

THE DUMBING DOWN OF LITERATURE

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Abstract: *This paper proposes to prove that in the late 20th and early 21st century commodification, commercialization and consumerism have, so to say, joined forces and led to a decrease in high literature and the increase of cheap volumes which are of low quality but in high demand.*

Keywords: *commercialization, commodification, consumerism, high-quality literature, low literature.*

1. Introduction

In order to celebrate the 90th anniversary of the first presentation of the Nobel Prize for Literature, the Nobel foundation and the Swedish Academy organized a symposium on the topic of “The situation of high-quality literature in the harsh cultural climate of today”, which took place in Stockholm from December 5th to December 8th, 1991. Two years later, they published the proceedings containing some of the papers presented at the jubilee symposium, with the title *The Situation of High-Quality Literature* (Allen 1993). Several of the distinguished scholars who presented their papers during the event gave them titles which included the phrase ‘difficult literature’ with the meaning of ‘high-quality literature’, as opposed to ‘easy literature’ – also called ‘low literature’.

Explaining the difference between difficult and easy literature, in her paper “The Role of Visual Media”, Jean d’Ormesson (1993:107) claims the following: “In some way, I think we could say that every piece of good literature is difficult literature. Why? Because easy literature is by definition a literature of commonplaces. If you have something new to say it is necessarily difficult.” As for the ways to distinguish a good writer from a bad writer, she asserts that: “[T]he bad writer wants his readers immediately. The good writer accepts the fact that the readers come later on.” (Ormesson 1993:109)

In his essay “The Other Voice”, in the same volume, Octavio Paz (1993:91) discusses different phases through which literature has gone as history progressed, and the dangers it has encountered so far:

Today literature and the arts are exposed to a different danger: they are threatened not by a doctrine or a political party but by a faceless, soulless, and directionless economic process. The market is circular, impersonal, impartial, inflexible. Some will tell me that this is as it should be. Perhaps. But the market, blind and deaf, is not fond of literature or of risk, and it does not know how to choose. Its censorship is not ideological: it has no ideas. ... It is impossible to fight, I know, against the market economy, or to deny its benefits.

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In the course of more than twenty years spent in thorough investigation of the reception of British novelists in Serbia, I could not fail but notice some rules and track down certain more than evident changes in the developments in that sphere. One of them is a peculiar shift from copious reception of high-class works almost a hundred years ago towards a flood of low-quality translations and reviews regarding some marginal authors at the turn of the century. The results of the research conducted for the purpose of writing my Ph.D. thesis were published in my monograph *Echoes of the English Novel: Modern English Novel in Serbo-Croatian Criticism* in 2006, as well as in this journal in 2007.

2. What Makes an Author Marginal or High-class

One of my ex-compatriots, a writer and critic – Dubravka Ugresic (2003:4) rightly claims in her book entitled *Thank You for Not Reading: Essays on Literary Trivia* that “producing books does not quite mean producing literature”. If we equate the process of *producing* books with the process of *publishing* them, then we can go back to what Titus Maccius Plautus, the greatest Roman playwright, said about this activity. His claim is that to publish something – where we have to bear in mind that the verb *to publish* stems from Latin *publicare*, which meant “to put to anonymous disposal in public” (Ilic 1980:175) –, and especially to publish something exclusively for commercial purposes, represents for the author a certain kind of *prostitution*. The reason for this, according to Plautus, is that a literary work, or even any work of art in general, is a very private and personal thing, so by disclosing it to the broad public, its author cedes to a certain degree a part of his or her own experience to an unknown new owner, in line with the all-pervading processes of commodification, commercialization and consumerism – and this is the same thing that happens in *the world's oldest trade* (cf. Ilic 1980:175). Astonishingly, one of the greatest science fiction writers ever, Stanislaw Lem, uses the same kind of lingo when he speaks about SF:

Without a doubt there is a difference between science fiction and all the neighboring, often closely related, types of trivial literature. It is *a whore*, but quite a bashful one at that; moreover, a whore with an angel face. *It prostitutes itself*, but [...] with discomfort, disgust, and contrary to its dreams and hopes. (Lem 1984:57, emphasis added)

