagined as settlers and not indigenes of this land.

In contrast to *Murambi*, the film *Ni Sisi* appears to presume that the post-election violence (PEV) was primarily a result of rogue politicians who bribed and incited their ethnic communities against each other through the use of rumours and propaganda. The film depicts the conflict as much more complex, entangled in myriad historical and contemporary structures of justice, truth, and equity.

In the film, Mr. Mzito, the politician, and his wife Zuena are portrayed as the harbingers of polarizing politics, who destabilize the harmony of this diverse yet harmonious community through manipulation, bribery, and propaganda. They cause friction by invoking sensational and derogatory ethnic stereotypes and myths. Mr. Mzito and his wife seem to follow the script of the Rwandan genocide, exploiting the media, especially radio and social media, to circulate propaganda and create tension, fear, and despondency among different ethnic identities living together as a community.

From these three artistic imaginaries, it is apparent that wars in Rwanda, Uganda, and Kenya are triggered by political power struggles by the selfish and avaricious political class, who manipulate ethnic identities to capture power and convert the state into a "site of feasting," as James Ogude (2009) aptly describes it, and which Michela Wrong (2010) cynically christened as "our time to eat." It is this marginalization of other ethnic communities from the state as a site of eating that has been implicated in these artistic imaginaries as the main catalysts for the internecine feuds and wars.

From Victimhood to Agency: The Quest for Peace Culture

Having outlined how these texts imagine the causes of war, the question now is how pacifist agendas are depicted through the grammar of agency to foster a culture of peace. It is noteworthy that artistic imaginaries with pacifist or anti-war impulses must simultaneously

focus on war. Thus, the unsurprising dominance of horrifying and even uncanny images in the texts. In an attempt to set an anti-war and pacifist agenda, these war imaginaries invest heavily in victim discourses and the grammar of agency to promote a culture of peace.

By victim discourse, we mean the use of language to depict passive bodies in times of war, particularly the explicit exposure of dead and wounded bodies. The grammar of agency, as construed by linguists and connoisseurs of preemptive visions of war, is the conscious effort of individuals to think, express, mobilize, and act to avoid war and promote the restoration and sustainability of a culture of peace. In war discourses, agency is seen as the alternative to complicity by victims of war.

Elisabeth Krimmer's (2010) ideas on the representations of war in German literature provide considerable insights for analyzing the interface between victim discourses and the grammar of agency, which anticipates a culture of peace. Her concept of metonymic slippage is a profound index in understanding how war texts participate in the promotion of anti-war or pacifist motives. Krimmer's ideas are important in analyzing war texts as they reveal underlying motives and messages. They assist readers in understanding how language can be used to shape perceptions and promote specific ideologies, such as anti-war or pacifist sentiments. The concept of metonymic slippage is therefore a valuable analytical tool in engaging with these texts. It allows for a deeper understanding of how texts about war can subtly influence readers' attitudes toward conflict, often promoting anti-war or pacifist perspectives through shifts in language and meaning. Indeed, it is a pertinent approach for analyzing the rhetoric and themes of war-related texts.

It can be argued that artistic war products or by-products are usually engaged with in the aftermath of the imminent danger of war. This is because the grotesque and horrifying images exhibited in war texts are generally intended to evoke shock effects on those encountering them, forcing them to contemplate the dangers of war and the value of peace. As Kant, cited in Krimmer (2010, 4), notes, "only an observer who is safe from actual danger can appreciate the phenomenon of the sublime." Similarly, Giorgio Agamben, mentioned by Krimmer (2010, 3), reminds us that: "in the war novel, the concept of peace represents an inclusion by exclusion." The depictions of wars, generally but more specifically in the artistic texts under discussion in this article, are therefore conscious intervention projects to avert wars as they advocate for peace. This then explains why victim discourses and agency for peace are inextricably entangled in anti-war artistic imaginaries.

Krimmer (2010, 19) further articulates this symbiotic relationship convincingly when she states that in the Cartesian hierarchy of body and mind, the body connotes passivity and the mind agency. Consequently, if a text focuses exclusively on the impact of war on the physical side of life, it runs the risk of reducing humans to pure bodies, thus blocking all recourse to rational and political agency.

Thus, if war texts focus on victim discourses or victimization, privileging images of dead and injured bodies without rational and political agency, then they end up simply as aestheticization of pain and pornography of violence.

However, the deployment of 'aestheticization of pain' or 'pornography of violence' as strategies of creating aversion to war and similarly evoking a longing and quest for peace raises questions of the ethics of representation. For example, is it responsibly and morally ethical for artists to confront readers and audiences with gory and horrifying images as well as the spectacles of mutilated, bloodied bodies in pain? As Krimmer—aptly citing Gilbert Adair observes: "the meticulously detailed aping of an atrocity is an atrocity […] the unmediated representation of violence constitutes in itself an act of violence against the spectator" (2010, 8). This is indeed the paradox of representing war with all its debilitating effects to promote the goal of peace. Of concern here, however, is not the ethics of war representations only but more significantly how victim discourses are implicated in creating and developing peace culture. In very diverse ways, the three texts analyzed here employ victim discourses as a caution to post-war societies on the dangers of war.

Mukulu's *Thirty Years of Bananas*, for instance, uses collected and collective memories to present victim discourses. This is facilitated through the symbolic deployment of the museum as a site of re-memory. There are further illustrations by the narrator-character, Kaleekeezi, the Rwandan refugee, and the museum guide/curator who shares his victim memories.

However, the most horrifying victim discourses are expressed in Boris Diop's novel, *Murambi, The Book of Bones.* Similar to *Thirty Years of Bananas*, the victim discourses are conveyed by the survivors of the genocide as well as through the gruesome images of corpses at the commemoration sites, referred to as museums of death. The encounter with these terrifying images is facilitated through the character Cornelius, who was in exile during the genocide. Cornelius is confronted with horrifying images in the church in Nyamata. Simultaneously, these scenes aim to prick the readers' conscience and motivate them to question the logic of war and to appreciate peace culture. A similarly shocking spectacle is presented in the film *Ni Sisi* when the

character Roxana, in a fit of anger, describes to her friends how her mother was raped by four men and a bottle inserted into her vagina; she goes on to relate how, out of shame, her mother subsequently committed suicide. All these images are intended to shock.

These gory images of dead and wounded bodies are laid bare to illustrate the debilitating effects of war and, in turn, act as cautionary measures by instilling chilling fear. However, the images are also made as banal as possible because, as Robert Reimer in Krimmer argues: "If images of war are framed in an aesthetically pleasing form, the beauty of the form may overpower the horror of the content" (2010, 8). Though the texts under discussion here are replete with victim discourses and their concomitant methods for encouraging an appreciation of peace culture, on their own, they do not constitute transformative agency. Indeed, the desire for a culture of peace should not be confined to a simple critique of war. For victim discourses to catalyze transformation meaningfully, it is imperative that they be positioned in complementarity with the grammar of agency and peace culture. As Krimmer argues: "Even if we are prepared to accept that the representation of the wounded and dead effects a powerful critique of war, we would still have to admit that any pacifist agenda must be subtended by concepts of agency" (2010, 8). As such, the critique of war must transcend the affective and also provoke the cognitive.

Arguably, an artistic war imaginary that is pacifist and anti-war in its motive and vision must transcend victim discourses and set a tone for a grammar of agency that inculcates and nurtures cultures of peace. This is clearly revealed in these war/anti-war texts. Thirty Years of Bananas serves as a grammar of agency in itself, as it is explicit in its anti-war and peace culture agenda. Beyond exposing the wounds of the three decades of war to shock effect, the play accuses Ugandan citizens born before Independence of complicity in the conflict and abdicating responsibility, allowing politicians to perpetuate chaos and violence. In the City Square, the characters ask fundamental questions that clearly indicate their agency. This is accentuated by the chorus:

> Chorus 2: (with anger) "What have I done for 'God and my country' during the thirty years of my country's Independence? If there is anything I have done, what is it? If I have not yet done anything, what must I do? When and, why?" (Mukulu 1993, 3).

Therefore, the affective/cognitive dichotomy or the victim discourses and the grammar of agency premised on the Cartesian hierarchy must be juxtaposed against each other to imagine and promote a culture of peace. This agency is well delineated in the three artistic imaginaries

described here. The motive behind *Thirty Years of Bananas* is to conscientize Uganda's citizens about what it means to be a nation. The character of Kaleekeezi shines a light on how myopic ethnic nationalisms and interests undermine the agency of peace culture, as different ethnic identity groups only perceive the nation-state as a site of 'to eat', leading the country down the path of self-destruction through relentless (un)civil-wars.

Interestingly, the play's Museum, functioning as a site of memory, catalyzes the agency of the characters as they engage with their history, posing pertinent questions such as where, why, and how their newly found nation was diverted from its positive trajectory. Through their encounter with the Museum, they begin to realize that the only way to avert future wars and violence in the country is to actively participate in the process of writing the new constitution.

In Diop's *Murambi*, the grammar of agency and peace culture is conveyed through characterization and counterpoised against the language of violence prevalent during the 'cold war' period and, consequently, the genocide. It seems that agency can only be crystallized after a serious engagement with the traumatic past. This is the rite of passage that the character Cornelius and the country Rwanda must accept to go through. Simeon insinuates that for Rwanda to remain a nation, citizens should have fond memories of the past. That is, memories of a pastoral, serene, and tranquil place. According to Simeon, it is more important to "try to think about what is yet to be born than what is already dead" (Diop 2000,143). The future is more important than the past. However, the past must always be revisited to ensure that the future is protected. Simeon tells Cornelius that the genocide should not be mythologized because that trivializes its gravitas and also legitimizes it as some sort of predestined act of divine power, thereby undermining human agency. Privileging these myths and premonitions would absolve the (human) perpetrators from responsibility. It is only by accepting the fact of the genocide that there will be accountability and an identification of the burden of responsibility.

Diop envisions a Rwanda where ethnic identities are no longer the determining categories for privilege but are merely socio-cultural markers, not signifiers of differences that create hostility and animosity. In a similar manner to *Thirty Years of Bananas*, the vision of peaceful co-existence is embodied in the agency of the younger generation.

In Murambi, Simeon Habinèza, who plays the same role that Kaleekeezi performs in *Thirty Years of Bananas* and Jabali in *Ni Sisi*, believes that a peace culture can only be realized if democracy is allowed to thrive. In terms of a grammar of agency and peace culture, the commemorative sites housing the victims of the genocide not only

remind people of those who died and the horror of the events, but their presence serves—in a poetic inversion—to resurrect the living so that they appreciate the value of life; and the value of life is embedded in sustained peace culture.

In *Ni Sisi*, the grammar of agency and peace culture is framed through various narrative techniques, including the use of juxtaposition, dreams, the environment, and music. In this film, the rituals of everyday life, reflecting cosmic equilibrium, are destabilized by political power struggles and manipulations. Jabali's dream is significant as it catalyzes agency towards conscientization and political transformation in the masses, especially the youth. The dream serves as a premonition of a possible recurrence of the PEV of 2007/8 if no action is taken to stop the politician Mr. Mzito and his wife Zuena from their manipulative schemes. Mzito's use of violent language, overtly promoting ethnic profiling and polarization, is instructively juxtaposed against the grammar of agency and peace culture in the romantic poetry of Tall, the reconciliatory and didactic language of Jabali, Roxana, and Scola, and the music and songs used in the film, all of which gesture to the agency of a peace culture. While the film utilizes music and songs as forms of agency, the play begins with the national anthem, which is instead prayerful and pleads with the Almighty God to bless and protect Kenya. Among the other songs are Eric Wainaina's popular song *Daima*, which urges patriotism and aspirations to nationhood, and the song *Mbegu Gani* (Which Seed), which solemnly questions the genesis of friction among ethnic identities that had been living together harmoniously.

This film, similar to the other two artistic war imaginaries that have been scrutinized, also privileges the younger generation in the agency and vision of a culture of peace and a tranquil future. In *Ni Sisi*, unlike the other two imaginaries that use physical commemorative sites (museums) to catalyze agency, dreams are used symbolically as archives and also act as catalysts for agency. It is noteworthy that these artistic war imaginaries themselves serve as commemorative sites of the war's effects and, as such, are agencies for the imagination of peace cultures.

Conclusion

In essence, postmortem reading transforms war literature from mere storytelling into a comprehensive examination of human suffering and resilience. It demands reflective and critical engagement with the text, ensuring that the lessons of the past are meticulously dissected

and understood, thereby contributing to a broader discourse on peace and reconciliation. Though the artistic imaginaries of war presented here are explored through different genres, they reveal more similarities in their anatomies as agencies for peace culture. This postmortem approach to reading war texts provides a profound framework for understanding the multifaceted impacts of war, both on individuals and societies. By likening the analysis of war literature to a forensic examination, their anatomies follow similar trajectories in pursuing anti-war motives and agenda. The interface of victim discourse and grammar of agency for peace culture is not dissimilar. All these texts deploy memory and remembering as catalysts to pre-empt future wars. They further demonstrate the power of pre-emptive writing in dispelling the paradigm of victimhood to instil accountability and responsibility in a nation's citizens. All the texts examined here use sites of commemoration, whether tangible, such as museums, or intangible, such as dreams, to catalyze this agency for peace culture, particularly with a view to investing in the younger generation

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Rebecka Kärde

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.

Criticism, Globalism, and Language(s)

Ronya Othmann
Criticism and Crisis

Every now and then, a new crisis is declared. At least in Germany, I have been able to observe this. It started in 2008 with the financial crisis, then came the so-called refugee crisis in 2015, in 2020 came the Corona crisis, followed in 2021 by the Ukraine crisis, which actually started in 2014 and is actually also a war. And this was followed in Germany by the gas crisis (caused by a self-inflicted dependence on cheap Russian gas—unpleasant, but still relatively manageable, bearing in mind that bombs are falling elsewhere). And hanging over all this is the sword of Damocles' of the climate crisis. In some places in the world, the sword of Damocles has already fallen and is causing damage. And these multiple crises, as they are often called, produce winners and losers, like all crises. Among the winners of the crises—so the analysis goes—are the populists, the right-wingers, the self-proclaimed god warriors—Evangelicals or Islamists—the truthers, the conspiracy theorists. And of course, in the face of the crises, it is pretty staggering to have to deal with a bunch of people, parties, and organizations who have sworn off reason and decency, who make claims without justifying them.

Often, the present time is described as particularly crisis-ridden, at least from a West German perspective, characterized by economic boom, baby boom, the wild 1970s, and the end of history. If you change the perspective, of course, everything is relative again. (Growing up in a German-Kurdish-Yazidi family, with relatives from modern-day Turkey, Syria, Iraq, I personally cannot think of a time that could not be described as crisis-ridden.) Which brings us back to the famous question: From which perspective is the story told?

Since the end of the noughties, we have been speaking about the newspaper crisis in Germany, about the decline of print and of the mainstream media. And the newspaper crisis was ultimately followed by a crisis in literary criticism. It is almost indecent to speak about

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literary criticism here, given all the other crises that are raging. But if you take a closer look at the issue, then again: it is not.

To briefly summarize the debates of the last few years: First, there are fewer reviews every year, the number of literary pages in the print media are shrinking; the classic review is being replaced by the interview, the portrait, or even the home story. Positions for literary editors are not being re-filled, so they are effectively being removed. Secondly, the price per line has decreased. So there is less cash for the same amount of work, and that is in the face of increased costs of living and increased rents in major cities. Freelance critics can hardly support themselves anymore. Online journalism is paid less than print, at least in Germany. And if you have to produce non-stop to make a living, then quality inevitably suffers. And, thirdly, men still review men above all. According to a widely received study published at the University of Rostock in 2018 "#frauenzählen" (Clark, Seidel, et al., 2018), two-thirds of books reviewed were by men. And the reviews of these books were also incomparably longer than those of books by women.

Well, you might say, what is all the whining about? This crisis in a prosperous country like Germany could actually be solved quite quickly. All that is needed is enough lobbying to preserve literary pages and broadcasts, pressure from the unions for higher line rates, and a women's quota to get a grip on the male surplus.

Let's look at the matter from another angle.

There was a time when the so-called Popes of Literature sat in their offices—where, of course, back then, people were still allowed to smoke—and typed away on the feuilleton pages. They wrote texts that were bulky and dense, entertaining and brilliant, as appropriate for a classic feuilleton.

And because there were still no click counts and such, they never noticed that the literature page was skipped in order to jump from politics to economy, or that the newspaper was bought primarily for its sports section. As a digital native, I probably have some very romanticized perceptions. -Well, it could have been a few more female critics …

When I took my first baby steps into the world of literature, first reading, later writing, the era of the so-called Popes of Literature was already over. No one had overthrown them, they had simply died. And, yes, a new generation of critics followed, but they were no longer popes. In the noughties, people still had one cause for hope: the internet. Cultural optimists saw the rise of a democratic culture of discussion. Blogs, forums, Twitter—anyone and everyone could participate. To paraphrase the artist Joseph Beuys: Everyone is a critic. And, indeed, they were, only in a different way than the optimists had imag-

ined (hate speech, shitstorms, etc.). But the internet was a blessing for German poetry criticism: Blogs for poetry reviews and debates emerged, such as Fixpoetry (which, unfortunately, was discontinued in 2020 due to lack of funding) or Signatures. The flipside of all this is the domain of the cultural pessimists, for: in a world where click counts and reach are currency, literary criticism can only lose. At worst, the logic of social media (clickbait, target group mentality, and so on) will take hold of literary criticism. In other words, no longer do the clever, pointed tones hold sway, but instead scandalization, purchase recommendations, thumbs up and/or thumbs down. Not to mention algorithms. On Instagram, whoever shows face and skin (but not too much skin), whoever scrolls, and whoever likes, and whoever interacts (i.e. spends as much time as possible on the platform) is rewarded with visibility. And when click numbers and reach pay off, it is not only authors who have to present and market themselves, but also critics.

It is the end of the public sphere,—the so-called public, which has always been a rather strange thing—as we know it. This constantly invoked public that everyone seems to know and no one knows exactly who it is. It should not be confused with the majority, that is for sure. For the literary public in particular, which was also a bourgeois public, this has always been true, ever since its emergence in the eighteenth century. We only have to consider how many people at that time could read and write, let alone had the time and money for literature. Now, we might wonder whether the public sphere has disappeared. Admittedly, this is not entirely the case, it has not yet disappeared completely, the dear public sphere. After all, they still exist: the large publishing houses for the general public, the somewhat smaller publishing houses, the literary pages in the feuilletons, the literary programs on the radio.

However, the cultural pessimist would ask: Where has the so-called public sphere gone? Into the niches, into the margins. And that is both good news and bad news at the same time. What would the cultural pessimist want to hear first? The bad news, of course.

Everything is already pre-sorted by the algorithm. Chopped up, pre-cooked. It varies, depending on the platform. So, we operate more or less in those infamous filter bubbles. But this should not be overestimated: We do not just passively browse the web; we Google, we follow, we search, out of curiosity, or out of sympathy or out of antipathy. And even in the pre-internet age, unless you read for a living, you did not subscribe to everything from the left-wing to the conservative. However, unlike today, not everyone could write back publicly (again, that is both good and bad news). Of course, there was a lot of junk printed in the pre-internet era, but you could not just walk in and

put your text in the newspaper. There was the editorial office, the department head, the editor-in-chief—a little bit of quality control. Now everyone can write and read. Although not everyone who writes will be read. And not everything that is written can also be read. There is the logic of the platforms, there is the paywall. The internet seems to offer endless space for everything. The pathways are short, sometimes the most marginal thing is just a click away, sometimes it is dumped into your timeline. The recording of a conference on Nature Writing in California. Or a show on YouTube in which German right-wing intellectuals (so-called)—you could just call them Nazis with bookshelves—discuss literature. Against the background tinkling of a piano, they talk a bit about reading impressions and character sketches, so what this is all about is not immediately apparent, namely: putting everything together so that it fits into a preconceived ideological mold. The rhetorical sleight of hand in this Youtubeshow with the title "Aufgeblättert. Zugeschlagen—Mit Rechten lesen" (BuchHaus Loschwitz 2022) is worth a closer look. Even though the show gives itself a veneer of literary criticism, it is basically nothing but its parody. Absurd though it seems, a great deal can be learned here about criticism in the negative. For texts—as long as they are not the texts of right-wing authors—are examined here for their ideological usefulness (for example, the books by Peter Nadas, Lutz Seiler, or Vladimir Sorokin). Literature is therefore far from being the issue here.

Is there anything left beyond the ideological exploitation of literature, beyond testing it for its socio-political usefulness, in the form of bestseller lists—the big hit book of the moment, the one that warns us about the climate crisis, or the one that tells us about the difficulty of combining motherhood and a career, or the one that empowers? Not that I have anything against it, but every book also has a form and a language. However, speaking about language, form, and content is not easily marketed, so there is often a focus on topics. Consequently, keywords are applied to books: the book about racism, the book about gender, the book about climate change, the book about motherhood, the book about classism. Which brings us back to thumbs up, thumbs down, purchase recommendations. The book as a product, the critic as an influencer, the audience as a target group, the reader as a consumer.

What of the good news? Where every person is a critic, there is also a criticism of criticism—a wonderful democratic practice. Admittedly, this existed in the past as well, critical comment heaped on both praise and condemnation. Now, though, anyone with an internet-capable device can have their say. On Twitter, professional and casual readers engage in discussion. This can be seen every year at the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize in Klagenfurt, the literary competition where authors

read their texts aloud and a panel of critics discusses them. Not only are the texts themselves subject to eager commentary in real time under the hashtag #tddl, but so is what the critics have to say. Do they do justice to the texts? Do they give adequate reasons for their judgments? Do they do what they do with wit and dignity? In the best case scenario, what happens here is polyphonic literary criticism; in the worst case, it is a return to the all-too-familiar experience of Twitter. It would be wise not to forget that these social media platforms are ultimately businesses that follow a business logic. Arguably, of course, so are the traditional media, unless they are organized as cooperatives or financed by fees like a public broadcaster, and censorship also takes place in the digital sphere. In Turkey, for example, the company Google toed the Turkish state propaganda line (Çavuş 2023), while on TikTok in China, videos with the hashtag #xinjang were deleted and idyllic landscapes shown in their place (Fifield 2019; Conrad 2022). This has less to do with literature, but a great deal to do with criticism. To quote Marcel Reich-Ranicki, literary critic and one of the Popes of Literature: "Freedom and criticism are mutually dependent. Just as there can be no freedom without criticism, so criticism cannot exist without freedom." (Reich-Ranicki 2002)

The Syrian writer Khaled Khalifa still lives mainly in Damascus. His books are published in Lebanon. They are banned in Syria. Of course, they are still bought and read—just under the counter, secretly. With his last novel, *No One Prayed Over Their Graves*, the epic of a century, which deals with unfulfilled love, the lives of Christians, Jews, and Muslims in Aleppo, massacres and expulsions, Khaled Khalifa had a little bit of hope for different treatment. After all, *No One Prayed Over Their Graves* is a historical novel, set before the founding of the Baath Party and the rule of the Assad family. So, Khaled Khalifa submitted his novel to the authorities for examination: The Ministry of Culture is responsible for literature in Syria, it is the Baath Party's cultural office, it lies behind the Syrian Writers' Union, which may not sound like it, but is basically nothing more than a censorship authority. This novel was also banned. When Khalifa asked why, a censorship official answered him quite accurately: "You wrote about the nineteenth century, but actually you wrote about today." (internationales literaturfestival berlin 2022) The quite cynical question here would be: Is the censor a critic? But then that would not be far from the very cynicism with which the Assad regime maintains a censorship authority called the Syrian Writers' Union. What began with a question about the good news, the optimistic view, has quickly brought pessimistic answers. Nevertheless, there are some things that have undoubtedly improved the situation for criticism in these digital

times. Book smuggling, for example. Small USB flash drives are easier to smuggle across the border than thick books. It is even easier to transport texts in digital form if they do not appear physically in the first place. And they are not found so quickly during a raid.