The proof that Plautus rightly predicted what would happen two thousand years later is easily found everywhere around us. On the current literary market, says Stanislaw Lem (1984:53), there exists “only one index of quality: the measure of the sales figures of the books”. However, Ugresic (2003:109) emphasizes that *literary values* cannot be measured by the numbers of sold books because – as Octavio Paz (1993:91) informs us – “the market ... knows all about prices but nothing about values”. Then again, it remains true that nowadays books *are* being published exclusively for commercial purposes. Furthermore, Ugresic (2003:145) reveals to her readers that to some extent books are even being written, that is, produced in such a way as to be saleable: “The literary market does not tolerate the old-fashioned idea of a work of art as a unique, unrepeatable, deeply individual artistic act. In the literary industry, writers are obedient workers, just a link in the chain of production”. Even the literary works which may still be classified as ‘high literature’ are nonetheless produced with only one eye casually cast at their academic value, and the other one widely and intensely staring at the profit. Not to mention those qualified as ‘low literature’, sometimes called *trivial*, which in its sense of “banal, commonplace, ordinary, trifling” (Kipfer 2002:633) almost equals *vulgar* – and that is another proof that Plautus was definitely right

when he associated publishing with *prostitution*, since trivial literature is frequently described as something belonging to ‘the Aesthetics of Vulgarity’.

In *The Situation of High-Quality Literature*, Jean d’Ormesson (1993:110) calls attention to the fact “that today the book is a product and that literature has become a section of marketing”. How did all this come about and why/when was literary production commercialized to such an extent? Let us examine the genesis of what is commonly known as ‘trivial literature’. Two other concepts most often related to ‘low literature’ are Kitsch and Schund, but it is also frequently called mass, popular, or pulp fiction. The term ‘trivial’ itself was used for the first time in 1923 (Saksida 1994:212) to describe low-quality literary production in Germany – as it was named: *a literature of entertainment* (opposed to the so-called *Hoch-literatur*), which was even penalized at that time. However, the origins of ‘low literature’ go much farther in the past. Commercialization of literary production was the result of literary works being converted into *articles* on the market, thus making the writers dependent on their sales, especially after the printing process and paper production became much cheaper, which largely influenced the costs of publishing and made books available to less learned recipients from the middle and lower class, with the result of creating mass cultural production and ‘literary consumerism’. The undisputed link between mass production and consumerism is also emphasized by Lem (1984:52), who claims that “a reader of trivial literature behaves just like the consumer of mass products”.

The authors of *The Novel in Europe 1670-1730: Market Observations*, Olaf Simons and Anton Kirchhofer (2001:1) remark that the early 18th century literary market was already characterized by a “division leading to the high market of literature and the low market of trivial literature”, or what they call in other words: ‘market of low productions’ or even just simply: ‘low market’. Noting that the latter “hardly deserved the term ‘literature’” (Simons and Kirchhofer 2001:2), the authors explain how and when such a division was created: “The moment we – those who talk and write about literature as literary historians and literary critics – entered the game and demanded a better production of novels to be written, we created the bad market to be ignored by us” (Simons and Kirchhofer 2001:3). According to them, what happened at that time was that “[t]he realm of high literature was created by the secondary discourses focusing on the central production” (Simons and Kirchhofer 2001:3), i.e. literary production branched into two separate streams: high literature – which stands for literary prose fiction encompassing such works of literature that “demand the attention of the secondary discourses” (Simons and Kirchhofer 2001:4), and trivial or low literature – which is “not promoted by the critical discourse” (Simons and Kirchhofer 2001:5). The places where the volumes belonging to the latter category can be easily found are “[b]ook-stacks in modern train stations” (Simons and Kirchhofer 2001:4), which offer the following five categories of low literary works: sex and crime, history and romance, adventure, espionage and conspiracy, add the authors of this theoretical work, while Stanislaw Lem (1984:213) mentions that what he calls popular or mass literature, includes “detective stories, slushy love stories, science fiction, etc.” Lem (1984:47) labels these two types of fiction as “the ‘Lower Realm,’ or Realm of Trivial Literature, and the ‘Upper Realm,’ or Realm of Mainstream Literature”, on this occasion specifying that “to the Lower Realm belong the crime novel, the Western, the pseudo-historical novel, the sports novel, and the erotico-sentimental stories”.