In the past, a huge effort was made to prepare books and replace the spines. I still remember the stories my father told, who grew up as a stateless Yazidi Kurd in Syria. As a teenager, he smuggled himself into Lebanon during the summer vacations to earn some money as a day laborer, and at the end of the summer vacations he returned to Syria with a pile of books. At that time, Lebanon was still considered the book paradise of the Middle East. It was extremely difficult if you wanted to read in Kurdish, and it still is today. My grandparents' generation was illiterate; my father's generation was the first to attend school (mostly only the elementary school in the village, and only a few pupils—the secondary school was located in the city). School education in Syria was conducted in Arabic; Kurdish was sanctioned with beatings. Nevertheless, people read, copied the Kurdish poems of Cigerxwin by hand, and learned them by heart. In Syria, people were trained to learn by heart anyway. School education basically consisted of nothing more than learning by rote and repeating on command. Expressing one's own thoughts and arguments was not trained. Criticism is undesirable in a dictatorship. None of this should be romanticized. Because none of it is romantic. If a language is banned, it dies. This is evident in modern Turkey, where the authorities even went so far as to forbid the letters X, W, and Q, because they occur in the Kurdish but not in the Turkish alphabet. The result is the large number of Kurdish authors who can no longer read, let alone write, in their native language. And even if they can, who will be their readers when whole generations are literate only in Arabic, Turkish, or Persian? And if books are censored, criticism withers as well. The tighter the screw turns, the more books are censored, publishing houses and newspapers are closed, writers and journalists are put on trial, the more emigrate. Mostly to Europe. If I were, this minute, to start listing the many writers, publishers, and critics have found refuge in Europe in recent years and decades, I would still be working on that list tomorrow. At best, new hubs, literary scenes, libraries, literary events, magazines are emerging in the diaspora; people are writing, publishing, and criticizing again. They are also being translated. In other words, diaspora literature is not only read and received by other members of the diaspora, but also by mainstream society. At best, an exchange takes place in both directions.

Now another question: What might a literary criticism of today look like? It seems strange to try to answer this question, when I

myself only write books that are reviewed by literary critics. And I criticize a lot in newspapers, just not (with one exception) literature. This differentiation of professions—writer here, critic there—has not always and everywhere been as self-evident. It will not be as self-evident in the future, either. Considering the sometimes negligibly small rates per line, who can still afford to work full-time as a freelance critic? And what happens to criticism when, as in the visual arts, for example, critics also accept well-paid commissioned texts for exhibition catalogs, galleries, and such? How can the independence of criticism be guaranteed when, as is happening in Germany right now, critics also regularly present author readings, and the divide between these two spheres—that of the author and that of the critic—is disappearing more and more?

Do we simply need a different understanding? One in which criticism is a form of love, as pathetic as that sounds. Criticizing a text also means taking it seriously. As an aesthetic entity, in its trinity of language, form, and content. Criticism that is more than just 'content' or a 'summary with opinion section'. In the end, perhaps criticism is even a piece of literature itself.

In Germany, there is a widely diversified funding structure for literature, at the national and communal levels, through private foundations and individual patrons, but there is no such thing as funding for criticism. There are good reasons for this, including historical ones. After all, journalism is supposed to be independent. In view of the many crises, it may seem presumptuous to talk about the crisis—or rather crises—of literary criticism. And to a certain extent it is. But we need to speak publicly about literature more than ever. Where everything is fragmented into partial and even smaller public spheres, we need a place where all the particularities can be brought together, in all their plurality. Lively literary criticism is always polyphonic. And it is universal in a subjective way. It is simultaneously a democratic practice (no homage to genius), yet in no way democratic in itself (no consensus). It works solely in the service of literature (whatever it may be) and evaluates it (with whatever criteria may be). It does so to the best of its knowledge and belief. In the end, a crisis of criticism is always a crisis of democracy and vice versa.

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Xu Xi

The Problem of English in Contemporary Literature (in the Fora of Criticism)

As a novelist and writer who's not either a scholar or critic, it's daunting to even consider the fora of criticism, since this is what I do my best to avoid in order to write. However, as a teacher of creative writing internationally, to both native and non-native writers of English, I've considered the "problem" of English in terms of how the language affects which books attract critical attention. To examine this problem, here are the questions posed from one writer's perspective.

The global dominance of English has helped it to evolve into a lingua franca for contemporary literature, both as a literary language writers choose to write in, as well as the preferred language for translation of the world's literature. What the major Anglophone publishers anoint as "the best" writing is bolstered by a publicity machine to obtain favorable coverage and reviews leading to book sales and literary awards that contribute to critical success. Amazon has changed publishing and access to literature globally, as well as dramatically transformed the fora for criticism, as Mark McGurl articulates in *Everything and Less*.[1] What concerns me is prose, especially the novel, the form most problematically affected by English.

As a storyteller, the most direct way to consider this question is to recount the story of my own compulsion to write in English. It was the accident of my birth and upbringing in the last British colony of Hong Kong, coupled with a transnational education and life split approximately 50/50 between my birth city and the U.S., mostly in New York, that transformed me into a so-called "pioneer"[2] English

1 Mark McGurl, *Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon* (London and New York: Verso, 2021).

2 Doreen Weisenhaus, "Arts Abroad; Asia's Writers Turning to English to Gain Readers." *The New York Times*, December 25, 2001. https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/25/arts/arts-abroad-asia-s-writers-turning-to-english-to-gain-readers.html.

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language writer from Asia. Much of what I write is centered around a cosmopolitan Hong Kong society and people, stories of transnational lives. But I proved a misfit, both as a Hong Kong and as an American writer. If I wrote the same thing in Cantonese Chinese, Hong Kong's majority culture and language but my second language, I could be a "real" local writer; alternatively, if I wrote about American immigrant life, the subject for most Asian-American novelists of my generation, then I could be an "American writer." When my books were first published in the 1990s, some literary critics did not consider me an authentic Hong Kong writer because I am Indonesian-Chinese and American, and write in English. Meanwhile the Asian American Writers Workshop in New York said my fiction was not really Asian-American and were surprised when White people showed up to my book talk. If I wrote in Javanese, both my parents' first language, or Mandarin Chinese, my father's other first language, then I could be a writer who was either "Indonesian" (as a former Indonesian national) or "Chinese" (since I am a Chinese "forever citizen"[3]). Had I been a decade or so older and trans-migrated to Britain, I could perhaps be an adjacent "post-colonial" writer among the definitive post-colonials such as Naipaul, Achebe, Rhys, Gordimer, Coetzee, among others; of course, unlike most former colonies, Hong Kong never achieved independence, complicating the problem of English for a Hong Kong writer. Instead, I am this mongrel whose works fit into no single nation-state.

John Guillory writes that "the development of the nation-state as a cultural formation was always intimately related to the development of a literary culture and a national literature."[4] Despite the supposed borderless-ness wrought by globalization, the fora for criticism still associate literature, and the novel especially, with nation-states, and by extension, national languages. Of the 119 Nobel laureates since the prize's inception in 1901, only 24 (or 20%) went to writers linked to more than one nation; a majority of these, 18 (or 15% of all the Nobel laureates for literature), were from 1950 or later. Of those 18, only 2 write in more than one language (out of a total of 5 in the history of the prize who write in more than one language); the other 16 all write in the language either of their country of origin or that of the former colonizer's. Thirty three laureates write in English (28% of the total), making English the dominant language by a significant margin. These writers hail from 13 different nations.

3 Hong Kong-born permanent residents are officially designated 永久居民 which translates as "forever citizens."

4 John Guillory, *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2022), 209.

Nobel Prize in Literature Awarded to 119 Laureates from 1901 to 2022[5]

Writers	Countries	Language	Notes
25	More than one country.	2 write in more than one language: Gao Xingjiang (Chinese/French); Joseph Brodsky (English/Russian).	18 awarded from 1950 and later.
5	N/A	Write in more than one language: Gao, Brodsky; Tagore (Bengali/English), Gjellerup (Danish/German); Beckett (French/English)	French/English, Danish/German, Bengali/English, Chinese/French, English/Russian
33	13	English	Australia, Canada, India, Ireland, Japan, Nigeria, Russia, South Africa, Saint Lucia, Trinidad, United Kingdom, United States, Zanzibar.
17	9	French	Algeria, Belgium, China, France, Guadeloupe, Ireland, Madagascar, Mauritius, Panama.
11	6	Spanish	Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru, Spain.

Is it critically advantageous, especially for writers who have more than one country or language, to write in English? In the twentyfirst century, English heads the list as the most spoken language in the world, estimated in 2022 at 1.5 billion speakers, with Mandarin Chinese second at 1.1 billion[6], although these numbers are not of native speak-

5 https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/lists/all-nobel-prizes-in-literature and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Nobel_laureates_in_Literature. See Appendix for spreadsheet data specific to this table.

6 Ethnologue: https://www.ethnologue.com/insights/ethnologue200/ and Babbel: https://www.babbel.com/en/magazine/the-10-most-spoken-languages-in-the-world.

ers, as that criteria places English third, behind Chinese and Spanish. But the language most frequently used for web content is far and away English, currently estimated at almost 59% of all content on the internet (58.8%). Between 2021 and 2023, English appears to have decreased slightly in use, from 60% to 59% (60.4% / 58.8%), with Russian a distant second from 9% to 5% (8.5%/ 5.3%). Mandarin Chinese is low at just 1.4% (1.7% to 1.4%)[7].

Web content is obviously about more than just publishing and literature. However, Anglophone publishers and literary journals are among the world's largest, wealthiest, and most critically influential. For example, among the ten biggest English book deals named in 2020 were James Patterson's 2009 17-book deal with Hachette for U. S. $ 150.000.000, while Ken Follett received U. S. $ 50.000.000 from Penguin in 2008 for his trilogy; notably, of the ten, seven were book deals for world leaders, politicians or celebrities while only three were by writers.[8] Separately, the largest deals for individual books are all by American Anglophone authors.[9] Which means writers are likely to get much more attention if their works are published in English.

English, "the problem," became more evident after I established and directed two international low-residency Master of Fine Arts (or MFAs). These are part-time graduate writing programs for mostly older students who attend brief "residencies" (from a few days to a week or even ten days) and then are assigned a faculty writer each semester to work with in distance learning. The first was an Asian MFA in creative writing for prose and poetry (2010-2016) at a Hong Kong university[10] that held residencies in the city. The second was an all-prose International MFA in writing and literary translation (2017 to 2022), at a private college in Vermont[11] that rotated residencies at locations world-

7 Statista (2023): https://www.statista.com/statistics/262946/most-common-languages-on-the-internet/ and Visual Capitalist Data Stream (2021) https://www.visualcapitalist.com/the-most-used-languages-on-the-internet/.

8 Namera Tanjeem, "10 of the Biggest Book Deals in History," *Book Riot*, February 24, 2020. https://bookriot.com/biggest-book-deals/.

9 List of Largest Book Deals (dynamic list), Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_largest_book_deals#List_of_largest_deals_for_books_series.

10 The City University of Hong Kong, Department of English, the MFA in Creative Writing lasted from 2010 to 2016. See Joanna Scutts, "Hong Kong MFA Program Closes," *Poets & Writers Magazine*, September/October 2015 issue. https://www.pw.org/content/hong_kong_mfa_program_closes

11 Vermont College of Fine Arts, the International MFA in Writing & Literary Translation began in 2018 but was closed to new enrollments as of 2020, and the program officially ended in June 2022. The college has since closed some of its other MFA programs and no longer has a campus, having moved all residencies

wide—Iceland, Hong Kong, Vermont, Canada and Portugal—until Covid halted travel. Both attracted students from around the world, split between Anglophone-country expatriates living abroad and nationals from various countries who were first-language English writers, or, more significantly, those who chose to write in English, regardless of their native language. The majority (65 to 70%) of the students enrolled (135 from both programs) lived in the Asia-Pacific region; the rest in the U.S./Canada, U.K./Europe, Israel and the Middle East. They comprised nationals of around 25 to 30 countries and the majority (approximately 80%) had lived in more than one country and had one or more languages, besides English. But what they all wanted was to write or translate and be published in English.

In my chapter for a Routledge book on teaching writing in Asia, released last year, I christened English a "compromised tongue," and cite one problematic "whitening" of language:

> […] in 1995 the Singaporean writer Ming Cher published Spider Boys, a novel about street urchins in Singapore who train fighting spiders. It was written in colloquial Singapore English or Singlish. Its reception was mixed. The originality and courage of such a narrative voice was praised, yet it was also criticized for presenting Singapore English in what some considered a negative light. By 2016, the novel was out of print until Epigram Books in Singapore reissued it, but only after it was "re-edited to not only retain the flavour of colloquial Singapore English in the dialogues, but also improve the accessibility of the novel for all readers by rendering the narrative into grammatical standard English."[12]

Shades of critical hypocrisy! Would publishers have deemed Joyce's *Ulysses* or Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* or Anna Burns' *Milk Man*, winner of the 2018 Booker, in need of "re-editing" for accessibility? Those three novels are no more or less difficult to read as literature

first to Colorado and later California. The college has since announced the sale of the campus. See https://www.mynbc5.com/article/vermont-college-fine-arts-close-programs-colorado-college/42826039 and https://vtdigger.org/2022/06/21/alumni-voice-profound-disappointment-in-vermont-college-of-fine-arts-plan-to-end-residencies-explore-selling-buildings/ and https://www.vermontpublic.org/local-news/2022-10-06/vermont-college-of-fine-arts-faculty-divided-over-decision-to-move-programs-to-colorado

12 *Teaching Creative Writing in Asia*, ed. Darryl Whetter (London: Routledge, 2022). Xu Xi: Chapter 2: "Compromised Tongues: That 'Wrong' Language for the Creative Writing We Teach in Asia," 46. https://www.routledge.com/Teaching-Creative-Writing-in-Asia/Whetter/p/book/9780367621148.

than the original *Spider Boys*. Does this global lingua franca require an Anglophone world's blessing for writers from elsewhere? The Japanese novelist Minae Mizumura noted in 2008[13] that "the elevation of the English language carries with it, almost accidentally, the elevation of English literature."[14] This "accident" was evident among my students. Asians who devoured White American and British authors did not read Asian authors in English, or their native tongues, even when work was available in translation. One Dutch student who published her first novel in Dutch wanted to write her second in English because "nobody reads Dutch literature." A Thai, fluent in English, Thai and French decided "contemporary Thai literature wasn't worth translating." Mainland Chinese who admired Dickens, Hemingway, Raymond Carver or Alice Munro sometimes looked askance at writers like Ha Jin or Maxine Hong Kingston. The American writer Robin Hemley was startled by his Singaporean students[15] who wrote fiction set in North American suburbs about White characters because, they said, that was what got published; some had never even been to the U. S. Robin and I have since co-authored a textbook, released in 2022 by Bloomsbury[16] in which we anthologized 24 contemporary Asian short stories, half written in English and half translated from Asian languages, as teaching examples of how to write good fiction, in English. It's one way to "write back," as defined in post-colonial literary theory of writing back by the empire,[17] against this problem of our global literary language and the dominance of Anglo-American English literature.

A related problem is what critics Tim Parks and Pankaj Mishra complain of as the "global novel." Parks expresses concern for the "consequences for literature."

13 Adam Kirsch, *The Global Novel: Writing the World in the 21st Century* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016). "World Literature and Its Discontents" (Location 159).

14 Minae Mizumura, *The Fall of Language in the Age of English*, trans. Mari Yosihara and Juliet Winters Carpenter (Neew York: Columbia University Press, 2017). https://cup.columbia.edu/book/the-fall-of-language-in-the-age-of-english/9780231163026

15 Hemley was director of the Writing Center at Yale NUS, Singapore until 2019.

16 Robin Hemley and Xu Xi, *The Art and Craft of Asian Stories: A Writer's Guide and Anthology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022). https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/art-and-craft-of-asian-stories-9781350076549/

17 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffins and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1989).

> From the moment an author perceives his ultimate audience as international rather than national, the nature of his writing is bound to change. In particular one notes a tendency to remove obstacles to international comprehension.[18]

While Mishra says that,

> Literature today seems to emerge from an apolitical and borderless cosmopolis. Even the mildly adversarial idea of the "postcolonial" that emerged in the 1980's, when authors from Britain's former colonial possessions appeared to be "writing back" to the imperial centre, has been blunted.[19]

Anyone who has "written back" to the imperial culture and language knows the perils of that attempt. For a Hong Kong Asian-American writer like myself, it became clear that there were essentially two narratives in English "universally" expected: a cross-cultural political or historical novel, replete with "China-expert" journalistic baggage in sync with Western democracy, or an Asian-American "authentic" immigrant story about parents who are marginalized in the West. Chinese Hong Kong writers had fewer restrictions because they publish in a Sinophone world, but theirs are the last works in line, after China and Taiwan, to be translated into English.

When Hong Kong's "handover" to China occurred in 1997, Paul Theroux helicoptered in and internationally published his outsider, handover thriller *Kowloon Tong* a year later[20]. My quieter, insider handover novel *The Unwalled City* was released in 2001 by a Hong Kong publisher but never found one either in New York or in London, although now, thanks to Amazon, distribution is global anyway. I was still the more fortunate writer because it took some 20+ years for Dung Kai-cheung, one of the city's leading Chinese literary fiction writers to publish his handover era work in English translation. His novel *Atlas* appeared in 2012 and a short fiction collection first published in 1999 was not released in English until 2022.[21]

18 Tim Parks, "The Dull New Global Novel," *New York Review of Books*, February 8, 2010.

19 Pankaj Mishra, "The Case Against the Global Novel," *Financial Times*, September 27, 2013.

20 Paul Theroux, *Kowloon Tong. A Novel of Hong Kong* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1998).

21 Dung Kai-cheung, *A Catalog of Such Stuff as Dreams Are Made On*, trans. Bonnie S. McDougall and Anders Hanson (New York: Columbia University

Today, Hong Kong's political situation makes it of interest to Anglophonia again, so translations and international publications are finally happening for the city's writers in real, not prolonged time. Perhaps Parks, Mishra and those Singaporean students aren't entirely wrong about what it takes to publish in English.

The problem of English is obviously even more acute for literary translation. In 2010, according to Parks, who is also a literary translator of Italian,

> [a]s a result of rapidly accelerating globalization, we are moving towards a world market for literature. There is a growing sense that for an author to be considered "great," he or she must be an international rather than a national phenomenon [...] In recent months authors in Germany, France and Italy—all countries with large and well-established national readerships—have expressed to me their disappointment at not having found an English language publisher for their works; interestingly, they complain that this failure reflects back on their prestige in their home country: if people don't want you elsewhere you can't be that good.[22]

He's not wrong. Whenever I'm around Chinese writers, many express that desire for translation into English, while other languages can wait. A similar desire is manifest in Chinese, Malay, Indonesian, Korean, Japanese or Thai writers who want to write in English; except for Malaysia, none of these countries are former British colonies, which might offer at least some rationale for linguistic crossover. Recognition at home clearly isn't enough. After all, Kevin Kwan wrote *Crazy Rich Asians* in English, and we all know who he is.

In my conversations with the Singaporean-Chinese writer and literary translator Jeremy Tiang, he bemoans how hard it is to sell publishers on books of literary excellence that are not "universally White enough" for translation. Tiang is unusual because he translates across the Sinosphere of Chinese literature. That's three different Mandarin-Chineses in Singapore, Taiwan and China, as well as Hokkien in Singapore and Cantonese in Hong Kong. A recent translation, Zou Jinghi's *Ninth Building* was longlisted for the 2023 International Booker, but Tiang couldn't find a major imprint, partly because the novel offers an insider view of the Cultural Revolution that doesn't quite fit the West-

Press, 2022. https://cup.columbia.edu/book/a-catalog-of-such-stuff-as-dreams-are-made-on/9780231555999.

22 Parks, "The Dull New Global Novel."

ern narrative of the likes of *Wild Swans*. It was an indie specializing in East Asian literature that eventually published it.

Historically, world literature in translation into English from any language accounts for a miniscule number of the books published, giving rise to what Chad Post named "the 3 percent problem"[23] which is fundamental to the problem of Anglophone publishers' presumption of what will or will not sell. The establishment of the International Booker prize in 2005 has alleviated this problem, but only a little, because it is still primarily the smaller indie presses that will publish and support translated literature.[24]

So-called "universality" as a marker of "excellent" fiction is overrated in my books, but it's still what matters to the Anglo-American critical fora that tend to favor either political or aesthetic "accessibility" in its world literature. The translation controversy surrounding Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, winner of the 2016 Man Booker International for its English translation by Deborah Smith, is a case in point. Chinese, Spanish, Polish and Vietnamese translations had previously been released, but none catapulted the book to the international critical acclaim of the English version. Yet allegations of mistranslations and inaccuracies have been legion, especially in Korea. Charse Yun notes that almost 32% (31.5%) of the first section contains re-written "embellishments," including insertions of "adverbs, superlatives, and emphatic word choices that are simply not in the original." This creates an effect of "the spare style of Raymond Carver being translated so that it sounds like Charles Dickens," and he adds that "those embellishments highlight the difference in what appeals to readers abroad."[25] An earlier, more accurate English translation by a South Korean, I was told, was much closer to the original in terms of style, but could not find an international publisher.[26] However, when a young, ambitious, White translator with the right credentials and just enough Korean (she had

23 Chad Post, "Will Translated Fiction Ever *Really* Break Through?," *New York Vulture*, "In Translation," May 7, 2019. https://www.vulture.com/2019/05/translated-fiction-has-been-growing-or-has-it.html.