3. The Difference between Commercial and Difficult Literature

Having made the above-explained division according to the existence or absence of the secondary discourse, the authors of *The Novel in Europe* offer another factor which is crucial when differentiating between low and high literature, claiming that the former fails to

“aim at anything higher, at art or the improvement of manners” (Simons and Kirchhofer 2001:6). Then follows a nice comparison which comprises the parallel situation in other spheres of creative activities, namely the arts, music and journalism:

We divided art into a prestigious performance analysed at universities, presented at exhibitions and gaining tremendous prices on the art-market. The commercial production lives on in a wide stratification from kitsch on the lowest level to pop art and design in the higher levels of the mass market. Music finds its own stratification ranging from pop music to serious, classical music. Again a field of secondary discourses offers the categories. The field of journalism developed a system of levels from meanest tabloids to most prestigious quality papers. (Simons and Kirchhofer 2001:6)

This comparison helps to highlight another parallel – the distinction between high and low literature can be made just as in the field of movies, music and other arts! For instance, nobody raises the question of making a difference between high-quality and low, i.e. commercial, paintings. On the other hand, high literature may be compared with haute couture, and low literature with ready-made clothes. Translated to French the latter phrase becomes *prêt-à-porter* = ready to be worn – in other words, something that is convenient, necessitating no effort for either purchasing or consumption. Besides extremely good marketing and advertising, the sales of low-literature works have marked such huge success precisely because they are:

1) *easy to read*: unlike high-literature works which demand a certain amount of effort to be put in by their readers, and are therefore frequently called ‘difficult literature’;

2) *fun*: low literature is often named *pink*, because it is easy-going, happy, offering pure pleasure, while highbrow literature is thought to be unavoidably incomprehensible, melancholic, and no fun;

3) *far from reality*: having browsed numerous works on this topic, I have come upon the following attributes: artificial, fake, simplified, idealized, illusory, and deceptive; while Stanislaw Lem asserts that “American writers [...] find allies in the book buyers, who have become used to an easily digestible, sensationalistic literature that pretends to be science fantasy. Yet *the fairy-tale nature* of this ‘fantasy’ is obvious.” (Lem 1984:250, emphasis added);

and

4) *shocking*: as just mentioned above, it is *sensationalistic*, whereas its purpose is to shock the readers and to excite the market (Ugresic 2003:57).

According to the authors of *The Novel in Europe*, such a situation in the world’s market-oriented literary production continued “as long as readers wanted to read such works” (Simons and Kirchhofer 2001:3), and the trend will go on in the future as well, with the only one aim of publishers and writers fulfilled by so *successful* (in the terms of marketing and not regarding its real values) literary output, which is “to make money” (Ugresic 2003:29). And this claim, Ugresic (2003:230) notes, is confirmed by the fact that the book market of our contemporary world has become “dominated by the laws of supply and demand”. Within the framework of the “mass cultural creation which follows economic laws, obeys the criteria of industrial and serial production and fits into market values” (Bozilovic 2006:153), it is evident that the price of a genuine work of art is not adequately correlated with its real value. However, adds the Serbian author: “a high art work, regardless of its economic price or market value, cannot essentially lose what is immanent to it – the ontological quality” (Bozilovic 2006:156, my translation). On the other hand, it is also true that “trivia has swamped contemporary literary life and become, it seems, more important than the books” (Ugresic 2003:2). Trivia, trivial literature, low literature – or in other words, what Ugresic (2003:165) calls “the imitation of literature instead of literature”. Nowadays it has become