24 John Self, "'It's exciting, it's powerful': how translated fiction captured a new generation of readers," *The Guardian* Books, July 29, 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/jul/29/its-exciting-its-powerful-how-translated-fiction-captured-a-new-generation-of-readers.

25 Charse Yun, "You Say Melon, I Say Lemon: Deborah Smith's Flawed Yet Remarkable Translation of 'The Vegetarian'," *Korea Exposé*, July 2, 2017. https://www.koreaexpose.com/deborah-smith-translation-han-kang-novel-vegetarian/.

26 In conversation with the Korean-American writer Krys Lee in March 2017, at the Macau Literary Festival.

only studied Korean about six or so years at the time)[27] rendered a "universally" English version, the book sold and took off.

To be fair, Smith's version is a remarkably good read as gothic literature—think of Poe as a feminist twentyfirst-century voice—and despite its flaws, which are troubling and further embellish this problem of English, I'd sooner be able to read Kang than not. Notably, the author herself has no complaints.

So one question I'm left with is whether or not "criticism" as it has traditionally been practiced, defined and dominated by the Anglosphere, will eventually begin to matter less for determining literary quality in what appears to be an unstoppably global world culture. It seems to me that perhaps it is criticism itself that must undergo reform, that must begin to read beyond the narrow confines of Anglophone literature to judge what is or is not "good" literature. The problem is not only that the English language is dominant, but that it must be re-imagined more fully as a literary language that can and will embrace both translation and a more truly universal form of "Englishes" as spoken, read and written by writers, regardless of their language of origin. Only then, perhaps, will what is *presented* in English reflect, more accurately, the literary tastes of the world beyond the borders of the zones of Anglophonia.

The English language isn't going away any time soon, and will continue to inflect or, perhaps, infect global culture, including literature. After all, even the Eurovision Song Contest has rolled to English. A recent analysis by *The Economist* indicates that songs in languages other than English receive, on average, 7% fewer points than English ones.[28] So, what's the answer to the problem of English in contemporary literature in the fora of criticism? As I'm fond of telling all my writing students, I never have definitive answers, only questions, which is how we can begin to address the problem.

27 Tara Khandelwal: "Deborah Smith on Translating 'The Vegetarian'." Shethe people, January 23, 2017. https://www.shethepeople.tv/news/deborah-smith-on-translating-the-vegetarian/.

28 "Bonsoir L'Europe" How language affects Eurovision scores. *The Economist*, May 12, 2023.

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Appendix

The spreadsheet below is organized across the X axis as follows:

Year of receipt of Nobel in reverse chronological order
Last/First Names of Nobel laureate in literature
Country(s) Countries of origin and residence
Language Original literary language(s) of their published work
Genres /Forms of their literary oeuvre
Age of Award Age Nobel laureate received

The remaining information is a breakdown of languages that is tallied and summarized at the bottom of the table. This breakdown is organized first by each Nobel laureate's literary language grouping as follows:

ENG	English
No	no award
W EU	Western European
AS	Asian

and further broken down by the other major languages as follows:

Fr	French
Ger	German
Rus	Russian
Sp	Spanish
It	Italian
Po	Polish
Sw	Swedish
Oth Sc	other Scandinavian
Oth Eu	other European.

Additionally the average age of recipients is calculated in the last column for each of three periods, from 1991 to 2023 (69), 1950 to 1990 (67) and 1901 to 1949 (61).

Year	Last Name	First Name	Country/ Countries	Language	Genre(s) & Form(s)	Age at Award
2023	FOSSE	Jon	Norway	Norwegian (Nynorsk)	Drama, Novel, Poetry, Essay	
2022	ERNAUX	Annie	France	French	Memoir, Novel	82
2021	ABDUL-RAZAK	Gurnah	Zanzibar/ U. K.	English	Novel, Short Story, Essay	73
2020	GLUCK	Louise	USA	English	Poetry, Essay	77
2019	HANDKE	Peter	Austria	German	Novel, Short Story, Drama, Essay, Translation, Screenplay	77
2018	TOKAR-CZUK	Olga	Poland	Polish	Novel, Short Story, Poetry, Essay, Screenplay	56
2017	ISHIGURO	Kazuo	Japan/U. K.	English	Novel, Screenplay, Short Story	63
2016	DYLAN	Bob	USA	English	Poetry, Song Lyrics	75
2015	SVETLANA	Alexievich	Ukraine/ Belarus	Russian	History, Essay	67
2014	MODIANO	Patrick	France	French	Novel, Screenplay	69
2013	MUNRO	Alice	Canada	English	Short Story	82
2012	YAN	Mo	China	Chinese	Novel, Short Story	57
2011	TRANS-TROMER	Tomas	Sweden	Swedish	Poetry, Translation	80
2010	LLOSA	Mario Bargas	Peru/Spain	Spanish	Novel, Short Story, Essay, Drama, Memoir	74
2009	MULLER	Herta	Romania/ Germany	German	Novel, Short Story, Poetry, Essay	56
2008	LE CLEZIO	Jean-Marie Gustave	France/ Mauritius/ Panama	French	Novel, Short Story, Essay, Translation	68
2007	LESSING	Doris	South Africa/ U. K.	English	Novel, Short Stories, Memoir/ Autobiogrpahy, Drama, Poetry, Essay	88
2006	PAMUK	Orhan	Turkey	Turkish	Novel, Screenplay, Autobiography, Essay	54
2005	PINTER	Harold	U. K.	English	Drama, Screenplay, Poetry	75

ENG	No	W EU	AS+	Fr	Ger	Rus	Sp	It	Po	Sw	Oth SC	Oth Eu	Avg Age Award
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Year	Last Name	First Name	Country/ Countries	Language	Genre(s) & Form(s)	Age at Award
2004	JELINEK	Elfriede	Austria	German	Novel, Drama	58
2003	COETZEE	John M	South Africa/ Australia	English	Novel, Essay, Translation	63
2002	KERTESZ	Imre	Hungary	Hungarian	Novel	73
2001	NAIPAUL	Vidiadhar Surajprasad	Trinidad	English	Novel, Essay	69
2000	GAO	Xingjian	China/France	Chinese/ French	Novel, Drama, Essay	60
1999	GRASS	Günter	Free City of Danzig, Poland/ Germany	German	Novel, Drama, Poetry, Essay	72
1998	SARAMAGO	Jose	Portugal	Portuguese	Novel, Drama, Poetry	76
1997	FO	Dario	Italy	Italian	Drama , Song Lyrics	71
1996	SZYM-BORSKA	Wislawa	Poland	Polish	Poetry, Essay, Translation	73
1995	HEANY	Seamus	Ireland	English	Poetry	56
1994	OE	Kenzaburo	Japan	Japanese	Novel, Short Story, Essay	59
1993	MORRISON	Toni	USA	English	Novel, Essays	62
1992	WALCOTT	Derek	Saint Lucia	English	Poetry	62
1991	GORDIMER	Nadine	South Africa	English	Novel, Short Story, Essay, Drama	68
1990	PAZ	Octavio	Mexico	Spanish	Poetry	76
1989	CELA	Camilo Jose	Spain	Spanish	Novel, Short Stories, Essays, Poetry	73
1988	MAHFOUZ	Naguib	Egypt	Arabic	Novel, Short Stories	77
1987	BRODSKY	Joseph	Russia/USA	English/ Russian	Poetry, Essays	47
1986	SOYINKA	Wole	Nigeria	English	Drama, Novel, Poetry, Screenplay	52
1985	SIMON	Claude	Madagascar	French	Novel, Essay	72
1984	SEIFERT	Jaroslav	Czech Re-public	Czech	Poetry	83

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Year	Last Name	First Name	Country/ Countries	Language	Genre(s) & Form(s)	Age at Award
1983	GOLDING	William	U. K.	English	Novel, Poetry, Drama	72
1982	MARQUEZ	Gabriel Garcia	Colombia	Spanish	Novel, Short Stories, Screenplay	55
1981	CANNETTI	Elias	Bulgaria	German	Novel, Drama, Memoirs, Essay	76
1980	MILOSZ	Czeslaw	Lithuania	Polish	Poetry, Essays	69
1979	ELYTIS	Odysseus	Greece	Greek (Jew)	Poetry	68
1978	SINGER	Isaac Bashevis	Poland (former Russian Empire) / USA	Yiddish	Novel, Short Stories, Autobiography	74
1977	ALEXANDRE	Vicente	Spain	Spanish	Poetry	79
1976	BELLOW	Saul	Canada/USA	English	Novel, Short Stories	61
1975	MONTALE	Eugenio	Italy	Italian	Poetry	79
1974	MARTISON	Harry	Sweden	Swedish	Poetry, Novel, Drama	70
1974	JOHNSON	Eyvind	Sweden	Swedish	Novel	74
1973	WHITE	Patrick	U. K./ Australia	English	Novel, Short Stories, Drama	61
1972	BÖLL	Heinrich	West Germany	German	Novel, Short Stories	55
1971	NERUDA	Pablo	Chile	Spanish	Poetry	67
1970	SOLZHENITSYN	Aleksandr	Soviet Union	Russian	Novel, Essay, Short Stories	52
1969	BECKETT	Samuel	Ireland	French & English	Novel, Drama, Poetry	63
1968	KAWABATA	Yasunari	Japan	Japanese	Novel, Short Stories	69
1967	ASTURIAS	Miguel Angel	Guatemala	Spanish		78
1966	SACHS	Nelly	Germany/ Sweden	German	Poetry, Drama	75
1966	AGNON	Shmuel Yosef	Israel / Austria-Hungary	Hebrew	Novel, Short Stories	78

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1965	SHOLO-KHOV	Mikhail	Soviet Union	Russian	Novel	60
1964	SARTRE	Jean-Paul	France	French	Philosophy, Novel, Drama, Essay, Short Story, Screenplay	59
1963	SEFERIS	Giorgos	Greece (born in Ottoman Empire)	Greek	Poetry, Essay, Drama	63
1962	STEINBECK	John	USA	English	Novel, Short Stories, Screenplay	60
1961	ANDRIC	Ivo	Yugoslovia/ Austria-Hungary	Serbo-Croatian	Novel, Short Stories	69
1960	PERSE	Saint-John	France/ Guadaloupe	French	Poetry	73
1959	QUASI-MODO	Salvatore	Italy	Italian	Poetry	58
1958	PASTERNAK	Boris	Soviet Union	Russian	Novel, Poetry, Translation	68
1957	CAMUS	Albert	France/Algeria	French	Novel, Short Stories, Drama, Philosophy, Essay	44
1956	JIMINEZ	Juan Ramon	Spain	Spanish	Poetry, Novel	75
1955	LAXNESS	Haldor	Iceland	Icelandic	Novel, Short Story, Drama, Poetry	53
1954	HEMING-WAY	Ernest	USA	English	Novel, Short Story, Screenplay	55
1953	CHUR-CHILL	Winston	U. K.	English	History, Essay, Memoir	79
1952	MAURIAC	Francois	France	French	Novel, Short Story	67
1951	LAGER-KVIST	Par	Sweden	Swedish	Poetry, Novel, Short Story, Drama	60
1950	BERTRAND	Russell	U. K.	English	Philosophy, Essay	78
1949	FAULKNER	William	USA	English	Novel, Short Stories	52
1948	ELIOT	Thomas Stearns (TS)	U. K. (Born in the USA)	English	Poetry, Essay, Drama	60
1947	GIDE	Andre	France	French	Novel, Essay, Drama	78

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Year	Last Name	First Name	Country/ Countries	Language	Genre(s) & Form(s)	Age at Award
1946	HESSE	Hermann	Germany/ Switzerland	German	Novel, Poetry	69
1945	MISTRAL	Gabriela	Chile	Spanish	Poetry	56
1944	JENSEN	Johannes Vilhem	Denmark	Danish	Novel, Short Story	71
1943	NO AWARD					
1942	NO AWARD					
1941	NO AWARD					
1940	NO AWARD					
1939	SILLANPAA	Frans Eemil	Finland	Finnish	Novel	51
1938	BUCK	Pearl	USA	English	Novel, Biography	46
1937	du GARD	Roger Martin	France	French	Novel	56
1936	O'NEILL	Eugene	USA	English	Drama	48
1935	NO AWARD					
1934	PIRAN-DELLO	Luigi	Italy	Italian	Drama, Novel, Short Story	67
1933	BUNIN	Ivan	Stateless (Born in Russian Empire)	Russian	Short Story, Poetry, Novel	63
1932	GALS-WORTHY	John	U. K.	English	Novel	65
1931	KARLFELDT	Erik Axel	USA	Swedish	Poetry	67
1930	LEWIS	Sinclair	USA	English	Novel, Short Stories, Drama	45
1929	MANN	Thomas	Germany	German	Novel, Short Stories, Essay	54
1928	UNDSET	Sigrid	Norway/De-mark	Norwegian	Novel	46
1927	BERGSON	Henri	France	French	Philosophy	68
1926	DELEDDA	Grazia	Italy	Italian	Poetry, Novel	55
1925	SHAW	George Bernard	U. K./Ireland	English	Drama, Essay	69
1924	REYMONT	Wladyslaw	Poland	Polish	Novel	57
1923	YEATS	William Butler (WB)	Ireland	English	Poetry	58

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Year	Last Name	First Name	Country/ Countries	Language	Genre(s) & Form(s)	Age at Award
1922	BENA-VENTE	Jacinto	Spain	Spanish	Drama	56
1921	FRANCE	Anatole	France	French	Novel, Poetry	77
1920	HAMSUN	Knut	Norway	Norwegian	Novel	61
1919	SPITTELER	Carl	Switzerland	German	Poetry	74
1918	NO AWARD					
1917	PONTOP-PIDAN	Henrik	Denmark	Danish	Novel	60
1917	GJELLERUP	Karl Adolph	Denmark	Danish & German	Poetry	60
1916	von HELDEN-STAM	Verner	Sweden	Swedish	Poetry, Novel	56
1915	ROLLAND	Romain	France	French	Novel	49
1914	NO AWARD					
1913	TAGORE	Rabin-dranath	British India	Bengali & English	Poetry, Novel, Drama, Story, Essay, Translation	52
1912	HAUPT-MANN	Gerhart	Germany	German	Drama, Novel	50
1911	MAETER-LINCK	Maurice	Belgium	French	Drama, Poetry, Essays	49
1910	von HEYSE	Paul	Germany	German	Poetry, Drama, Novel, Stories	80
1909	LANGER-LOT	Selma	Sweden	Swedish	Novel. Short Stories	51
1908	EUCKEN	Rudolph Christoph	Germany	German	Philosophy	62
1907	KIPLING	Rudyard	U. K.	English	Novel, Short Stories, Poetry	42
1906	CARDUCCI	Giosue	Italy	Italian	Poetry	71
1905	SIENKIE-WICZ	Henryk	Poland (Russian Empire)	Polish	Novel	59
1904	ECHGARAY	Jose	Spain	Spanish	Drama	72
1904	MISTRAL	Frederic	France	Provencal	Poetry, Philology	74
1903	BJORNSON	Bjornstjerne	Norway	Norwegian	Poetry, Novel, Drama	71

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Year	Last Name	First Name	Country/ Countries	Language	Genre(s) & Form(s)	Age at Award
1902	MOMMSEN	Theodor	Germany	German	History & Law	85
1901	PRUD-HOMME	Sully	France	French	Poetry & Essays	62
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25													
1.32		3.20	0.40	0.68	0.60	0.24	0.44	0.24	0.20	0.28	0.28	0.36	
24													
20%													

Richard Jacquemond

Who Determines the Arabic Literary Canon?

As a translator of modern Arabic literature, and having spent a good chunk of my active years in Egypt between the 1980s and the 2000s, I have been constantly confronted with the questions of literary judgement and literary value. During my stay in Cairo, I could observe on an almost daily basis the gap between the literary value of an Arabic work as defined locally and its value abroad, as well the feedback effect of translation on the national scene. These gaps and effects are linked to the history of the Arab literary space itself, from its formation some fifteen centuries ago to the present day, and to the history of its relations with the dominant European spaces, a history marked in particular by everything that can be put under the heading of "Orientalism," that is, the set of knowledge, representations and institutions constructed in unequal relations between Arab societies and the Euro-American centres where this knowledge and these representations were (and are still) developed. To make my point clear, I shall borrow two examples from classical Arabic literature before turning to a quick survey of the most recent forms of these discrepancies.

In the dominant representation that prevails in modern Arab elites, the core of the Arabic canon is constituted by a two-fold corpus: on the one hand, the Koran—considered not only by Muslims but also, should I add, by many non-Muslim speakers of Arabic language as well, as the epitome of Arabic eloquence—and, on the other hand, a variable body of poetic works that stretches from a cluster of pre-Islamic poets (fifth to seventh centuries CE) to a few great poets of the classical age, the latest ones being al-Mutanabbi (d. 965 CE) and Abu l-'Ala' al-Ma'arri (d. 1057 CE). Unlike other Oriental poetic corpuses (the most telling example being the Japanese haiku), very little of this ancient Arabic poetry has been translated into the main European languages and, when it has been, has remained very much marginalised in the dominant literary spaces. This gap was noted by the late

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André Lefevere, who devoted a chapter to the issue in his classic essay *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*.[1] As for the Koran, while it is widely translated in European and other languages, it is generally not perceived or dealt with as a literary masterpiece. Conversely, *One Thousand and One Nights* (or *Arabian Nights*), the most widely read ancient Arabic work in the world, and one of the most studied and canonised in Western academia, is commonly devalued in the Arab literary establishment—and always has been, in fact—because of its non-conformity with both the linguistic norm (it is written in "Middle Arabic," that is, a mixture of *fus'ha* [pure] literary language and spoken Arabic) and the ethical one (due to passages considered obscene or even pornographic, commonly censored in modern Arabic reprints). A good example of this double standard for France is provided by the catalogue of Gallimard's collection of complete works, the "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade", a convenient indicator of the state of the world literary canon as seen from Paris: for Arabic, it includes, in chronological order of publication, the Koran, an anthology of Arabic travel literature, the *Nights* and Ibn Khaldun's *Book of Examples*,[2] but no anthology of poetry, whether classical or modern.

Turning now to modern Arabic literature, the most eloquent example of the feedback effect of Western consecration on the Arab literary space is what can be described as the "Nobel effect." The Nobel Prize for Literature has been awarded to a writer from France a total of 15 times, including the prize for Annie Ernaux in 2022. For these writers, access to the Nobel Prize is one form of consecration among others, and one that does not silence a writer's detractors, as we have seen in Annie Ernaux's case.[3] Whereas within peripheral

1 André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (London and New York, Routledge, 1992), esp. Chapter 6: "Translation: Poetics, The Case of the Missing *Qasidah*", 73-86. *Qasidah* is the classical Arabic name for a poem.

2 The reception of Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) in the West is a fascinating case: while it started within the context of colonialism and Orientalism (especially the French conquest of Algeria), it went beyond and from the end of the nineteenth century until nowadays Ibn Khaldun has been widely read and presented as a precursor of modern social sciences. See Syed Farid Alatas, "Reading Ibn Khaldun in the Formative Period of Sociology", *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 35(3) (2022): 302-11. https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12377

3 See, e.g., Christian Salmon, "Derrière la polémique autour de l'attribution du Nobel à Annie Ernaux, une histoire de luttes," *Slate*, 12 October 2022 [https://www.slate.fr/story/234796/annie-ernaux-polemique-attribution-prix-nobel-litterature-politique]; Gisèle Sapiro, "Annie Ernaux: un engagement qui dérange," *En attendant Nadeau*, 22 November 2022 [https://www.en-attendant-nadeau.fr/2022/11/30/ernaux-engagement/].

literary spaces, many of which have yet to be considered by the Nobel, it is a crucial issue, the most visible criterion of access to the universal. The Arab space is a case in point: to date, only one Arab-language writer has been awarded the Nobel Prize, the Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz, back in 1988, and this accolade changed his status both in his country and throughout the Arab world. It so happened that I had just arrived in Cairo in September 1988, as a young Arabist appointed head of the French cultural mission's translation support programme, a position from which I was able to witness the change in Mahfouz's status.

Before October 13, 1988, Mahfouz was certainly a highly acclaimed writer, but an aging one (he was born in 1911), no longer in a central position in the national literary field, for reasons both political (his support for Egypt's separate peace with Israel in 1979 had alienated him a good portion of the national and Arab intellectual and artistic elite) and aesthetic (having given his best between the late 1940s and the early 1970s, he represented a somewhat outdated moment in the development of modern Arabic fiction). After the Nobel, he was more than canonised: he was beatified, in so many ways that would take too long to enumerate now. Another effect of the 1988 prize, one to which I will come back below, was that it contributed to settling the triumph of prose fiction over poetry as the dominant literary form in the modern Arabic canon, a triumph that was soon theorized by leading Egyptian critic Gaber Asfour [Jabir 'Usfur] in his book *Zaman al-riwaya* ("The time of the Novel").[4]

The above examples show that, not surprisingly, the modern Arabic literary output is more subject to the influence of foreign representations than its classical counterpart. When we look at the histories of Arabic literature produced by Arab academics, the foreign influence is perceptible in their very principle—that is, in the idea of writing a history of literature divided up according to a chronology that tends to follows the major political ruptures—rather than in the aesthetic and formal criteria that define the classical Arabic canon.

However, as far as modern literature is concerned, a new element came into play, namely, the formation of the modern Arab states, in which writing a national literary history became one of the tools with which these states' elites undertook to give shape to a "local" national culture. Yet, because they had to remain faithful to the idea of an all-encompassing "Arabic literature" as the privileged medium of ex-

4 Jabir 'Usfur, *Zaman al-riwaya*, Cairo, al-Hay'a al-misriyya al-'amma li-l-kitab, 1999. Asfour borrowed this title from Mahfouz himself, in a "pro domo" kind of essay he had published in 1945.

pression of their Arab identity, literature was bound to become a paradigmatic site of negotiation between local (Moroccan, Egyptian, Lebanese, etc.) allegiances and regional ones (on the scale of the Arabic linguistic area).

On the one hand, this literature is expressed in a common language, thanks to the fact that the Arab intellectual elites of the Nahda period—the modern "renaissance" that stretches from the mid-nineteenth century to the interwar years—chose to give priority to the classical vehicular form, whose modernization was essentially limited to the lexicon; in addition, throughout the twentieth century, these same elites were key players and vectors in the dissemination of a pan-Arab political ideology and, even after the decline of this ideology from the 1970s onward, they continued to convey the idea of a common cultural identity to all those who share the use of the Arabic language.