virtually impossible to distinguish between a high and a low work, so: “The contemporary writer who aspires to the category of so-called high literature is confused by the absence of a value system,” assesses Ugresic (2003:206), explaining the reasons for such a phenomenon: “Thirty years ago, the boundary between ‘high’ and ‘low’ literature still existed, and everyone was satisfied. High literature had its admirers, trivial literature did too. The polite old lady, high literature, was the first to offer her hand to trivial literature.” (Ugresic 2003:203) What has happened in the meantime, however, she adds (2003:204), is that “trivial literature has also mutated and gradually laid claim to the exclusive realm of high literature. Just as high literature played with the strategies of trivial literature, trivial literature decorates itself with the honours of high literature.” Wolfgang Beutin (2005:439) in his *History of German Literature* alleges that market forces were exactly the factor that in general “led to a levelling process between what was held to be ‘higher’ literature and trivial literature”, though he also adds that “serialised fiction in editions of millions, flooded the market with cheap trivial literature” (Beutin 2005:439).

On the extreme opposite end of this opinion stands what Carmen Callil and Colm Toibin (1999:xii) – who made the choice of *The 200 best novels in English since 1950* in their book *The Modern Library* – underline as one of their basic principles while carrying out that task:

we were as one in our determination to ignore the distinction between so-called popular fiction and literary fiction (also so-called). This false distinction which is prevalent in literary prizes, in academia and in our educational mores, has been responsible for the treacherous suggestion that reading is a chore, and that the best writing is always difficult and obscure.

Having said this in their “Introduction”, the two authors end their exquisite volume by providing a 33-page-long list of literary prize-winners (cf. Callil and Toibin 1999:214-246), including the winners of the Booker Prize, CNA Award, Commonwealth Prize, Prix Femina, Prix Medicis, Whitbread and of course, the inevitable Nobel Prize for Literature.

In the midst of these two opposing opinions, where could the truth be found about whether there are really differences between high and low literature, and how to determine what makes an author marginal or high-class? I think we’d better turn to an all-time authority – Arnold Bennett, whose book *Literary Taste* was first published more than a century ago – as early as 1909. Bennett (Chapter I) differentiates between two roles that literature plays in the lives of those who read, and thus between two types of readers:

People who regard literary taste simply as an accomplishment, and literature simply as a distraction, will never truly succeed either in acquiring the accomplishment or in using it half-acquired as a distraction; though the one is the most perfect of distractions, and though the other is unsurpassed by any other accomplishment in elegance or in power to impress the universal snobbery of civilised mankind. Literature, instead of being an accessory, is the fundamental *sine qua non* of complete living. (Bennett 1909, Chapter I)

Therefore, those really interested in literature should not regard it only as a pastime, but a very serious part of their lives, which means that the choice of their reading list items should be made extremely carefully:

The aim of literary study is not to amuse the hours of leisure; it is to awake oneself, it is to be alive, to intensify one's capacity for pleasure, for sympathy, and for comprehension. It is not to affect one hour, but twenty-four hours. It is to change utterly one's relations with the world. An understanding appreciation of literature means an understanding appreciation of the world, and it means nothing else. Not isolated and unconnected parts of life, but all of life, brought together and correlated in a synthetic

map! The spirit of literature is unifying; it joins the candle and the star, and by the magic of an image shows that the beauty of the greater is in the less. (Bennett 1909, Chapter I)

Stressing the potential of literature to enforce *moral wisdom*, he adds that the oeuvre of a real first-class author can be recognized by the fact that critical authority has granted *the imprimatur* upon that particular work of fiction (Bennett 1909, Chapter II); however, despite his best efforts, he admits to having failed to define the specific characteristics of such literary works:

What are the qualities in a book which give keen and lasting pleasure to the passionate few? This is a question so difficult that it has never yet been completely answered. You may talk lightly about truth, insight, knowledge, wisdom, humour, and beauty. But these comfortable words do not really carry you very far, for each of them has to be defined, especially the first and last. It is all very well for Keats in his airy manner to assert that beauty is truth, truth beauty, and that that is all he knows or needs to know. I, for one, need to know a lot more. And I never shall know. (Bennett 1909, Chapter III)

On the other hand, Bennett (1909, Chapter III) is rather confident when it comes to the reasons why certain works survive as classics:

A classic is a work which gives pleasure to the minority which is intensely and permanently interested in literature. It lives on because the minority, eager to renew the sensation of pleasure, is eternally curious and is therefore engaged in an eternal process of rediscovery. A classic does not survive for any ethical reason. It does not survive because it conforms to certain canons, or because neglect would not kill it. It survives because it is a source of pleasure, and because the passionate few can no more neglect it than a bee can neglect a flower.