But on the other hand, the literary production of these elites took place in a space that was increasingly defined by the borders of the new states, from Morocco to Iraq and from Syria to Sudan. And given the close ties that generally bind these intellectual elites to their newly-formed states, and the need for the latter to secure their hold on their respective societies, they would naturally tend to emphasize a local literary identity, whether in the themes of their writings or by pursuing their careers within local institutions (universities, newspapers, publishing houses, etc.). As a result of all these variables, a specific modern Arab canon started being built up in each country. Very roughly speaking, in the centres of this Arab space—especially Egypt and Lebanon—the modern literary canon tends to be dominated by local authors and works and to make little room for what comes from the peripheries;[5] conversely, in the peripheries (Maghrib, Arabian Peninsula in particular) the local canon will be dominated by the production of the centres, to the detriment of local authors, works and genres.

However, the 1990s onwards have witnessed a remarkable development: at the same time as pan-Arabism as a political ideology was dying out for good—with the second Gulf War, which saw Arab armies pitted against each other after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait—"Arabness" as a common identity based on shared cultural practices, references and values tremendously progressed throughout the region, and this has been true also in the literary field, leading to the emergence of a what can be described as a transnational Arab literary space. And

5 See for Egypt Richard Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State and Society in Modern Egypt* (Cairo: AUC Press, 2008); and for Lebanon, Elise Salem, *Constructing Lebanon: A Century of Literary Narratives* (Gainsville: University Press of Florida, 2003).

actors of this transnational space have been playing a growing role in the process of creating literary value, in a relationship of competition and collaboration with what I call the Orientalist field, that is, the individuals and institutions involved in the circulation of Arabic-language works outside their original linguistic space, especially in Western Europe and North America.

As a result, we can speak of three literary fields or spaces,[6] at once superimposed, competing and complementary, in which the value of an Arabic work of literature is created: the national literary fields (Egyptian, Lebanese, Algerian, etc.); the transnational Arabic literary field; and the Orientalist field. I have already said a few words about national literary fields. I will continue by outlining the latest two, which in my view have taken over from the national literary fields since the turn of the millennium in terms of the creation of literary value.

As regards the transnational Arabic literary field, its recent growth is the result of two sets of evolutions. First, the technological revolutions that started in the 1990s with the emergence of pan-Arab satellite channels (Al-Jazeera being but the most famous one), whose audience quickly surpassed that of the national Arab channels and helped to spread a common Arab culture. A few years later, the spread of the Internet produced the same effects in the Arab world as in other areas, such as the massive use of social networks for reading and promoting books. Goodreads, arguably the most popular readers' network worldwide, has millions of users in the Arab world and is closely watched by many writers, but also by critics such as myself, as an indicator of the popularity of books and authors in an otherwise very opaque book market. The Arabophone web has also its own "BookTube" critics: for example, the Egyptian "Nedal Reads" boasts nearly 400,000 subscribers, an audience equivalent to that of her most popular Western equivalents.[7] However, the two major effects of the circulation of literary works through Internet in the Arab-speaking sphere are more original. First, the profusion of specialised or general websites has enabled Arab

6 I use the concept of field in the sense elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu, especially in *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Cambridge, U. K.: Polity Press, 1996) (French original: 1992). Taking up the distinction proposed by Tristan Leperlier between "field" and "space," the latter being defined as a secondary, less institutionalised investment issue than the former (T. Leperlier, "La langue des champs. Aires linguistiques transnationales et espaces littéraires plurilingues," *Contextes* 28 (2020): 1-37, talking about spaces rather than fields would seem to be more appropriate as regards these transnational areas. However, the current evolutions might lead soon to the emergence of a genuine transnational Arab literary *field*.

7 https://www.youtube.com/c/NedalReads [retrieved on 15 April 15 2024].

regional literary and cultural conversation to develop to a previously unknown level. Second, the proliferation of illegal download sites, where any reader of Arabic can download most of the currently available books in pdf-version, including the latest novels by most popular authors, has made a powerful contribution to blurring the boundaries between Arab countries, which had been a major obstacle to the circulation of books within the Arab global market. Moreover, one should stress that, due to the growing flows of migration from the Arab world, this Arab global market is less than ever constrained by national or regional boundaries, but rather spans all continents.

The second major evolution has been a geopolitical one: since the turn of the millennium, the centre of gravity of this literary space has shifted towards the Arabian Peninsula, due to the massive investment of private and public capital from the Gulf in the Arab market for symbolic goods. In a quite paradoxical way, after having been for decades the fiercest opponents of the pan-Arab political project, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states have turned into the most efficient propagators of its cultural version through their investments in the media and culture industry.

The most commented of these interventions as regards literature is the several literary prizes awarded by Gulf-based institutions to Arab writers, which put together amount to several millions of dollars that are being distributed every year. Since the 1990s, the Arab book market has seen a real boom in the production of novels, to a level that cannot but evoke the "overproduction crisis" we experience in Western book markets. Until the 1980s, the total number of new Arabic novels published each year was in the hundreds; today it is in the thousands. A number of factors have contributed to this trend, first and foremost of course the expansion of the readership as a result of higher levels of education (particularly among young girls[8]) and the professionalisation of the publishing sector, but it can be argued that the proliferation of regional (as opposed to national) literary prizes has played a role in this development. Thanks to these prizes, it is not just two or three novels that are being promoted every year, but rather one or two dozen through the astute process established by the main prizes of the announcement of long lists and short lists. Publishers take part in this marketing game by adding vignettes printed or pasted on the novels'

8 In Arab societies as elsewhere (and maybe even more than elsewhere), women tend to read more books than men. See Next Page Foundation reports: "What Arabs Read: A Pan-Arab Survey on Readership", 2007. The reports can be downloaded here: https://www.npage.org/en/page?id=217 [retrieved on 12 March 2024].

covers advertising their selection or their award, and booksellers highlight them on their stalls: marketing practices that will sound familiar to the Western reader/consumer but are quite novel in the Arab book market.

Another important dimension of these prizes is their connection with translation. The main page of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF), also known as the "Arabic Booker", the most coveted of these awards, states: "One of the main aims of the [prize] is to encourage the translation of Arabic literature into other languages."[9] As a matter of fact, the bodies that manage these prizes do not seem to be very successful in selling the novels they select on the international book market. For example, the list of translations provided by the IPAF on its website shows that out of more than 200 novels selected since its first edition in 2008, fewer than a third (61) have been translated into one language at least, the majority of them (32) into one language only, 22 into two to four languages and only 7 novels into five or more languages.[10] Yet, this new state of affairs raises new and compelling questions about the role of the IPAF and similar pan-Arab prizes, and thus the transnational Arab literary space they help creating, as brokers or mediators between the national spaces and the global one.

This leads us naturally to the third layer of this analysis, that is, the global Orientalist field, or how translation and circulation of Arabic texts in the world literary market, especially in Western Europe and North America, gives them added value within their original national and regional spaces.

Arabic writing in translation accounts for almost nothing in the outside world. Even in countries where the share of translated literature in the book market is rather important, Arabic accounts for fewer than 1% of the translated books. Yet, this share, as small as it may look, is bigger now than it has ever been: since Mahfouz's Nobel in 1988,

9 https://arabicfiction.org/en/translations [retrieved on 12 March 2024]. One should mention here that the eldest –and one the most recognized in the Arab literary space– of these new prizes, namely, the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature, launched in 1996 by the American University in Cairo Press, "consists of a cash prize of U.S.$ 5,000, and publication worldwide in English translation by the American University in Cairo Press." https://aucpress.com/mahfouz-medal/#:~:text=The%20Naguib%20Mahfouz%20Medal%20for%20Literature%20consists%20of%20a%20cash,announced%20on%2011%20December%202024. [retrieved on 12 March 2024].

10 Ibid. It should be noted that there is no indication that this list limits itself to the translations promoted through the IPAF's mediation or includes all published translations of the concerned works. Furthermore, contrary to what is indicated on the website, it seems that it has not been updated for some time.

hundreds of Arabic novels, poetry or short stories collections and anthologies have been translated into the world market's major languages, a huge progress compared to the earlier period. Still, except for Mahfouz, no modern Arab author has made a name into the "world republic of letters"[11] except for those who wrote in English or in French, such as Khalil Gibran (1883-1931; he wrote both in English and Arabic but his world best-seller, *The Prophet*, was written in English) and a handful of francophone Arab writers such as Kateb Yacine or Assia Djebar, not to mention of course towering intellectual figures such as Edward Said (in English) or Mohamed Arkoun (in French).

Yet considered from within the Arab literary space, the lust for translation is just amazing, and it has to do less with the material benefits a writer gets from being translated, than with the symbolic ones associated with the "access to the universal" (*al-wusul ila l-'alamiyya*), as the cliché goes in Arabic. Now, this Orientalist sphere—that is, the small world of translators, academics, publishers, literary agents, etc., who mediate between the Arab literary space and the global market—has undergone tremendous changes also in the last decades, which can be summarised in two directions.

First, and contrary to the assumption one could make after reading Said's *Orientalism* (1978), this social milieu has grown increasingly closer with the Arab cultural players it represents and promotes in Western markets—an evolution I have witnessed over the last decades and that can be observed in many ways. In academia as well as in other cultural milieus, a growing proportion of individuals working in this orientalist sphere are actually "Orientals" who have migrated to the West at some point, often bringing with them and upholding political and aesthetic values and world views originating in their native countries. Also, there have never been as many Arab writers and artists based in Western countries as nowadays, most of them keeping to the Arabic language as their literary means of expression. In this context, non-Arab mediators are prone to identify with the aesthetic, ethic and even political values defended by their Arab counterparts and by the sections of the Arab literary scene the former identify with.

The last translation promotion project I was involved in is a case in point. LEILA, a reverted acronym for "Arabic Literatures In European Languages," is "a European cooperative project, which aims to promote the translation and dissemination in Europe of contemporary Arabic literature," focusing on "new voices in Arabic literature [which]

11 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004; French original 1999).

are not read or heard enough."[12] For that purpose, the designers of the project, funded mainly by the European Union, gathered a mixed team of European and Arab translators, authors and academics (many wearing—like myself—more than one hat) who built up a list of authors and works whose translation into European languages deserves to be promoted.[13] The project ended with a meeting at the Collège International des Traducteurs Littéraires (Arles) in December 2023, where we drafted what we named the "LEILA manifesto for the translation of Arabic literature." It consists of eight short recommendations, the last one insisting on "the inalienable right of free speech" of writers and translators of Arabic literature and "not[ing] with dismay the silencing of Palestinian writers such as Adania Shibli, who was cancelled at the 2023 Frankfurt Book Fair."[14]

Those very recommendations—one might rather say demands!—point negatively to the other direction toward which what I named the Orientalist sphere is driven by the iron law of Western literary translation markets, where literatures coming from peripheral languages are marginalised and are prey to the misrepresentations circulated about their cultures in the mainstream media. Unlike authors, translators and publishers are bound to deal with these constraints and have to negotiate and manoeuvre in order to secure their place in these markets and try to improve it. As a result, and in a somewhat paradoxical way, while the discrepancies between the local Arab canon and its foreign version have tended to decrease over the last decades for all the above-mentioned reasons, the dominant view within the Arab literary sphere remains that translation into the main Western languages offers a distorted view of the national literary output. This state of affairs is certainly not specific to modern Arabic literature in the current world republic of letters, but obviously, it finds a particular echo in the prevailing international context.

12 "What is LEILA", *LEILA, Promoting Arabic Literature in Europe*. https://leila-arabicliterature.com/the-leila-project/what-is-leila/ [retrieved on 12 March 2024].

13 Books and authors are presented individually in the project's on line catalogue: https://leila-arabicliterature.com/catalogue/ [retrieved on 12 March 2024].

14 https://leila-arabicliterature.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/LEILA_MANIFESTO-FOR-TRANSLATION-OF-AR-LANGUAGE-1.pdf [retrieved on 12 March 2024].

Galin Tihanov

How Do Literary Periods Accrue Value?

Notes on Romanticism and its Afterlives

The purpose of this article is to reflect on some aspects of the relationship between value and period in literary and intellectual history. It is centred around the discussions on the nature and value of Romanticism that took place during the first half of the twentieth century in Europe, with a brief excursus into the discourses on Romanticism in China at the very end of Qing and in the early Republican period that — significantly — facilitated the entry of 'minor' literatures on the Chinese cultural scene.

Romanticism, with its dual attitude towards the French Revolution and its aftermath, presented a laboratory case of responding to modernity. In a way, Romanticism was the first such response that would display the whole gamut of enthusiasms and critique; indeed, canonical thinkers in European political philosophy, and in European aesthetics (Kant, Burke, Hegel), are responsible for formulating this range of responses, both affirmative and critical, often by deploying categories that directly participate in the discourse of Romanticism (Kant, Burke), or polemicize with them (Hegel). Behind the particular reactions to the Enlightenment belief in the universality of reason embodied in the acts of the Revolution, there lurks a paradigm-setting instance of responding to modernity. It is this paradigmatic nature of Romanticism's stance on modernity and the Revolution that has not been sufficiently recognised before. Understanding the implications of this paradigm-setting process is an indispensable step in appreciating the longevity of post-romanticism long after the Romantic Movement itself had ceased to exist. Post-romanticism, however, was constituted in the public space to a large measure as a continuous debate on the value of Romanticism not only as a literary period but as a set of intellectual attitudes that render the very notion of period narrow and inadequate. This complex and tortuous practice urges us to analyse the contradictory makeup of the idea of literary value.

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Literary value has been approached intrinsically, in the hope of distilling a set of qualities, amounting to 'literariness', the recognition of which would intensify our enjoyment of literature; literature here draws its value from competition with everything that is seen as non-literary. (This was, notably, the doctrine of Russian Formalism in its early stages.) It has also been approached more systemically, as part of the question of value not just in literature but in art more generally. In this reading, value is generated by the dynamic inter-relation of the various strata of the verbal work of art that involves the reader in an experience that is specifically aesthetic; this understanding of value is the product of a more holistic notion of interplay and mutual reflection that urge upon us the idea of discussing literature in the larger context of the philosophy of art and aesthetics. (Roman Ingarden could serve as a good example here.) A third approach would see literature as the carrier of instrumental value, usually as the exponent of an ideology that bestows its presumed virtues on literature. (Marxism and Socialist Realism come to mind.) Finally, a fourth view would regard literature as the site of contingent values (Barbara Herrnstein Smith, one example of many), deposited by the extra-literary workings of the canon—but assuming a discursive existence of their own, which allows them to be borrowed, imitated, played upon, sabotaged, or endlessly deferred in the process of intertextual exchange that unfolds beyond individual agency.

Not all of these four types of literary axiology have cared to bear on how value relates to the notion of temporal depth, of which history and its inevitable segmentation into larger entities that, for convenience, we have tended to call 'periods', could be considered a mere sublimation. The Russian Formalists constructed their own version of literary evolution which was based on observing and accounting for the changes taking place within the available repertoire of genres. Marxism forged a tri-unity of value, period, and artistic method, in which literature would evolve in the direction of a realism that captures not just the status quo but the features of a nascent desirable future. The other two types briefly addressed above would find the question of history and period largely irrelevant. Complex cross-breeds between the systemic (aesthetic) and the Marxist approaches, such as Mukařovský's functional semiotics or Felix Vodička's evolutionary structuralism, would, however, formulate seminal attempts to bring together the concepts of value and period.

One of the reasons why value and period do not lend themselves to an easy coupling is the fact that our notion of periods grows over time its own metaphysical tissue that gradually takes over the rest and transforms this category into a shorthand for rather complex discursive

formations that stand for much more than an allegedly demonstrable segment of literary history. Suffice it to point to Walter Benjamin's or Deleuze's treatment of the Baroque.

The case of Romanticism and its afterlives in the numerous and often elusive guises of post-romanticism is likely to emerge as particularly instructive and revealing in this respect. Not containable within the classificatory logic of sheer periodization, Romanticism spills over into a larger discursive frame that supports the appropriation and interpretation of literary texts at various points in the twentieth and twenty-first century; it thus creates and recreates value that accrues asynchronically. The main reason for that is the unique place of Romanticism in the cultural formation of (post)modernity. Not only did Romanticism enjoy—like so many artistic currents from the eighteenth century onwards—a resurrection in periods of imitation and emulation in literature, music, and the arts; unlike all later currents, Romanticism became an attitude, a wider cultural reality, one might even say, a lifestyle. It branched out with equal force into philosophy, the sciences, and social theory; it established its own code of social intercourse and intimacy, its own privileged heroes and villains, in short—a whole philosophy and ideology of culture. Aesthetic and cultural modernity, most of us would agree today, began with the Romantics, even though its roots lay in an earlier defence of the autonomy of reason.

Romanticism's relations with modernity are much more complex than the picture painted by those asserting it as a promoter of the process of modernisation. In Germany and Britain, this ambiguous dynamic is particularly evident: the very same generation of poets and thinkers that began by embracing the French Revolution ended up bitterly opposing its ideals; in Germany, some of the major Romantics went as far as undertaking religious conversions (to Catholicism) to seal their change of heart and mind. It would thus be much fairer to describe the stance of Romanticism towards modernity as profoundly contradictory. Romanticism did not always play into the process of modernisation; much of its energy was spent doubting, criticising, or simply rejecting it. The French Revolution, with its radical agenda, served not as the cause but as the point of crystallisation; latent social and intellectual forces gathered and focused on an event of enormous momentum, thus revealing the entire spectrum of reactions to modernity, from passionate embrace to uncompromised resistance.

This is certainly nothing new for students of Romanticism. What needs to be emphasised instead is the fact that Romanticism was, in essence, an examination of modernity, a check on its performance, an inspection of its resources. Such an examination was bound to take place with renewed vigour in different circumstances every time a

society and a culture would find themselves at a critical juncture in their modern history. Being an evolving and "incomplete" process, as Habermas has called it, modernity is subject to these regular performance tests throughout its history. Because Romanticism was historically the first such critical assessment, the features and the parameters of the test, as well as the mode of formulating its questions (and often also the answers), would be drawn upon and would resurface in an ever-changing fashion every time modernity would be subjected to such an examination. This continuous after-life of the Romantic intellectual legacy, at a time when Romantic responses to the new social and cultural agendas would no longer do, constitutes the essence of the post-romantic syndrome. To put it in today's terms, checking on the performance of modernity has proven to be intimately dependent on mobilizing and carrying forward the arguments and the style of argumentation—at times in the guise of severe critique—worked out in the various strains of Romanticism.

Let me dwell at this point a little bit on the word "syndrome" that is so central to the title of this article. There are at least two likely objections to this term: a) that it naturalises rather than historicises the phenomenon I am discussing; and b) related to this: that it is turning the phenomenon into some kind of clinical predisposition to illness, evil, or other undesirable conditions. "Syn-drome" comes from the Greek *syn* 'with' and *dromos* 'a race'; running; race-course; or even "a public walk." The verb, *syndromein*, means "running together", "meeting", or "running along with", or "following close". The noun, then, has accrued the meaning of somebody or something that runs along but maybe still just behind something or somebody else. In other words, a response that is not late in coming, but also a set of features that occur simultaneously and characterise a particular phenomenon, usually seen as some kind of "abnormality". This brief etymological excursus is needed in order to demonstrate that at its very origin the term "syndrome" has a diachronic dimension built into it: "following close", "unfailingly appearing just behind" something. I thus insist that writing about a "syndrome" does not naturalise the phenomenon, as it actually allows us to follow the curves of the race, with our eyes fixed on the run and the response of the chaser. This is exactly what we do when we interpret Romanticism and post-romanticism as discourses that represent responses to modernity in its historical evolution—but also as discursive formations characteristic of modernity and tracing its dynamics as an integral part of it. To some extent, Marx captures this—although in negative terms and from premises I do not entirely share—when he writes in the *Grundrisse* that "The bourgeois viewpoint has never advanced beyond this antithesis between itself

and this romantic viewpoint, and therefore the latter will accompany it [i.e. the bourgeois viewpoint] as legitimate antithesis up to its blessed end".[1]

Thus, I deliberately choose to speak of "post-romanticism", thus placing the emphasis on the notion of distance, transformation and non-identity vis-à-vis Romanticism, rather than of, say, "neo-romanticism," which both narrows down the scope to literature and the arts, excluding sociology and political and economic thought,[2] and also — equally unacceptable — stresses repetition and identity through imitation and emulation.

But what about the reservation that "syndrome" is redolent of disease, of an unhealthy condition that is dormantly available and awaiting actualisation? This impression is further corroborated by the resilient link produced in scholarship between Romanticism and Nazism, in the case of Germany. Indeed, there has been a long tradition in seeking and locating the longevity of Romanticism and its supposedly baleful impact precisely and solely in Germany. One has to re-examine this connection and rethink this bond that seems so deeply entrenched. There are two crucial implications to asserting, as I do, that Romanticism and post-romanticism are evolving responses to modernity: one is that Germany cannot be singled out as the sole target of analysis, and as the only host tissue in which post-romanticism recurred; rather, the intimate link between modernity and post-romanticism can be observed across the cultural, ideological, and geographic divide, and throughout the twentieth century. In a sense, the geographical distribution needn't even matter: what is really at stake is the pervasive nature of the post-romantic syndrome that permeates modernity at each critical juncture of its evolution. The second implication, going back to the *Urszene* of Romanticism responding to the French Revolution in ways that set the parameters of future responses — both for and against — is that post-romanticism should not be seen as linked exclusively to Conservatism and the Right, as has been the case for so long. In equal measure, albeit in a more complicated fashion, it was also linked to Left (usually Leninist or social-democratic and reformist) thinking and action, a connection that has so far remained largely unexplored. Thus, the wider target of this article is the double misconception that post-Romanticism is a specific

1 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973) 162.

2 For a still rare interpretation of post-romanticism (and not just of Romanticism) that extends beyond the domain of literature and the arts, see Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*, trans. Catherine Porter (Durham, N.C., and London: Duke UP, 2001).

German malaise, and that it was nurtured by an exclusive alliance with Conservatism and the Right.

But if this is the case, the word "syndrome" warrants rethinking, in the sense that it no longer applies to post-romanticism as such but to modernity, whose structural problems post-romantic ideologies come to address and reflect. I am here evoking the work of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman who, in what is one of his most seminal books, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), made the case for the structural deficiency of modernity, or to use his stronger word, its "pathologies". It is this deficiency that generates the discourses of post-romanticism which function as a syndrome to the extent to which they accompany, or "follow closely", modernity at different junctures of its history, by critiquing its various deep-seated problems — sometimes latent, sometimes manifest — from vantage points across the ideological spectrum.

The pattern of drawing on Romanticism in formulating and dealing with twentieth-century concerns could be observed, as I have already suggested, in different fashions, in other European cultures and intellectual traditions as well. In France, Baudelaire and the surrealists re-discovered Romanticism and revived its critical potential.[3] In Italy and Scandinavia, a range of fin-de-siècle writers availed themselves of the Romantic legacy to articulate new anxieties and to diagnose new social problems.[4] In Russia, where in the nineteenth century a string of writers partaking — to a different degree — of the Romantic movement built the national poetic canon (thus fusing indiscernibly Romanticism and the classic), the post-1917 age called into being a state-sponsored stream of "revolutionary romantic" ('revoliutsionnaia romantika') which was more than a mere artistic current and stood for an entire world view and a broader life-attitude.[5]

In all these countries, the resurrection of the Romantic legacy at various points of their cultural history in the twentieth century was the inevitable result of these societies' complicated dealings with modernity. Each time this project had to be revised, criticised, or evaluated, the spectre and the resources of Romanticism in philosophy,

3 On this, see Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Die Kritik der Romantik. Der Verdacht der Philosophie gegen die literarische Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), 39-61, 72-83.

4 This process is explored in Mario Praz's classic study *The Romantic Agony* (1930-33), which was the first broad survey of the after-life of Romanticism in European literature (as such, it also contains some inevitable exaggerations and oversimplifications).

5 See, in particular, Michel Niqueux, "Revoliutsionnyi romantizm", in *Sotsrealisticheskii kanon*, ed. Hans Günther and Evgenii Dobrenko (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2000), 472-80.

economic thought, sociology, literary theory, historiography, and theology would be revived in turn. This continuous after-life of the Romantic artistic and intellectual heritage in Germany, at a time when Romantic responses to the new social and cultural agendas would no longer do, constitutes the essence of the post-romantic syndrome. To put it in today's terms, checking on the performance of modernity in Germany has proven to be intimately dependent on mobilizing — even in the guise of severe criticism — and carrying forward the arguments and the style of argumentation worked out by the Romantics.

All this accounts for the unique longevity of Romanticism, and for the extraordinarily value-laden notion of Romanticism as a cultural code that stands for a type of response to the perpetual crises of modernity. This is why Romanticism became such a contested axiological territory in the twentieth century, and this is why the recurrent asynchronous drawing of twentieth-century works of literature into the discursive orbit of Romanticism has unfailingly functioned as a way of evaluating them, bestowing on them certain (both ideological and aesthetic) value, or seeking to marginalise and dismiss them.

If all this sounds too eurocentric, I wish now to move briefly to an episode in early twentieth-century Chinese literary history. The last years of the Qing dynasty and the first decade after its end are undoubtedly a time when China begins to grapple with the dilemmas of modernity. Some of these dilemmas were articulated under the influence of Japanese and Western culture, others reflected a different agenda anchored in Chinese cultural history; arguably the most momentous manifestation of the latter was the struggle over the value of writing in a vernacular language vs. the veneration of tradition (classical Chinese) that unfolded just before and for about a decade after the publication of the first poem in modern vernacular Chinese (1917). This turning point at the entrance to modernity was — indicatively — also the time when Romanticism (again inflected in various post-romantic versions) made its first appearance on the stage. Just as in Western Europe and Russia, in China, too this was a contentious territory, dividing writers and intellectuals beyond mere political allegiance. What I find particularly noteworthy is that the Chinese engagement with the discourse on Romanticism came to stimulate a concomitant engagement with 'minor literatures', less so in the Deleuzian sense and more in the vein of a postcolonial critique of dependence.

Lu Xun (1881-1936), indisputably the central figure in the canon of Chinese twentieth-century literature, is also known as a prolific translator; in fact, his translations occupy 10 of the 20 volumes of his collected works, exceeding in volume his other writings. Already in a powerful essay written in 1907 and published the following year in

Tokyo, Lu Xun (writing under the pseudonym Ling Fei) charts the trajectory of European Romanticism, focusing foremost on Byron and Shelley, but then also dwelling extensively on Russian, Polish, and Hungarian Romanticism (Pushkin, Lermontov, Mickiewicz, Słowacki, Krasiński, Petöfi). Amongst his translations of Eastern European literatures one can find the Prologue to *Pan Tadeusz*, five poems by Petöfi, and a story by Mihail Sadoveanu (all of these were indirect translations from the German). Not only does Lu Xun's essay, titled "On the Power of the Mara Poetry" ("Mara" ['demonic', or 'Satanic'] is a word Lu Xun declares to have borrowed from Sanskrit),[6] initiate the long Chinese conversation on the (de)merits of Romanticism.[7] Symptomatically, it is also a text that, as we have just seen, introduces the Chinese reader to some of the canonical figures of Eastern European poetry (Lu Xun's was the first sustained comment on Mickiewicz in Chinese). Lu Xun's interpretation of Romanticism emphasises the marginal status (but also the tremendous energy) of these literatures and cultures without a nation-state, still parts of empires that would exclude them from the main-stream. This enforced marginality was very much consonant with China's own sense of dependence after a number of (mostly) Western powers were given various privileges in the aftermath of the two Opium Wars. It is not by accident that the discourse on Romanticism overlaps here so closely with the discourse on freedom and emancipation from the (semi-)colonial status of China and Eastern Europe. Eastern Europe served as the epitome of what in China would be referred to as "oppressed nations", a discourse that preceded by a few decades our Western discourse of decolonization and postcolonialism. As Irene Eber has demonstrated in a brilliant early study, by the 1930s this notion of "oppression" was sufficiently differentiated; it referred to peoples that were under partial colonial (white) domination; minorities that were neither politically independent nor sufficiently assimilated by the people amongst whom they lived; and—a clear reference to Eastern Europe—countries that emerged in the wake of World War I and were nominally independent

6 Lu Xun's long essay is available in full French (1981) and German (1994) translations; the English translation (1996) is significantly abridged; the entire part dealing with the Romantic tradition from Byron to Petöfi is missing. There is also a full Russian translation (1956), but the title is inaccurately translated as *On the Mara Power of Poetry*.

7 For an overview, see I. Rabut, "Chinese Romanticism: The Acculturation of a Western Notion", in *Modern China and the West: Translation and Cultural Mediation*, ed. Hsiao-yen Peng and Isabelle Rabut (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), 201–23.

but still culturally and economically oppressed by larger powers.[8] In this context, we should not be surprised that Lu Xun translated poetry and fiction from a number of Eastern European writers, overwhelmingly from what was to emerge as the Romantic component of the respective national canons. In his magisterial study of Lu Xun's life and work, the late Raoul David Findeisen draws attention also to two short stories by Vazov translated by Lu Xun: "Vălko na voina", translated in 1921 (arguably the first Chinese translation of a piece by a Bulgarian writer[9]), followed by "Edna bălgarka" in 1935.[10] (Both stories are translated from the German and come from the German anthology of Vazov's short stories *Die Bulgarin und andere Novellen*, 1908/1909.)[11] The fact that we are here dealing with indirect (or relay) translations should not cast a shadow on Lu Xun's efforts, or on the cultural prestige of Eastern European literatures: the vast majority of translations in China at that time—other than from the Japanese and a handful of major European languages—were indirect translations; that was the norm rather than the exception. In fact, Lin Shu, one of the most prolific and venerated translators of European fiction (into classical rather than vernacular Chinese), who dominated the scene of translation of English and French novels in the first two decades of the twentieth century, had neither English nor French, but was still credited with producing influential translations of some canonical

8 I refer here almost verbatim to the relevant passage in Irene Eber, *Voices from Afar: Modern Chinese Writers on Oppressed Peoples and their Literatures* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1980), 64.

9 This is what seems to be implied in Ying Chen's article "Chinese Literature in Bulgaria and Bulgarian Literature in China—Translations and Publishing", *Orbis Linguarum* 18, No. 3 (2020): 110-113 (here: 111), although the author also draws attention to Mao Dun's translation of "Ide li" in the 1920s, without indicating the year of publication, which leaves the question of chronology and precedence open to further inquiry.

10 Raoul David Findeisen, *Lu Xun (1881-1936). Texte, Chronik, Bilder, Dokumente* (Basel: Stroemfeld, 2001), 791-92 (Findeisen provides a complete list of Lu Xun's known translations that contains more entries than the one in Lennart Lundberg's 1989 monograph *Lu Xun as a translator*).

11 Iwan Wasow, *Die Bulgarin und andere Novellen*, trans. Marya Jonas v. Szatánska (Leipzig: Reclam). The year of publication is not indicated. The translator's preface is dated "Krakau, 1908" (p. 8); some library catalogues give 1908 as the year of publication, others 1909. This anthology features eight of Vazov's short stories, including "Ide li?" and "Diado Iotso gleda"; for a brief mention of *Die Bulgarin und andere Novellen* as a success amongst the German readers, see Liubka Lipcheva-Prandzheva, *Bitie v prevoda. Bălgarska literatura na nemski ezik (XIX-XX v.)* (Munich: Otto Sagner, 2010), 47.

works (including novels by Dickens).[12] (Lu Xun himself defended the practice of indirect translation in two essays published in 1934, a year before his second translation of a story by Vazov appeared.[13])

Lu Xun's turning to Vazov's fiction is part and parcel of this attention to the independence struggles of a young nation ("Edna bălgarka") or to its precarious position in larger post-independence (social) conflicts and entanglements ("Vălko na voina").[14] While Vazov is missing from the great list of Romantic (Mara) poets, he captured Lu Xun's attention later on at a moment when the discourse on "small and oppressed nations" was becoming a major frame of interpretation that would sustain (the leftist) Chinese interest in the literatures of Eastern Europe during the Republican period. This energy of resisting and transcending the status quo would continue to fuel Chinese appropriations of Romanticism, to the point where "revolutionary Romanticism" would become—for about two decades after 1958—a more prominent dimension of the new socialist-realist literature than it ever was in the Soviet Union.[15]

We can thus see how Romanticism has persistently functioned both as a period that grounds operationally our more traditional classificatory schemes of literary history, and as a larger discursive formation that allows a particular period to accrue value beyond its immediate chronological span. Periods accrue—and in turn generate and bestow—value by acquiring the status of discursive frames that support the appropriation and interpretation of texts. At various junctures of

12 See Michael Gibbs Hill, Lin Shu, Inc. *Translation and the Making of Modern Chinese Culture* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

13 On these two essays, see G. Gvili, *Imagining India in Modern China: Literary Decolonization and the Imperial Unconscious, 1895-1962* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 18.

14 The 1921 translation of "Vălko na voina" is also noted in Binghui Song, *Studies of Literature from Marginalized Nations in Modern China, with a Focus on Eastern European Literature*, trans. Haoxuan Zhang (Singapore: Springer and Peking University Press, 2024), 41. (The book was first published in Chinese in 2017.) There, Song mentions an appendix that Lu Xun wrote for the journal publication of the translation, in which he re-interpreted the story as a protest against a civil war instigated by the rulers. He praised Vazov as "a destroyer of the path taken by the old literature" (Lu Xun quoted in Song, *Studies*, p. 42).

15 See Lorenz Bichler, "Coming to Terms with a Term: Notes on the History of the Use of Socialist Realism in China", in *In the Party Spirit: Socialist Realism and Literary Practice in the Soviet Union, East Germany and China*, ed. Hilary Chang (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), 30-43, esp. 37-39. In fact, as Bichler demonstrates, in 1958 the term "Socialist Realism" was "dropped as a term referring to Chinese literature and was replaced by the "Combination of Revolutionary Realism with Revolutionary Romanticism" (p. 39).

(not just) European cultural history Romanticism would supply such powerful discursive frames that valorise specific texts by discerning in them resonance with society's current concerns. This has implications also about how we conceive of world literature. It is through translation that all this becomes possible, but we should remain alert to the fact that what travels in world literature are not only texts, but also these discursive frames that both universalise and anchor locally the translated text. World literature relies on the circulation of texts, yet this is only one of its preconditions. World literature would be unimaginable without these discursive frames that allow for asynchronous accrual of meaning, value, and prestige. The enduring semantic aura of periods, whose significance outgrows their chronological delimitations, is an indispensable discursive building block of world literature. Today's heated debates on the legitimacy of working with larger categories of world (literary and cultural) history, such as the Renaissance, including with reference to non-European cultures, seems to confirm this.[16]

16 For a brief overview of polemics around the Renaissance and the extent to which it can be universalised as a category of world (literary and cultural) history, not least with reference to China, see Galin Tihanov, "World Literature in the Soviet Union: Infrastructure and Ideological Horizons", in *World Literature in the Soviet Union*, ed. G. Tihanov, A. Lounsbery and R. Djagalov (Boston, Mass.: Academic Studies Press, 2023), 1-23.

Criticism, Ranking, and Digitalization

James F. English

Five Star Stories: *Readers and Ratings*

I have been studying the history of quantitative systems for rating works of art and literature. Prominent among these today are systems that express cultural value in stars and fractions of stars—more stars indicating a more positive judgment, a higher estimation of value. For shopping decisions in general, the dominant star rating platform is of course Amazon. But among platforms purpose-built for literature, the dominant player is Goodreads, Amazon's social book-reviewing subsidiary, which claims over 100 million members.

If prompted, many of those 100 million people would give the Goodreads star-rating system a rating of one star. Discussion threads both on the site itself and elsewhere in social book-chat media are rife with complaint and bewilderment about the curiously opaque and, on the face of it, unhelpful metric of "average user rating" for a book. Goodreads is scarcely unique in this respect: rating systems in general, and online rating aggregators in particular, have long been held suspect as devices for judging art and literature. Yet, despite the lack of trust placed in them, they have become the most ubiquitous cultural judgment devices of our era.

I'm not going to attempt a deep dive into the bowels of Goodreads in this essay, merely to offer a quick sketch of its place in the history of literary star ratings. What follows is a short story about ratings of short stories. The short story was the first form of literary work to which star ratings were systematically applied. This was in Edward J. O'Brien's *The Best Short Stories of 1915*, which inaugurated the annual *Best American Short Stories* series that continues to the present (Figure 1). The star rating system itself was pioneered a century earlier by the Englishwoman Mariana Starke in her *Letters from Italy* (1800; 1815) and *Travels on the Continent* (1820), as a concisely arithmetical way to present critical judgments of European painting and sculpture to middle-class British tourists. Starke's system involved exclamation

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marks rather than stars (asterisks); but the latter became typographically standard as travel guides proliferated in the mid-1800s through the efforts of her British publisher, John Murray, and the German competitor, Baedeker. After its application to literature by O'Brien, the device was extended to film by Irene Thirer, who began to include a "star bar" in the header of her movie reviews for the *NY Daily News* at the dawn of the talkie era in 1928 (Figure 2).[1] A common view today is that star ratings are fit to evaluate ordinary consumer goods like office chairs or flashlights, but have no natural place in the domains of art and literature, where value is indeterminate or ineffable. But historically, aesthetic judgment provided the exclusive ground for the incubation and early adoption of these systems. It is only after they became a standard feature of judgment regimes across the major fields of artistic practice that the multi-tier rating or grading systems began to be applied beyond the arts: first, to other, less aesthetic kinds of "experience good" such as cuisine, for which Michelin launched its 3-star scale in 1931, and finally to ordinary goods and services like canned beans and cameras, which began in 1937 with the first annual *Buying Guide* from *Consumer Union*—the forerunner of *Consumer Reports*. The historical evidence suggests that an impulse to arithmeticize the value of incommensurable and unmeasurable things—what Lucien Karpik calls *singularities*—is not imposed upon but is rather built into aesthetic ideology.[2]

Indeed, when O'Brien took up the star system from painting and the plastic arts and applied it (with manic enthusiasm and thoroughness) in literature, his aim was to advance an expressly anti-commercial, art-embracing agenda. O'Brien was part of the first generation of literary critics to center the short story—a quintessentially popular, ephemeral form—as the discipline's prime object of study, the exemplary form of literary art (and especially of *American* literary art). To resist what he saw as magazine editors' disabling constraints on the form, their encouragement of synthetic formulae and cheap plot hooks, O'Brien launched his annual review and anthology to steer readers toward the stories that were truly worth reading. The annual *Best Short Stories* anthologies O'Brien edited from 1915 until his death in 1941 included substantial "Yearbook" sections filled with lists and

1 The first review that included a star rating was Irene Thirer,"'Port of Missing Girls' Film Gives Parents Moral Lesson," *New York Daily News*, July 31, 1928, 22. Thirer awarded the film one star out of what at that time was a maximum of three.

2 Lucien Karpik, *Valuing the Unique: The Economics of Singularities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

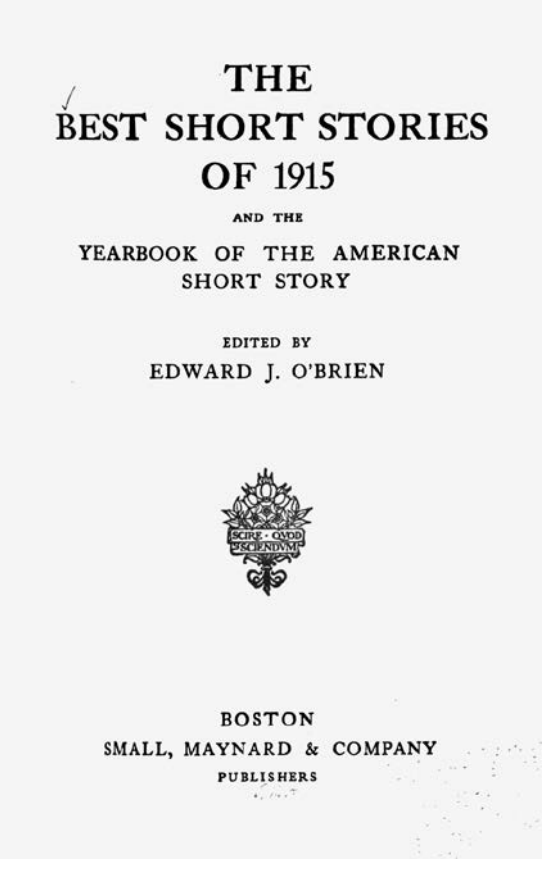
THE
BEST SHORT STORIES
OF 1915
AND THE
YEARBOOK OF THE AMERICAN
SHORT STORY
EDITED BY
EDWARD J. O'BRIEN
SCIRE · QVOD
SCIENDVM
BOSTON
SMALL, MAYNARD & COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

Figure 1: Title page from Edward J. O'Brien, ed., *The Best Short Stories of 1915.*

statistical tables in which he rated all the hundreds of stories published that year, awarding them zero to three stars based on a simple algorithmic syllogism of "substance" and "form". Excellence in either of these aspects was worth one star; stories that excelled in both received two stars; and a third star was reserved for stories that successfully wove substance and form together in a unifying pattern of "spiritual sincerity". These stories were listed in what O'Brien called a "special Roll of Honor".[3]

3 *The Best Short Stories of 1915 and the Yearbook of the American Short Story* ed. Edward J. O'Brien (Boston: Small Maynard & Co., 1915), 7-8. O'Brien's project of cultural renewal and its fate in the early years of the "Program Era"

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FINCH, LUCINE.
*The Boy at the Window. Harp. M. Oct., '14.
***The Woman Who Waited. Am. May, '15.

FINNEGAN, FRANK X.
And Your Neighbor As Yourself. Col. Jan. 16, '15.
Birdie's Mixed Motives. Col. Jan. 17, '14.
Birdie's Sane Christmas. Col. Dec. 19, '14.
Birdie the Strikebreaker. Col. March 28, '14.
From the Brink. Col. May 22, '15.
Marconi *vs.* Hymen. Col. Sept. 12, '14.
So Much Down. Col. Aug. 21, '15.
The Pulse of Spring. Lip. April, '15.
The Voice of Spring. Col. June 20, '14.
What the Siren Shrieked. E. W. July 26, '15.

FISHER, C. E.
The Riders. Col. Feb. 13, '15.

FISK, MAY ISABEL.
The Village Dressmaker. Pict. R. Feb., '15.

FITCH, ANITA.
***Colin McCabe: Renegade. Col. Jan. 9, '15.

FITCH, GEORGE.
Sam and I. Am. Nov., '15.

FITZGERALD, HENRY.
*The Pink 'Un. Col. June 5, '15.

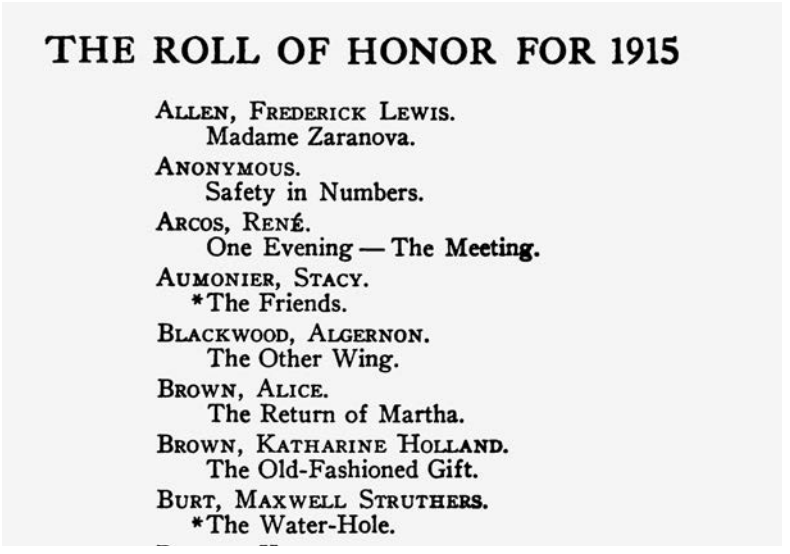
FITZPATRICK, JAMES WILLIAM.
*The Hospital Ticket. Col. Dec. 19, '14.
**The Last Laugh. Col. Aug. 7, '15.

FLOWER, ELLIOTT.
Editor Parkin's Defeat. Pict. R. March, '15.
What Barnum Said. Cen. Dec., '15.

FLYNT, WENTWORTH.
The Mist. I. S. M. June 13, '15.

FOOTE, ELVERA.
The Escape of Cyrus. Sun. Oct., '15.

is well described by Kasia Boddy, "Edward J. O'Brien's Prize Stories of the 'National Soul'", *Critical Quarterly* 52.2 (2010): 14-28. Adrian Hunter's analysis of the critical debates around the short story in the early twentieth century suggests O'Brien's alignment with the "generalist" wing of literary criticism in its struggle against the "researchers" and their program of rigor and professionalisation. See Adrian Hunter, "The Short Story and the Professionalisation of English Studies" in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Short Story in English*, ed. Paul Delaney and Adrian Hunter (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 24-39.



THE ROLL OF HONOR FOR 1915

ALLEN, FREDERICK LEWIS.
Madame Zaranova.

ANONYMOUS.
Safety in Numbers.

ARCOS, RENÉ.
One Evening — The Meeting.

AUMONIER, STACY.
*The Friends.

BLACKWOOD, ALGERNON.
The Other Wing.

BROWN, ALICE.
The Return of Martha.

BROWN, KATHARINE HOLLAND.
The Old-Fashioned Gift.