Or, as Susan Bassnett (1998:134) asserts in *Constructing Cultures*: “The idea of a literary canon is premised upon the universal greatness of key writers, whose works transcend time and offer, as Leavis puts it, ‘the finest human experience of the past’.”

In his effort to make a distinction between high and low literature, which he calls “to sift the wheat from the chaff”, Bennett (1909, Chapter XIV) describes the works belonging to high literature in this way:

Great books do not spring from something accidental in the great men who wrote them. They are the effluence of their very core, the expression of the life itself of the authors. And literature cannot be said to have served its true purpose until it has been translated into the actual life of him who reads. It does not succeed until it becomes the vehicle of the vital. Progress is the gradual result of the unending battle between human reason and human instinct, in which the former slowly but surely wins. The most powerful engine in this battle is literature. It is the vast reservoir of true ideas and high emotions--and life is constituted of ideas and emotions.

On the opposite end, Bennett (1909, Chapter XIV) adds this illustrative description of the aims of low literature: “Of course, literature has a minor function, that of passing the time in an agreeable and harmless fashion, by giving momentary faint pleasure.”

4. Conclusion

The basis of this paper has been Stanislaw Lem’s (1984:212) famous statement that “whereas there do not exist any good organisms as distinguished from bad ones, there do exist good and worthless books”. In *The Situation of High-Quality Literature* (Allen 1993), the authors use the following terms: ‘difficult literature’ with the meaning of ‘high-quality literature’ – or, in Lem’s words, ‘good books’; as opposed to ‘easy literature’, also called ‘low literature’ – which Lem calls ‘worthless books’. The link between these terms can be found in

the following explanation: “every piece of good literature is difficult literature. Why? Because easy literature is by definition a literature of commonplaces. If you have something new to say it is necessarily difficult.” (Ormesson 1993:107)

One of the reasons for dumbing down literature is the rapid expansion of the mass market paperback during the second half of the twentieth century. Upon the revolution in publishing and printing, a book has become an article, the same as any other, and the value of every book is determined by the market, on the basis of what sells well. This ‘commodification of literature’ has been additionally boosted by the progress in marketing, advertising and selling methods, which resulted in commercialization of not only low literature but high-quality works as well, facilitated on the other side by the all-pervading process of consumerism which marked the late twentieth century in all domains. Thus, commodification, commercialization and consumerism have, so to say, joined forces to bring about the fall of high literature and the rise of cheap volumes, which are of low quality but in high demand.

But over and above all this, the most important reason which has led to the flood of low-quality writing in recent years, not only in Serbia but in other countries too, regards the financial motives of publishers who try to earn more by paying less, usually to marginal writers. There is nobody else to blame more for making wrong decisions about which literary works to produce and distribute but the publisher himself, who – though he may be assisted by experts or counsellors – is the person bearing the final responsibility for the moral, commercial and aesthetic impact of the output on the readers (cf. Ilic 1980:176).

In the proceedings of *The Situation of High-Quality Literature* symposium, Agneta Markas (1993:77) reports that a similar situation is evident in all Central European countries:

In Hungary and Czechoslovakia, as well as in Poland, new small publishing houses are sprouting up like mushrooms – in Hungary alone, five hundred new publishers are said to have been established in the last two years, undoubtedly in order to earn a lot of quick money on pornography and other junk literature, literature that has been forbidden in the past. One can, of course, hope that this is a temporary phase through which these countries must pass in order gradually to achieve a more reasonable balance between serious and commercial publishing. In contrast to commercial publishing, difficult literature with a narrow appeal requires special efforts and support in various forms.

It only remains to be hoped that such a tendency regarding the publishing of serious/difficult/high-quality literature will be curbed into the opposite direction in the future, and that such literary works will receive the necessary support, which they obviously deserve.

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