BURT, MAXWELL STRUTHERS.
*The Water-Hole.

Figure 2: Page excerpts from O'Brien's alphabetized appendices: from the complete list of stories published in 1915, with star ratings (on opposite page); from the Roll of Honor for 1915 (on this page). Note special asterisk for the stories by Aumonier and Burt.

In explaining this putatively three-tier system, O'Brien took care to define zero stars as the first of *four* "natural […] groups" (7), as well as including a distinctly higher fifth category consisting of three-star stories to which a special asterisk was added. The extra star marked them, he explained, as "so highly distinguished as to necessitate their ultimate preservation between book covers" (8), rather than merely in the ephemeral format of a magazine. His system thus actually consisted not of three ranks but of five—a number that seems to have exerted a certain gravitational pull on modern rating and grading regimes.

Looking at the star ratings in O'Brien's anthologies from the WWI years into the 1930s, one can be impressed by how well they track with the canon of twentieth-century American fiction as it was then taking shape. His Roll of Honor in the 1926 "Yearbook", for example, includes multiple stories by Sherwood Anderson, Kay Boyle, Willa Cather, Theodore Dreiser, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Zora Neale Hurston, Edith Wharton, and William Carlos Williams. As a credentialed expert offering judgments of a "generalist" bent to middle-class book buyers, O'Brien was not using the rating system in accordance with strictly personal values. While he claimed to per-

sonally read and rate every story published in an American magazine, he was of course well informed regarding the relative critical esteem of established authors as well as the reputational hierarchy of the magazines. Like Starke before him, he was a kind of human aggregator, condensing into an intuitive metrical scheme a complex of values shared by others in his wing of the expertise regime. Where he deviated from critical consensus, his tendency was progressive, as with the prestige parity he granted women authors, whose stories were, during his editorship, awarded stars and promoted to the honor roll in exactly equal proportion to men's.[4] One looks in vain to find any other scale or scheme of literary value, prior to the present century, in which women authors were valued equally with men.

Through O'Brian's efforts and those of other advocates for the modernist short story, the core ambition of the *Best Short Stories* project was achieved: to sort short stories hierarchically, filtering out the ephemera and securing an echelon of timeless works bound for the library rather than the bottom of the birdcage. Over the course of the twentieth century, the short story became an increasingly important prestige form even as it lost commercial value and faded from the mass market. The "best" short stories offered a supply of modern "classics" for the training in criticism provided by postwar English studies, a "teaching canon." And as we know from the work of Mark McGurl, the short story came to serve also as the exemplary form for creative writing pedagogy in fiction workshops, the form *par excellence* of the Program Era.[5]

This is the point in our story about the rating of stories where Goodreads comes in. The star rating system is far more prominent on the literary field today than it ever was in O'Brien's time, but it has meanwhile become radically divorced from the scale of literary prestige and the program of the school. This is not because the millions of users on Goodreads are ignorant of the symbolic logic that grants short stories their place of special esteem. On the contrary. In the Price Lab at the University of Pennsylvania we've looked at the 1200 or so genres and subgenres Goodreads readers most frequently use to organize their book collections onto shelves: everything from "Anglo

4 I'm grateful to my research assistant Quinn Robinson for calculating the gender ratio of authors across the various levels of O'Brien's value system during his 25-year tenure as series editor. O'Brien maintained such a near-perfect balance between male and female authors that it is difficult not to assume a conscious social agenda. But he insisted his only criterion of excellence was unity of aesthetic and spiritual design.

5 Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2009).

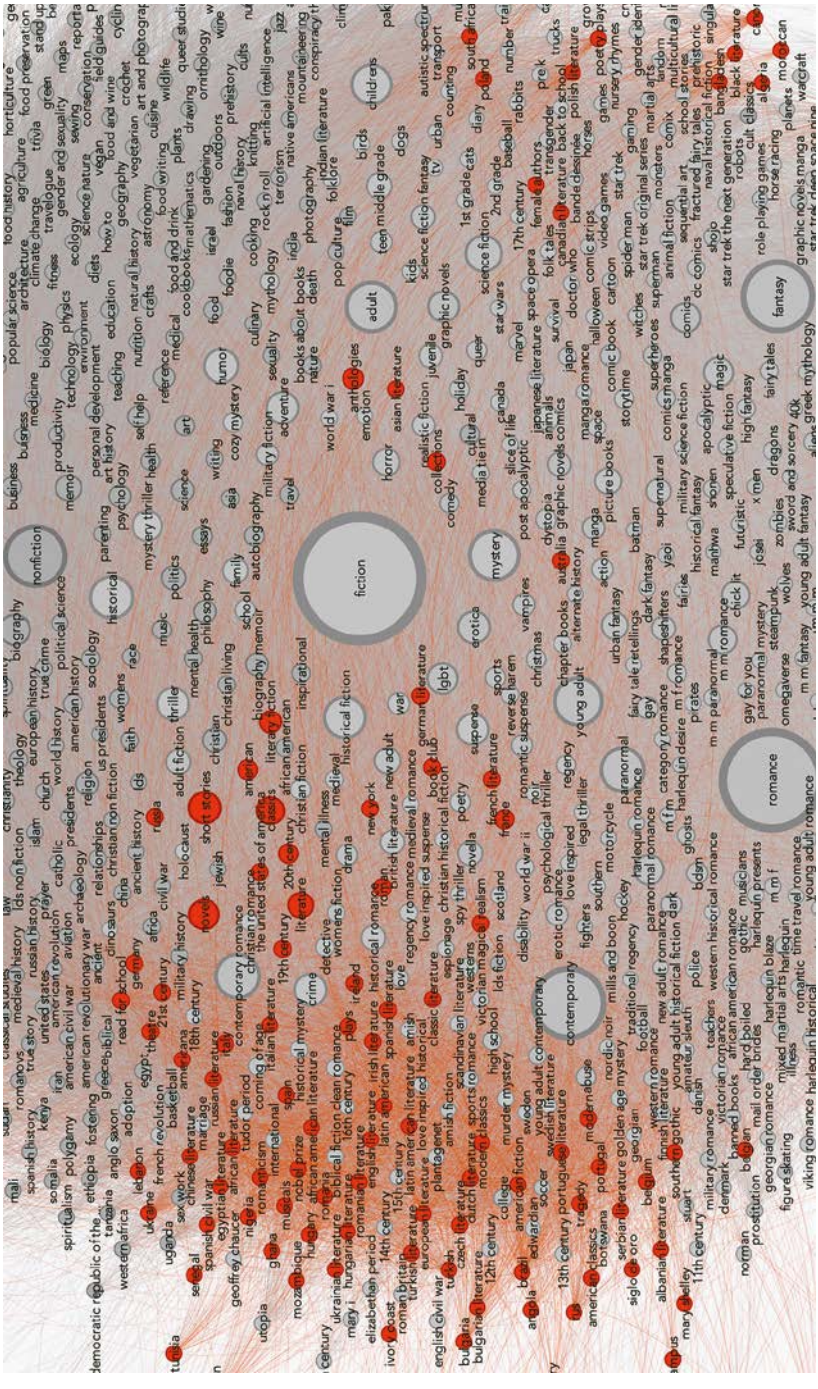


Figure 3: The network of 1200 common genre shelves in Goodreads, with shelves in the community of "literary fiction" highlighted in red. The size of a circle corresponds to how frequently it is used. (Visualization created in Gephi, by J. D. Porter.)

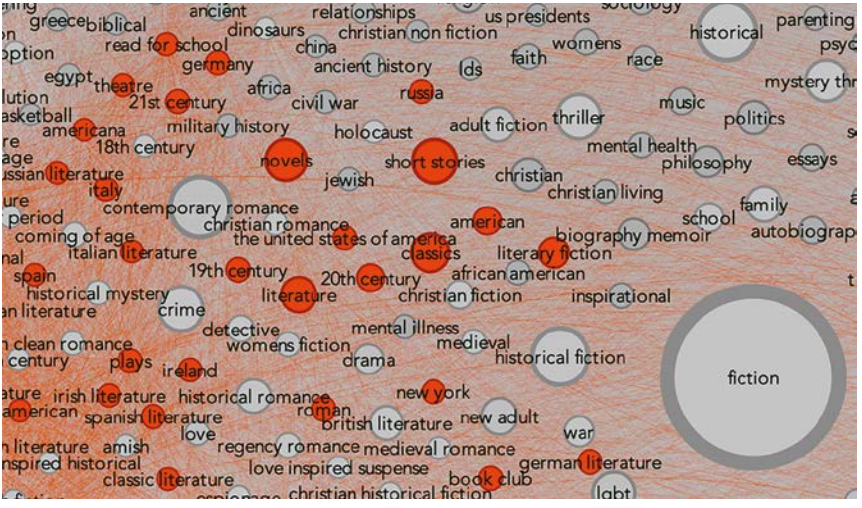


Figure 4: Zoomed in view of Figure 3, showing shelves in the community of literary fiction. "Short stories" is the largest, most frequently used shelf in this high-cultural genre neighborhood.

Saxon" to "zombies". We built a network model where each of these genre-shelves is a node (a circle), sized according to its connectedness with other nodes, other shelves. The strength of connection between any two shelves depends on how often they co-occur in the shelving data of the same book. "Anglo Saxon" frequently co-occurs with "Medieval," for example, but rarely if ever with "zombies".[6]

By running what is called a community detection analysis over this network, we can discern algorithmically eight major genre-neighborhoods, tightly-connected node-clusters into which the millions of Goodreads users have placed their books. For convenience, we've given these major zones familiar genre labels: Fantasy & Science Fiction, Graphic, Historical, Literary, Mystery, Romance, YA, and Nonfiction. In the data visualization of Figure 3, created by J. D. Porter, all genre-shelf nodes have been left grey except those belonging to the community of "literary," which are highlighted in red. As you see if

6 This data is based on the shelf-counts for a book's ten most common genre-shelvings, as reported on Goodreads landing pages prior to the introduction of a new page format in 2022. The current site does provide access to complete shelf-counts, but to extract the top ten genre-shelves from that data would involve different methods than were used for the present paper.

Genre	Average Rating
Short Stories	3.79
Literature	3.76
School	3.74
Classics	3.86
Mystery	3.90
Historical Fiction	3.92
Romance	3.96
Fantasy	3.98

Figure 5: Average (mean) rating for books connected to eight different genre shelves in Goodreads. Ratings for genres associated with "literary" fiction are generally lower than for the major genres of popular fiction.

we zoom in (Figure 4), the largest node in this cluster, the subgenre most strongly interconnected to others in this community, is "Short Stories".

Goodreads users tell us, through their collective shelving practices, that out of all the subgenres in the entire shelf array, it is "Short Stories" that they most strongly associate with the space of high critical esteem. At the same time, however, through their collective *rating* practices, they tell us that high critical esteem does not mean more stars. The average star rating of the 24,000 books shelved as "Short Stories" is 3.79 out of 5. That's slightly higher than the average for the books shelved as Literature (3.76) or School (3.74), and slightly lower than the average for books shelved as "Classics" (3.86). But this entire genre neighborhood, the zone of canonicity and critical prestige, is rated lower than all the other major neighborhoods. The average rating of books connected to "Mystery" is 3.90, "Historical Fiction" 3.92, "Romance" 3.96, and "Fantasy" 3.98 (Figure 5).

It is also the case that, among short story books, the "best short stories" are not rated higher than average. The average rating of the most recent ten volumes of *Best American Short Stories* is 3.79—which makes them, on this metric, no better than average for books connected to the Short Story shelf. In fact, I have found that in general books that win critical recognition as "best" in any given genre (e.g.

books shortlisted for mystery novel prizes like the Edgar or science fiction prizes like the Hugo and the Nebula) tend to be rated *lower* on Goodreads than the average book in that genre: 3.83 for prizelisted detective novels vs. 3.93 for non-prizelisted; 3.82 for prizelisted science fiction novels vs. 3.93 for non-prizelisted.[7] Even books that stand out in a given genre as best*sellers*, best by the measure of commercial value, tend slightly to trail the average rating.[8]

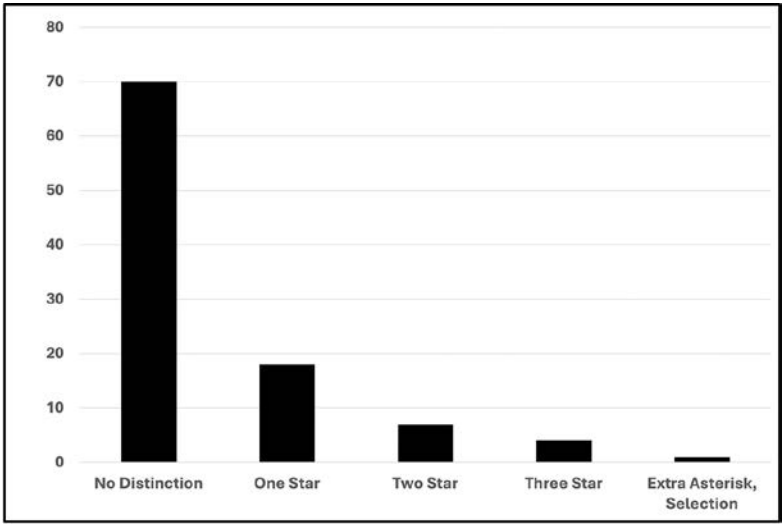
In short, between a book's Goodreads rating and its position in the most relevant hierarchies of value—its canonicity (value in the academic system), its mainstream prestige (value conferred by prizes and awards), or its popular success (commercial value, number of ratings in Goodreads) there exist more inverse correlations than positive ones.

Aggregation—the crowd-sourcing of judgments—cannot in itself account for the misalignments between Goodreads' star ratings and other judgment devices of the literary expertise regime. Why the sky-high ratings for poetry compared to YA romance? Why is *Pride and Prejudice* rated so much higher than *Romeo and Juliet*, *Anna Karenina* so much higher than *The Great Gatsby*? One key to understanding the shift from the original star rating systems like O'Brien's to ratings aggregators like Goodreads is the elimination of the zero-star option. For O'Brien, like Starke, zero stars was the norm, covering the whole range of cultural value from appallingly bad to well above average. One star was already an exclusive attainment, and three stars was reserved for works of rare quality. Of the 2,200 stories O'Brien rated in 1915, only 93 (or 4%) were awarded three stars and placed on the Roll of Honor. About half of those (2% of all published stories) appear in the appendix with a special asterisk, a fourth star, denoting extra high distinction.[9] And only about half of *those*—20 stories (less than 1%)—were finally selected for reprinting in the anthology. "Honor roll" is indeed an apt term for works thus distinguished. The

7 Based on a 2018 analysis with Scott Enderle at the Price Lab of winning and shortlisted novels for leading prizes in those two popular genres, compared to samples of 100 other novels in each genre.

8 My 2023 analysis, with J. D. Porter, of more than 600,000 books in Goodreads found a slight positive correlation between the number of ratings of a book (its popularity) and its average star rating. But this does not contradict my earlier finding in the Contemporary Fiction Database Project, that the very top best-sellers for each year dating back to 1960 tend to have lower average ratings than other novels in Goodreads. That study also found that novels shortlisted for major novel-of-the-year awards had even lower average ratings than the best-sellers.

9 This fourth level of the system, the three-star-plus-extra-star level, was discontinued in 1922 without, so far as I know, any statement or rationale from O'Brien.



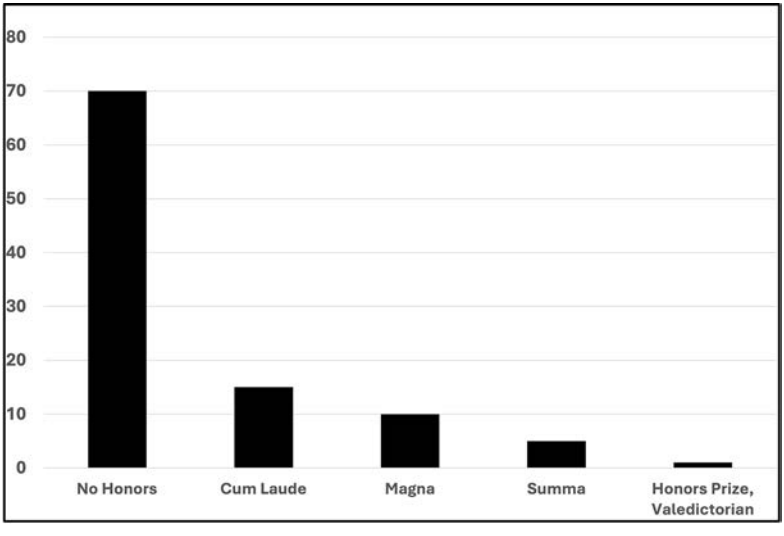


Figure 6: Percent distribution of stars, none to four, in O'Brien's 1915 volume (above); percent distribution of academic honors, none to valedictorian, in the US university system, 2015 (below).

original star rating systems functioned as *scales of exceptionality*, homologies of the Latin Honors system in higher education, with a sharply declining fraction of recipients at each higher level of honors (Figure 7).[10]

Contrast this with Goodreads. Deprived of the zero-star baseline, Goodreads users have to make room in their five-tier distribution for all those run-of-the-mill, "not bad" or "ok" books—the vast majority—as well as the ones they judge "terrible" or "unreadable," which are now assigned, as stigma, the one-star rating that originally signified esteem. The result is a distribution resembling not Latin honors but letter grades in the age of grade inflation: a rising curve on which the vast majority of values are either A or B, 5 or 4 (Figure 7).

The Goodreads rating system is a scale of *negative* exceptionality. Though superficially resembling the systems of O'Brien and other pioneers of *cultural* rating systems, it in fact derives more closely from the rating schemes developed decades later by *Consumer Reports*. For users of CR's *Buying Guides*, it was more essential to distinguish items found to be "poor" or "substandard" (Consumer Reports" two lowest categories) than finely to differentiate among the highest-end luxury goods. As a review aggregator, Goodreads operates on quite different principles than *Consumer Reports*, but its rating system makes this decisive accommodation of negativity. It provides reviewers with a sharper tool for indexing their disappointment than their esteem.

Disappointment explains, in part, why more prominent books (prizewinners, bestsellers, school texts, classics) tend to score lower than average on Goodreads. The visibility and symbolic elevation that these books have attained through other judgment devices (whether academic or commercial), attract readers who would not normally be reading books in that neighborhood, or on that particular shelf: readers who are more likely to be disappointed. And given the compression of scores toward the top of the scale (nearly ¾ of all ratings in Goodreads are 4's or 5's), disappointed readers enjoy disproportionate power. A one- or two-star review lowers an overall rating more than a five-star review can raise it. Again, academic grades provide a familiar analogy. A single F on a transcript drops a student's GPA more than an A can boost it.

10 O'Brien was of course intimately familiar with the Latin Honors system, which was first introduced at his alma mater, Harvard, in 1869. How consciously his rating system was modeled on Latin Honors rather than, for example, on the star ratings in Baedecker guides, I am unable to say.

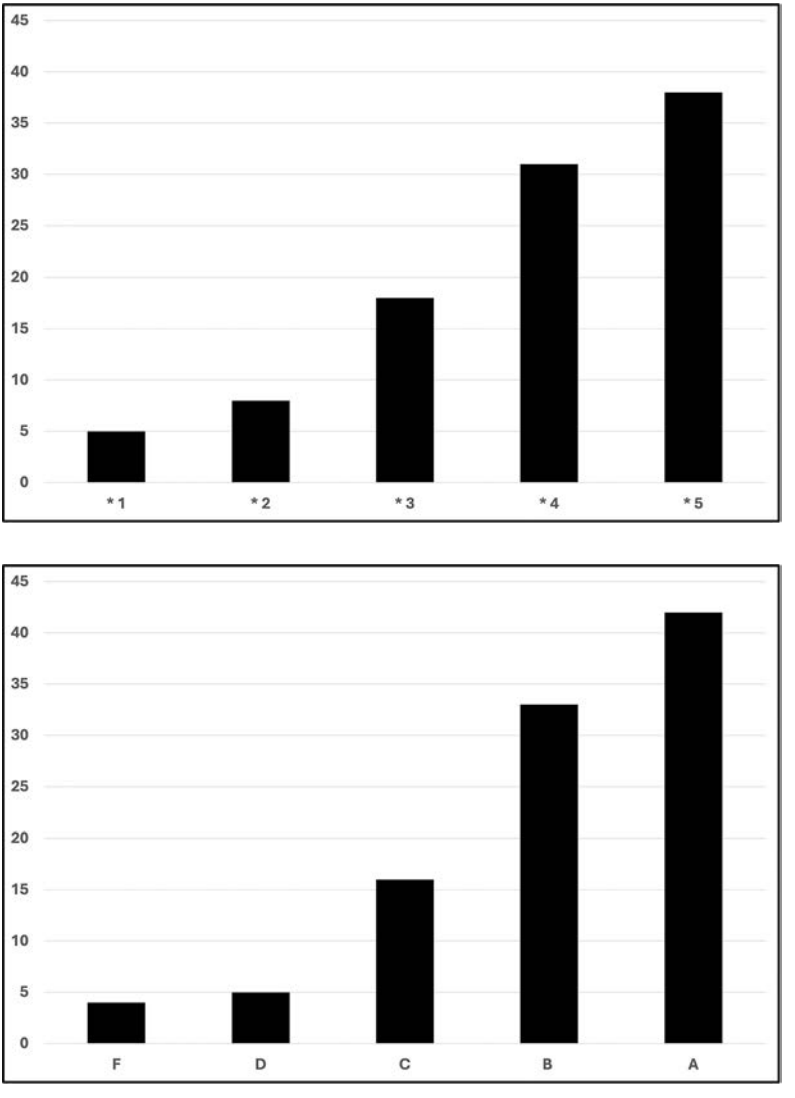


Figure 7: Percent distribution of stars, one to five, in Goodreads (above); percent distribution of academic grades, F to A, in U. S. higher education (below). Goodreads data based on 1800 novels in the Contemporary Fiction Database Project at the Price Lab, University of Pennsylvania. Source for academic grades: Catherine Rampell, "A History of Grade Inflation," *New York Times*, July 14, 2011.

This doesn't mean readers can't use Goodreads' star ratings and accompanying distribution-chart graphics to help guide them toward a book they'll love. There are well-honed strategies for doing that. But these strategies generally entail more scrutiny and assessment of the one-star reviews than the five-star, further amplifying the influence of negative judgments within the site, elevating them in Goodreads' second-order hierarchies of "top" reviews and "top" reviewers. Effective navigation strategies also lead users away from the system of star ratings into other features and affordances of the site such as ranked lists and curated sets of favorites. The arithmetical ratings themselves are simply not aimed any more at capturing "the best", but rather, by activating the core negative constituents of taste—aversion and avoidance—at keeping readers happily within the bounds of their established preferences.

Mark McGurl

Criticism at Scale: *BookTube and Literary Hyper-Abundance*

Our understanding of the state of literary criticism today can be expanded by tuning in briefly to the online forum known colloquially as BookTube, which consists of videos of persons standing head and shoulders in front of a camera talking about books. The observations offered here will be largely descriptive if also modestly diagnostic, drawing tentative conclusions about what this eccentric subset of the fantastically large phenomenon of YouTube video streaming shows us about the popular culture of novel-reading in our time. The true interest of BookTube, I will suggest, is in the way it tries to manage the problem of literary hyperabundance already visible in the background of an image like the one in Figure 1, and in most BookTube videos, where one sees bookshelves packed full of primarily recently published works of popular fiction.

This abundance of books is met, on BookTube, with an abundance of channels devoted to reviewing and discussing them, there being few barriers to entry to this forum of criticism beyond access to the internet, a digital camera, and an inclination to talk about books. Numbering in the hundreds, they represent a tiny portion of the roughly 38 million total active YouTube channels, and do not amount to much in terms of viewership when stacked against the more popular entertainment-oriented YouTube content producers of our time, who count viewers in the tens of millions. And yet, relative to other fora of *literary criticism*, BookTube represents a phenomenon of considerable scale.

BookTube is large not just in the number of channels on offer. The reach of individual channels can also be quite extensive. Near the top of the heap one sees a few strikingly popular figures, including Haley Pham with her 2.6 million subscribers, and Jack Edwards with his comparatively modest 1.2 million. But their path to BookTube dominance has been unusual: both began as youthful lifestyle "influencers" of a more general kind, only swerving into the production of book-

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centric content belatedly and bringing their original viewers with them. Beneath those heights are channels that have centered on newly released works of popular fiction from the beginning. They top out at half a million subscribers or more, of whom roughly 15 to 25% of that number will watch any given video. These are the professionals of BookTube, with followings large enough for them to make a living from payouts directly from YouTube based on "engagement metrics," from product endorsements inserted midstream in their videos, or Patreon (a virtual tipping or "membership" payment service) contributions from their most ardent fans. Below this level BookTube is largely the product of unusually gregarious booklovers with other sources of income, whether as a high school Latin teacher, a dental hygienist, a former professional wrestler turned IT professional, a graduate student living on a stipend, etc. They would appear to be college graduates for the most part, otherwise demographically diverse, albeit with (to all appearances) a statistical over-representation of white women of various nationalities.

College graduates though they may be, one generally encounters little trace in BookTube videos of either the literary historical knowledge or modes of formal textual analysis they might have encountered in literature classes. In this forum of criticism books are neither historicized nor contextualized nor patiently explicated to draw out their subtle meanings. They are taken personally. They are judged for their greater or lesser success in providing readerly enjoyment. Videos uploaded by the professionals might easily reach 100,000 viewers in short order. For amateur content producers, by contrast, five or ten thousand viewers counts as an impressive outing. Those are relatively small numbers in the context of platform capitalism and social media, but cumulatively they represent quite a lot of book talk.

Indeed, it might be useful to compare the scale of a single example of the more popular channels with, for instance, the highly esteemed *New York Review of Books*, one of the few leading organs of book discussion in the English-speaking world. At half a million and counting, the channel "With Cindy" counts three times the number of subscribers of the *New York Review*, with its roughly 140,000, but Cindy's 100,000 view-count per video surely dwarfs to an even larger degree the presumably small percentage of *NYRB* subscribers who read any given review in any given issue. One could surely perform a similar deflation of the 1.2 million readers of *The New Yorker* or the 10 million readers, mostly skimmers, of the digital and print versions of *The New York Times*. There is a large gap between the number of people who have purchased or otherwise acquired potential access a given review and those who actually end up reading it.

Figure 1: A face in front of bookshelves: the BookTuber is a fount of personalized criticism. (Screen capture from YouTube, 2023).

That said, it bears noting that clicking to subscribe to Cindy's content is free, while renewal of subscriptions to the *NYRB* and the others require periodic payments, as their subscribers are likely to be reminded quite frequently. There is no monetary cost for watching Cindy's videos, as entertainingly caustic and frequently insightful as they are, working at the intersection of contemporary popular fiction and contemporary identity politics as seen from the perspective of a self-identified queer Asian American woman. A subscriber could tire of Cindy's way of talking about books but take no action reflective of that fact, simply skipping over her videos when they show up in their YouTube queue. Still, the number of views accumulated per video, visible beneath the thumbnail image and title announcing its availability, is harder to discount. It probably represents a capture of "mindshare" in the book market as large as any commanded by an august print publication, albeit one focused in this case on different kinds of books than one typically sees discussed in the *New York Review*. The question of course being: is what BookTubers offer their viewers something professional critics would recognize as "literary criticism" at all? Or is it something else, something like mediated sociality, or perhaps simply entertainment, anchored by books?

Where is BookTube on the map of contemporary criticism? The image in Figure 2 is what I saw when, inspired by the theme of the conference for which this paper was written, I sat at my computer and started to diagram my sense of the U.S. "fora of criticism" *in toto*,

which I have organized into three categories. On the left are what I have labeled "legacy" fora, those which preexist the internet. I have further subdivided that space into the academy on the left, with its scholarly literary critical monographs and journals, and traditional public "fora of criticism" in the middle, which I've broken into several different print categories. And yet, if our definition is generous enough, we'd surely want to count the classroom as a forum of criticism of a certain kind, in some ways the most important of them all, insofar as it is the place where the habits and skills of literary reading are introduced to countless millions of persons, some of whom will continue to read books for pleasure for the rest of their lives. Medially, if not substantively, a BookTube video is distantly reminiscent of the classroom inasmuch as the latter is the occasion for the conjoining of the lively person of the teacher with the book they are teaching. On the right of the diagram are digitally native fora of criticism, including the *Los Angeles Review of Books* and others, but also things like BookTube, Bookstagram, and BookTok, which are nicknamed subsets of hyperscale social media platforms.

I find a diagram like this clarifying in a lot of ways, even if it is highly artificial in its topographical distinctions given that most of the entities on the left now circulate on the internet as well as in print. If one takes the common medial substrate of our fora of criticism seriously, perhaps even as determinative, one gets something (quite impressionistically) like what I have depicted in Figure 3.

In other words, a somewhat flattened landscape with ample opportunities for inter-access across the network via linking, although one still striated to some degree by reputation, paywalls and the like. Which is to say, a confusingly "postmodern" mishmash of different sources of authority and sensibility. This linkage was crucial to enabling expressions of outrage among the BookTuber community in 2022 upon the publication, in the traditional magazine *Wired*, of a disrespectful feature article on Brandon Sanderson, one of the more widely read epic fantasy authors of the present day. Its author was puzzled that such a mediocre writer, whom most of his friends and colleagues had never even heard of, could command such vast audiences for his loosely Tolkien-esque fare. Taking umbrage, BookTuber Merphy Napier, an ardent fan of Sanderson, declared to her 400,000 subscribers and other watchers that the *Wired* article she had read online is "NOT JOURNALISM" but a snobby hitjob. All of the other BookTubers (among whom ardent fandom of Sanderson is widespread) who entered the fray concurred.

While these direct crossovers between distantly spaced fora are rare, more local connections across platforms are crucial in many

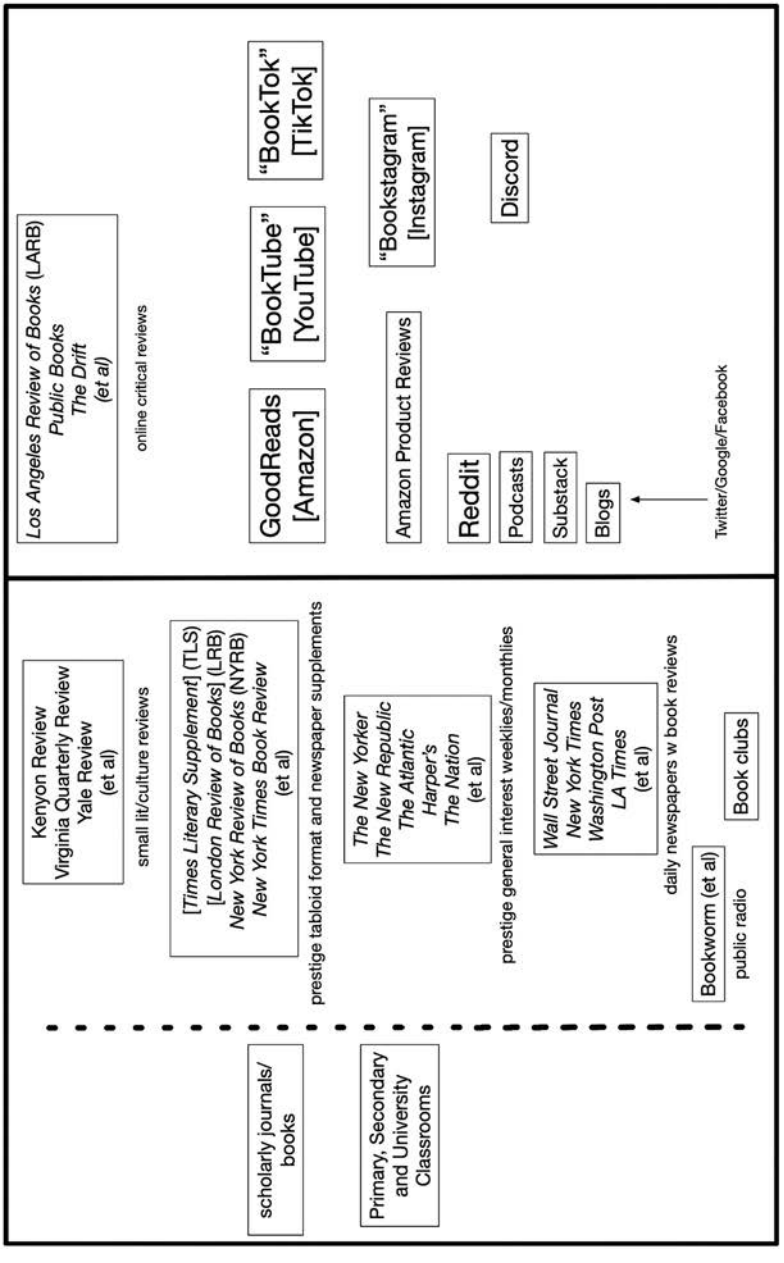

Figure 2: The fora of contemporary criticism from the U.S. point of view, ranging from scholarly journals on the far left, through tradition print venues in the middle, to new internet-based fora on the right. (Mark McGurl, 2023).

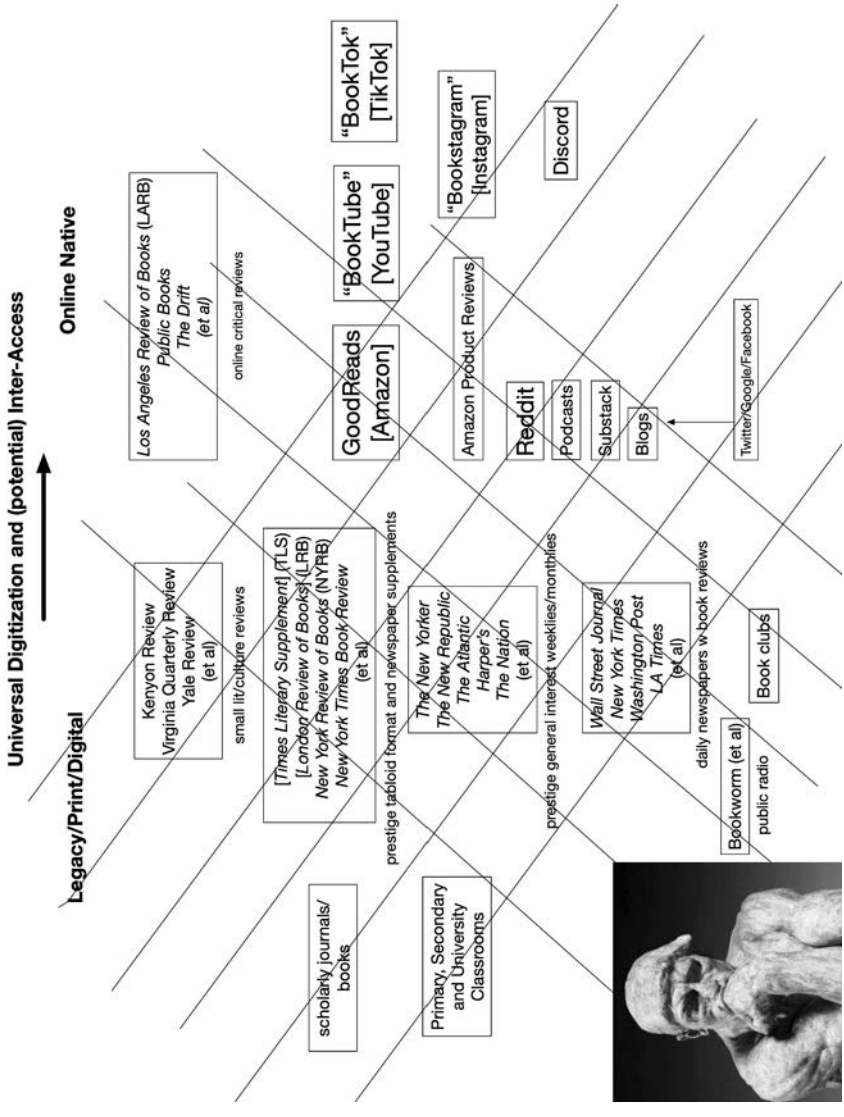

Figure 3: In practice, the fora of contemporary criticism are not separate but connected in a complex media ecology. (Mark McGurl, 2023).

ways to the daily functioning of BookTube. For instance, any given BookTuber trying to monetize his or her channel is surely present not just on YouTube, but also Instagram and TikTok. The book-centric subsets of YouTube, TikTok and Instagram are distinct even from a large-scale online book forum like Goodreads (a social media site

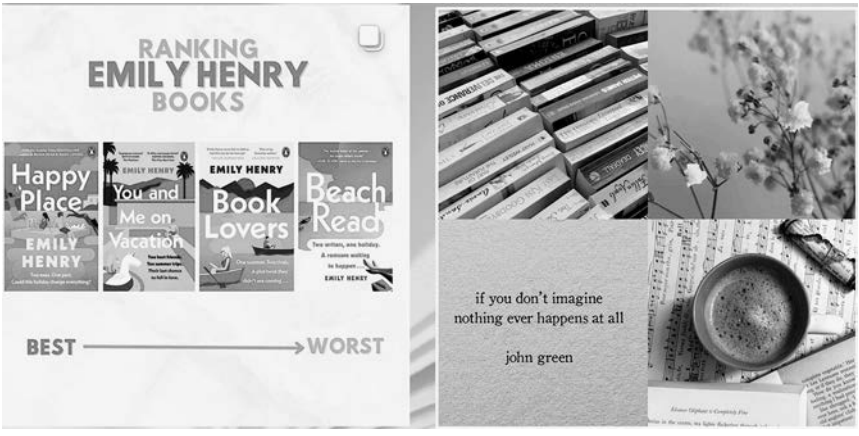

Figure 4: On Bookstagram, the book-centric subset of Instagram, the book-as-object is integrated into a lifestyle image. (Screen captures from Instagram, 2023).

now owned by Amazon where users post reviews and keep track of their reading) in essentially leaving textuality behind for presentations of voice and image. Bookstagram and BookTok feature, not texts so much as images of texts, as in one Instagram post ranking the books of popular romance writer Emily Henry without explanation (more on this ranking impulse anon). Or one might encounter books integrated into a bookish lifestyle image. (See Figure 4.)

On BookTok, where the preferred form of content is the very short video clip, one encounters a certain sentiment about a book or books, and then a "reveal" of their covers. An entirely typical video would be one that advertises "books that left my jaw on the floor" (see Figure 5).

First one sees the stacked fore-edges of these books, replete with tape flags used to mark the particularly good or meaningful parts. These tape flags are presumably meant as a kind of visible stand-in for the intensity and authenticity of the reading experience, even as there is no discussion whatsoever about how or why these particular books left this reader's jaw on the floor. Then we see their covers revealed in quick sequence, and that's all. No doubt to the delight of the publishers of those books, this video has (as of this writing) been viewed 23.5 million times.

And indeed, in the story of contemporary publishing, it is BookTok that looms largest among these platforms, dwarfing the importance of BookTube as a marketing phenomenon. The BookTok video is essentially a free ad for the books it portrays, formally convergent

with a 30-second TV commercial. This is why, if one walks into a large chain bookstore in the U. S., one might see a table near the front explicitly devoted to "BookTok Books": which is to say, books that have become massively popular by going viral on BookTok. But is BookTok even a "forum of criticism"? From the scholarly perspective, surely not. Indeed, even for BookTubers, BookTok can seem a bridge too short. It's all relative. The normal length for a BookTube video is something like 20 minutes, give or take. To fill that time requires that a lot of words be spoken about a given book or books. As the *New York Review of Books* is to BookTube, we might say, so is BookTube to BookTok: an increasingly "old school" medium with reason to worry about its future in the attention economy. Hence the existence of numerous BookTube videos looking across the way at either BookTok or Bookstragram and pondering their meaning for books and for BookTube. One is titled "Is BookTok Okay?," as though the taste-profile revealed there leaves one worried about the platform's sanity.

Is BookTube maybe *too* substantive in its relation to books? While it rarely even quotes from the books it is discussing, preferring to generalize about them, the typical BookTube video does at least make time to conduct a practical assessment of the success or failure of a given book. Here is Emily of "Books with Emily," a French Canadian more severe in her judgments than most, explaining why the second volume of Patrick Rothfuss's *Kingkiller Chronicle* failed for her:

> There is like a ten-chapter section that I wish I could erase from my memory. Like, literally. [mimics physical pain]. We'll not talk about spoilers in this video so I won't mention it but [...] awful. Even if you didn't care about that part, that affects the rest of the story, makes it awful, too [...]. I (also) feel like it was so choppy. In the beginning of Book One the author's narrator mentions that, okay, this is going to be my life story to get where we are at right now and he will recount his whole life story in three days and each book is a day. And then when we get to day two, Book Two, you realize, oh I didn't go anywhere near far enough, like, we took our time and then we're still at the same spot in Book Two and there's just this rush. That's why it feels so choppy, and it just skips ahead and it's just *not good*. Just not good.

Necessarily brief as it is, this partial transcript is a fair representative of the form. There is a book and there is a face; a lively face staging her visceral personal reaction to a sexually explicit section of this hugely popular fantasy novel, while also observing something about its, for

Figure 5: On BookTok, the book-centric subset of TikTok, the short video converges with the form of the 30-second TV commercial. (Screen capture from TikTok, 2023).

her, awkward pacing. This is not James Wood writing in *The New Yorker*, God knows, but the longer form of the BookTube video draws forth evaluative language and even "formal analysis" of a kind.

That said, the books discussed on BookTube are rarely the kind that show up in classrooms, even if the *Kingkiller Chronicle* is, in fact, obsessed with schools, as a great many fantasy novels (most notably, the *Harry Potter* novels) are. Instead BookTube is centered on recent releases in popular or "subliterary" genres: fantasy, romance, and young adult novels are the heart of the matter, although there are a handful of channels devoted to the discussion of literary fiction. The most popular among latter would appear to be Benjamin McEvoy's. It boasts some 80,000 subscribers. With videos titled, for instance, "How to Read *War and Peace*," it is a wonderfully high-minded channel, not at all tied to new releases and in that way, too, somewhat discordant with BookTube norms. Even so, the video "How to Motivate Yourself to Read" has been viewed 111,000 times, representing an influence on reading habits presumably larger, if perhaps less intense because more passive, than any classroom teacher could ever dream of having in a whole career. Elsewhere on BookTube the discourse of cultural self-improvement we see here becomes more overtly therapeutic in nature, with countless paeans to books as vehicles for emotional well-being. These videos are sometimes quite moving and one imagines, or at least hopes, that lots of people have found their way to the books they need by means of BookTube.

A more pathological version of this genre of video, however, can be found in the ones emphasizing the sheer quantity of books one can get through if one learns to read more and read faster, as in Elizabeth Filips's much-watched video, "You Don't Hate Books: The Simple Method I Use to Read 100 Books a Year." And here is where, even if you are not disturbed by what counts as "criticism" in this online forum, the entire enterprise of reading a good book can start to seem, not a quiet oasis in the rough and tumble of modern life, but something entirely wired into that life; not an antidote to but instigator of the modern problem of time-famine. For all the rude health of literary life as we see it activated on BookTube, I think we are not wrong to feel some disquiet about its implications for that life; indeed, for the sheer awkwardness of the novel, with its demand for 10 or 20 or 30 hours of one's time, as a cultural commodity in the hypermediated present. This, no doubt, is partly why audiobooks loom ever larger in the publishing economy: they remediate the book so that it can be consumed while also doing something else, whether driving or doing laundry or getting exercise. Several BookTubers use this method to meet the quota of reading required to run their channel.

Hyperabundance. A literary milieu governed not so much by the cost of books as the opportunity cost of reading them in a situation of time-famine. This is the context in which we might understand one of the most ubiquitous and most predictably successful genres of video on BookTube, the ranking video. (See Figure 6.)

I don't have the space to conduct a full analysis of ranking as a form of literary judgment. Instead let me simply say that it fascinates me on several grounds, not least for its violation of the protocols of aesthetic judgment in the Kantian tradition, which is a judgment outside comparison. For Kant, that is, the issue is whether something is beautiful or not, not whether it is more beautiful than something else. The top-ten video lends support to the sociological decoding of "disinterested" aesthetic judgment as a technology of social distinction, as we have it most famously from Pierre Bourdieu, while also making a mockery of it. Why? Because ranking mania is nothing if not a thoroughly populist enterprise, even an embarrassingly *déclassé* one. It is a game-like popularity contest, occasioning a collision between the faux-rationality of the numerical-ordinal with the semi-arbitrariness of subjective taste.

To be sure, the ranking video is of a piece with a wider world fundamentally structured by ranking regimes, from Google's page-rank search algorithm to university rankings and tennis rankings and top-ten vacation destinations and on and on. And yet, the point to be made about ranking mania is that it is not the product of a society

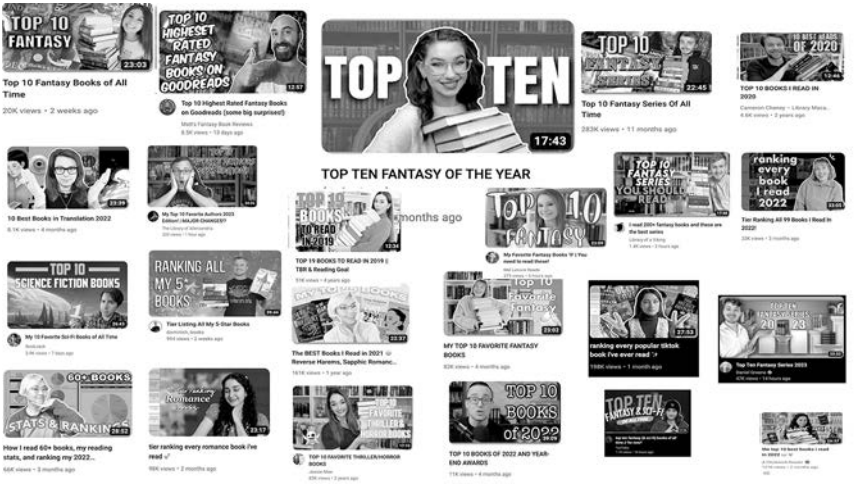

Figure 6: The ranking video is one of the most reliably successful genres of BookTube content. (Screen captures from YouTube, 2023).

organized by traditional social rank. It is instead the product of a *differentiated* society preoccupied by the *lack* of any consensus on rank; on social rank, certainly, but also, and more importantly to the phenomenon of BookTube, on the relative worth of cultural materials in a situation of practically infinite offerings. Where once was canon, a collective if no doubt elitist enterprise, now a top-ten list must be, a personally curated ranking of books typically offered with abundant warnings about its being *just my opinion*.

For all its much-discussed faults, one of the benefits of a relatively secure canon of literature was its reduction of the complexity of an over-populated literary field. Against the pure fragmentation of attention in a world inhabited by too many books for any one person to know about let alone read, canons enable certain works to be objects of shared concern and sustained discussion. This is the benefit of the top-ten list, too—with the caveat that top-ten lists are themselves so numerous on BookTube that tuning into all of them might take a lifetime.

Imitating each other, sometimes appearing as guests on each other's channels, converging (depending on the genre emphasis of the channel) on roughly the same sets of books as objects of discussion, BookTubers tend to produce a handful of different kinds of video which they will rotate through from week to week, obedient to the evidently exhausting need for would-be successful channels to upload new content

regularly. While they are certainly there to be found, videos devoted to reviewing a single book are not the staple of BookTube, which specializes instead on the omnibus review of many books at once. This reduces the quantity of insight required for the discussion of any given book and maximizes the potential sources of appeal to viewers looking to be informed of their options for reading in any given genre, even as it makes hosting a channel burdensome in the sheer numbers of books one is making oneself responsible for. Following the career of any given BookTuber, one frequently detects a condition of burnout setting in, as the quantum of attention they have secured proves less than lucrative, and no wonder. A recent video in the minor genre called "transparency video," where the BookTuber discusses the finances of their channel in detail, makes it clear how little even a relatively successful BookTuber can make from their work. The one calling herself "Bookborn" has more than 40,000 subscribers, with each of her videos garnering between a few thousand and 20,000 views, but after running the numbers she reveals her "hobby" to have netted $3215 for the 260 total videos she has uploaded in the life of the channel.

Central to almost all channels is the so-called "reading vlog" or wrap-up video in which the BookTuber, as model reader and life-liver, casually recounts their reactions to the books they have been reading in *medias res*, detailing how much or how little they have been enjoying them. Also popular is the so-called "book haul" video. In the book haul video, the BookTuber goes through the books they have acquired and discusses how much they are *looking forward* to reading them, and why. These are the books that are joining the so-called "tbr" pile, "to be read." If they prove especially bad, they might be "dnf'd" (did not finish), an eventuality reported on in due course. The book haul video fetishizes the sheer quantity of books the BookTuber has acquired: an image of oneself carrying a precariously large stack of books is apparently irresistible, since all of them seem to do it. (See Figure 7.)

The more dignified twin of the book haul video is the "bookshelf tour," in which the BookTuber takes the opportunity of the full bookshelves behind their head to discuss the range of their literary interests, the different editions of books they own, the systems of organization they have come up with, and so on. It represents the reasoned disciplining of literary hyperabundance, but it has its limits. Hence the inevitable complement of the book haul video, the "book un-haul" video, where the BookTuber, having no more space in their apartment to store the books they have hauled, talks you through their decision-making process in getting rid of some of them.

Figure 7: As evidenced by these images, an underlying theme of the "book haul" video is the problem of literary hyper-abundance. (Screen captures from YouTube 2023).

It is surely one of the glories of the modern culture of the book, as compared to other media forms — the cinema, most obviously — that books are relatively inexpensive to produce, with electronic publishing only making them cheaper. This enables them to serve as vehicles of a practically infinite variety of individual authorial sensibilities and readerly interests, high and low and in between. It's only when this numerousness becomes overwhelming that our thoughts might properly turn to its hidden costs.

Phillipa K. Chong

The Ecosystem of Book Reviews

Introduction

Much ink has been spilled contemplating the nature, the value, and the future of book reviewing. Most recently, the cultural authority and hierarchy of critics was shaken to the core by digitalization, and they feared that the terrain of book publishing and reviewing would never be the same.

Physical book publication and the print media, the traditional homes of the book trade, had been thrown into a kind of dual jeopardy. The advent of the cheap ebook changed the financial model of publishing, with lower royalties leaving less money to go around and fewer advertising dollars for traditional review outlets. This new reality also incentivized publicity departments to pursue new and cheaper digital channels to market their books (Thompson 2013).

At the same time, digitalization opened up new online spaces for amateur reviewers to share their opinions. While the average reader had always been able to chat about books in a café or book club, their opinions were now being disseminated on a mass scale and consulted alongside those of professional reviewers. Publishing one's literary judgments, once the preserve of an elite, had become a common currency.

Naturally, this raised concerns that professional reviewers would be displaced by amateurs and nurtured an "us vs. them" polemic. The presumption was that the types of discourse produced by amateur reviewers were inherently uninformed and inferior—if not dangerous—compared to professional critics. For instance, many professional critics and think pieces voiced concern about amateurs reading the wrong books—or, worse, appreciating the right books in the wrong way (Chong 2020). Moreover, they seemed to fear that the "wrong way" might somehow become contagious. Good taste, con-

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textualized opinion, and balanced reasoning were in danger of being swept away by a vulgar tide of "stuff I like." In more alarmist formulations, some felt that the entire literary culture was under siege from amateurs as barbarians at the gate (cf. Keen 2011; Wasserman 2007).

While some critics were more open-minded—like Laura Miller, who wrote "In Praise of Reader Reviews" for *Slate*—their stance was very much one of curiosity about how the "other half reads" (Miller, 2016), retaining an "us and them" framework for understanding the central dynamic of book reviewing under digitalization.

With some time and distance, it is now clear that the barbarians did not overrun the citadel. First, e-readers did not destroy publishing. Print book sales in America increased by 8% in 2020 and 2021, respectively, and print books continue to be popular with younger readers (Mintel 2022; Duffy 2023). Second, print and digital journalism, rather than cannibalizing each other, have co-evolved along different trajectories (Nalkur 2013). Finally, while the internet did carve out a space for new cultural journalists, it also presented an opportunity for established legacy media to expand their presence online. Digital ended up being an opportunity for all.

In parallel, scholarly efforts to understand have evolved. For instance, questions that contrast print versus digital may no longer be meaningful; "new" media are no longer all that new, and there are many more digital platforms, such as TikTok, for new entrants to use. It is always difficult to describe things while they are still evolving. Yet, one way to illuminate such dynamics is to shift the focus from content—like particular apps or interests—to social processes.

While the professional–amateur distinction is a convenient way to think about review discourse, it has its limits. Aside from being overly broad, it assumes an inherently competitive dynamic between two factions—a "survival of the fittest" story where only the strong prevail. Recent social scientific research on reviewing suggests a more empirically nuanced storyline. Arguably, instead of conceptualizing reviewing as a field of competition (Bourdieu 1993), it may be more fruitful to conceive it as a diversifying ecosystem. On the one hand, this metaphor allows for multiple "genera" of reviews to cohabit and emphasizes that symbiosis and biodiversity are essential for the health of the system. On the other hand, it also stimulates new questions regarding what might unbalance or pollute the environment, in a way that reasserts the value of reviewing in civil discourse today.

Who Counts as a Reviewer?

In a context where seemingly anyone could be a reviewer, many sociological studies of the past decade have interrogated the definition of a "professional reviewer" and revealed a long-standing ambiguity (e.g., Hanrahan 2013; Jaakkola 2021; Kristensen & From 2015; Verboord 2010; 2014). A purely pragmatic definition would propose that if one wrote a review in a mainstream media outlet, one was a reviewer. Yet even critics for some of the most influential review outlets in the world, like the *New York Times Book Review*, do not necessarily identify as such (Chong 2019). This is partly because reviewing, as an occupation, has relatively porous boundaries: no formal credentials are required and few reviewers hold full-time positions; hence, the question of what features should demarcate professional from amateur critics remains undetermined.

Professional critics frequently seek to distance themselves from amateur reviewers in terms of evaluative approach. A common complaint is that amateurs treat books as entertainment rather than as serious objects of aesthetic contemplation (Chong 2020). While the evaluative benchmark for entertainment is about individuals' unmediated enjoyment, art should be appreciated for its richness, complexity, and intellectual challenge (Baumann 2001; Bourdieu 1984). To their minds, then, the average reader who wrote about a work of fiction from a recreational standpoint, rather than from an aesthetic one, was not writing a "real" review.

Empirical studies support the idea that amateur and professional reviews do treat cultural objects differently. Specifically, research shows that amateur reviews often employ more personal and emotionally charged language, and evaluations tend to be more polarized (e.g., scores of either 0/10 or 10/10) (Santos et al. 2019) or bimodal ("brag or moan") (Hu et al. 2006). Professional reviews, meanwhile, tend to be more formal, use technical high art terms, and offer mixed or equivocal evaluations (Andreasson 2021; Chevalier & Mayzlin 2006).

But researchers also find that the style of professional and amateur reviews sometimes converge. For instance, amateurs who regularly contribute reviews over time compared to occasional posters produce different types of content (Beaudoin and Pasquier 2017; Choi and Maasberg 2022). To use Choi and Maasberg's (2022) terminology, the discourse produced by "experienced" amateurs is closer to that of professional critics than to their own less-experienced "novice" peers—which flags the issue of amateurs' intent and motivation when writing reviews (Chong 2019; Verboord 2014). When interviewed,

pioneers of amateur book blogs revealed themselves to be aspiring critics or deeply committed to the traditional practice of book reviewing, which was reflected in what books they reviewed and how they wrote about them (Chong 2020). However, the convergence in review styles may not be a function of *who* is writing the review, but what genre is being written about. Reviews of high-status cultural works, such as movie dramas or literary fiction, are more likely to contain aesthetic criteria than reviews of popular works, like action movies or mystery novels (Antoniak et al. 2021; Daenekindt and Schaap 2022; Schmutz and Faupel, 2010). And amateurs who aspire to be like professional critics will similarly mimic their book choices of high-status literary fiction.

But not all amateurs want to be like professional critics. While professional reviewers act as market mediators, helping readers learn about books they might enjoy or should know about, many reviewers posting on Goodreads, Instagram (i.e., "Bookstagram"), TikTok ("#booktok"), and YouTube ("BookTubers") are not interested in this role. Jaakola (2019) finds that Bookstagrammers' contributions are associated with performing a "reading self" as a mode of self-improvement or a way to share their reading experiences and passion for books (see also: Vlieghe et al. 2016). For many Bookstagrammers, BookTubers, and #booktokers, their platforms serve as "affinity spaces", neither professional nor commercial, but spaces for generating book discourse as simply another way to engage with a text on a personal level, to connect with other readers, and/or engage in reading culture (Andreasson 2017; Murray et al. 2021; Matthews 2016). Indeed, *Goodreads* members were dismayed at the acquisition of the platform by Amazon in 2013, fearing it would lose its communal, book-lover ethos (Albrechtslund 2017). In other words, while their reviews may appear on public platforms, many amateurs think of their reviewing in private terms.

In practice, however, a study of BookTubers reveals that the social organization rewards for posting about books can be similar to those for traditional book reviewers: receiving free books, making connections in publishing, and gaining modest income through advertisements and sponsorships (Song 2023). This speaks to the diversity within the amateur reviewing category; rather than delineating different types of reviewers, it may be more productive to consider different *styles of reviewing*.

The lesson that can be drawn from this body of research is the value of speaking of different *styles* of reviewing, with their unique conventions and goals, rather than holding on to rigid ideas of *types* of reviewers. Doing so resists essentialist ideas about the relative worth

of opinions as a property of individuals and aligns with the empirical reality that a single person can produce multiple types of reviews and will often change their discourse accordingly; for instance, the English professor who writes both academic essays and posts on *Goodreads*. Finally, shifting the focus to different styles of review*ing* rather than different types of review*ers* affords the analytical agility required to engage with a rapidly changing mediascape.

Who Wields Influence?

Another question that has interested scholars and industry professionals alike is how much professional critics' literary judgments still matter—especially compared to the influence of amateur reviewers amplified by social media platforms. Social scientists have used book sales as an indirect measure of critics' relative cultural influence (Verboord 2011): if professional critics still have sway, their reviews will lead to book sales at a magnitude greater than amateur review attention. Studies have yielded conflicting findings based on the specific operationalizations and procedures used by researchers (Chen, Wu, & Yoon 2004; Chevalier & Mayzlin 2006; Zhu & Zhang 2010). The question of whose opinions matter more may also be too blunt to yield useful insights.

A deeper question is *how* consumers engage with reviews. When do they trust them? What cognitive processes are involved? Here, a consistent finding is that people pay more attention to negative reviews than to positive ones (Guan & Lam 2019), partly because they are viewed as more authentic and credible (Lo & Yao 2018; see also Fiske 1993). Furthermore, negative reviews of very popular books and writers do not immediately depress sales, but they do have a negative effect over the long term (Erhmann & Shmale 2008).

What about reviews that are mixed or ambivalent? When readers encounter an aggregate rating that contradicts their expectations, they will go on to read more reviews overall than they do if their initial expectation is confirmed (Guam & Lam 2019). Moreover, when faced with such a mix of opinion, readers view professional reviews as more credible than amateur ones (Lo & Yao 2018). On the other hand, professionals are seen as less authentic—partly due to their formal writing style and partly because they are being paid for their views (Andreasson 2021).

Insofar as readers use reviews to guide their decisions, those decisions are based on the information they glean and how they use it.

Beyond the binary question of whether readers ultimately act on a review, this entails credibility, trust, and other complex cognitive processes. However, one clear finding is that platforms such as TikTok and Instagram are successfully reinvigorating sales of publishers' older backlist titles, which are no longer being covered by most traditional review media (Bilno, Hue 2021). A recent example was Colleen Hoover's romance *It Ends with Us*, which became an *NYT* bestseller when published in 2016, then returned to the bestseller lists five years later, largely due to #booktok (Zarroli 2021).

However, perspicacity is required when considering how #booktok and traditional longform reviews differ. For now, the influence of TikTok and Instagram appears strongest for genre fiction—including backlist titles (Bilno, Hue 2021). Again, Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us* provides a well-known example. But it is important to remember that different types of reviews confer different types of legitimacy. While a professional review may not make a bestseller, neither can #booktok and reader-based reviews propel a book into the literary canon.[1]

Recent research therefore clearly shows that how readers use reviews and thus the impact of reviews on sales is a far more nuanced social process than whether readers choose *The Globe and Mail* versus *GoodReads*. All styles of reviewing have value, depending on the goals and conventions of that style and the specific needs of the readers consulting them. Rather than positing one type of reviewing as superior to another, it is more productive to reframe discussions of book reviewing in a way that takes as intrinsic and inevitable the full diversity of genres, readers, and rewards that animate the world of books.

A New Storyline: Introducing The Ecological Perspective

Book reviewing, in its most general form, can be understood as discourse about the state of books and a process of creating knowledge about their value. Within this framing, it is possible to draw on sociological inquiries into knowledge-making—specifically, how disparate groups of people can collectively build knowledge, in the absence of consensus, shared interests, or even mutual respect. This will allow a

1 In this Bourdieusian perspective, different types of criticism have more or less power based on the type of capital they can confer and the type of capital possessed by their authors (Bourdieu 1993; 1996).

transition to a different storyline: not of professional versus amateur, battling for legitimacy and their own vision of good literature, but the story of an ecosystem with many evolving parts. A case in the 1900s in Berkeley, California, is illuminating in this regard.

Star and Griesemer's (1989) foundational case study describes how amateur collectors and professional scientists worked together to help establish the collection of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology (MVZ) at the University of California, Berkeley. Unlike other museums, the MVZ was envisioned as a research-focused natural history museum. This required the collection of hundreds of plant and animal specimens for scientific study. Since the task was too large for the scientists to tackle alone, they recruited local amateur naturalists, among others, to help. This created a tension because while amateur naturalists enjoyed collecting as a leisure activity driven by a love of nature, they were not skilled in collecting scientifically usable specimens. The professional biologists, meanwhile, wished to distance their practices and professional credibility from that of amateurs by way of advanced degrees and their emphasis on research and experimentation, over simple observation. Yet these disparate groups had to be made to cooperate somehow without undermining either's sense of self-worth or identity. How could such diverse groups be brought into alignment?

The authors show how museum leaders used California as a *boundary object* to facilitate the cooperation between scientists and amateurs. A boundary object is an entity that exists on the boundary between groups and enables them to work together without erasing their respective aims[2]. Boundary objects are effective precisely because they are abstract and loosely defined, which enables diverse groups to see their interests and values articulated within it. In the case of the MVZ, both groups were oriented towards California as a special place, proudly distinct from the American east coast, whose nature needed to be preserved through collection. Moreover, museum management also developed standardized procedures that amateurs could follow which enabled them to collect usable specimens, but without interfering in what amateurs found most pleasurable about their activities. The place of California, as a boundary object, was "fuzzy" enough for each group to enjoy autonomy and preserve the dignity of their differences, while standard procedures provided a shared language for communication.

2 For instructive discussions of boundary objects, see Bowker et al. (2016), Star (1989), Star and Ruhleder (1994), and Trompette and Vinck (2009). For previous applications of the concept to the world of books, see Worrall (2015).

The boundary object concept hinges on an ecological perspective of knowledge-making. Rather than focusing on individuals, this analytical frame considers the interconnected web of objects, actors, and practices implied in a situation. Crucially, there is no *a priori* presumption that one group of actors (scientists) is more correct or primary than another (amateurs). Nor is this a privileged concern. Instead, the ecological approach takes a wider lens to consider how the combined efforts and relations between multiple groups enable the functioning of a larger ecosystem—which they do in book reviewing, just as they did at the museum. The benefit of an ecological view on reviewing is that it takes into account points of symbiosis. For instance, moving beyond purity tests about what constitutes "real" reviewing, it becomes apparent that the varying impact of reviews across different genres supports the well-being of the literary ecosystem overall. This is manifested in Bookstagram reviews driving interest in older titles, particularly among younger readers, or Goodreads promoting books from genres and writers that traditional review outlets may ignore. An ecological lens also provokes questions about the environment inhabited by reviewers: such as, how do all these would-be reviewers get hold of books in the first place? Publicists are keen to gain reviews on *any* platform, which supports the natural diversity—that is, social differentiation—of the review ecosystem.

The boundary object uniting all these groups is the book review as a genus of discourse. Such a view is fruitful because it underscores coordination among groups of reviewers with different values, beliefs, and goals guiding their reviews. It can also draw attention to situations where the boundary object may facilitate contention rather than collaboration. How has the ecosystem become unbalanced? What, or who, is polluting it?

Recently, some non-professional reviewers have been physically stalked and assaulted by disgruntled authors (Hathaway 2015; McAnally and McLelland 2015; Vij 2023). While professional reviewers must also deal with retribution, this is usually on a more social or intellectual level. This points to the relative vulnerability of some people who write or speak about books and how that is likely chilling, and certainly coarsening, book discourse. Some particularly vulnerable reviewers and authors have been targeted because of their social identities and the topics they cover—racism, women's issues, etc. (McClusky 2021; Sobieraj 2020). Sometimes, authors buy reviews, while in other cases, angry readers inundate unfavored authors' books with negative reviews ("review bombing") (McClusky 2021). Such distortions violate the whole idea of free discussion and exchange of ideas—yet their impact can only be appreciated if the system as a

whole is considered. How does the digital environment change what reviewers write or the evaluative frames they use? How can critics engage audiences when there are so many opinions out there, misinformation is rife, and no one knows quite whom to trust?

What is a Book Review?

At the highest level, a book review is discourse produced around determining the value of a book—but beyond such abstraction, it is difficult to find a definition upon which either readers or reviewers would agree. A book could have value as art or entertainment, based on political or artistic grounds, in relation to other books on the same topic, previous books by the same author, or against the yardstick of literary history. A review can explore these dimensions by offering recommendations or conducting thematic interrogation, in long or short form, "online" or in print. It can be a snap verdict on the latest espionage thriller or a measured reappraisal of Dostoevsky.

The open-ended nature of reviews can be seen as a form of epistemic and institutional uncertainty. While this translates into a potential vulnerability for professional reviewers, it also confirms the status of the review as a viable and effective boundary object. The flexibility of the idea of reviewing gives those who write them maximal autonomy. The different types of discourse created as a result situate reading, and its societal value or role, in different scales, registers, or contexts. The resulting variety is best understood as genres of book reviewing, rather than types of reviewers—just as the reductive essentializing of certain "types" of readers should be avoided. The boundary-object perspective points to book reviewing as a means of collaborating in the service of a greater aim: to articulate the value of books in our lives. And while the literary academic may proclaim the value of books in Life with a capital "L," a Bookstagrammer may see them as a more intimate part of their own lower-case "life."

Considering reviewers as part of different social worlds opens up the question of how events in book reviewing may also be implicated in wider issues or as cases of more general social processes. For instance, including everyday readers in the scope of book criticism helps subvert any claims about the separation of art from life. Activities such as reading are often viewed as a rarified form of recreation—a means of escapism (in the case of popular fiction) or intellectual navel-gazing (in the case of literary fiction). Yet, efforts to ban books that reoccur throughout history, most recently banning books in schools

in Florida and elsewhere (Gans 2023; Walker 2023) show that books *do* matter in "real life"—indeed, it is impossible to separate the two. Reviews situate books at the heart of life as it is lived.

This article draws on new research to argue for a more collective and ecological view of book reviewing. Such a perspective opens up new research questions beyond the competition perspective that dominated around the 2010s. It helps keep analytical frameworks flexible and it highlights some of the political stakes at play. It highlights the world of book reviewing as more socially differentiated than previously thought. Last but not least, it reveals all the ways in which books matter in our lives.

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