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RESEARCH PUBLICATION

# Egalitarian Criticism

## How Norwegian Literary Critics Conceive and Communicate Quality

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### ABSTRACT

This article investigates how literary criticism as a traditional elite undertaking is acted out in an egalitarian culture. The main focus lies on how book reviewers understand their task as a more or less professional quality assessment, and how they communicate their conceptions of quality through aesthetic judgments in the public sphere. The article uses in-depth interviews with book reviewers from the largest Norwegian newspapers as empirical data, and aims at demystifying the concept of quality – which often avoids definition – by looking at how it is defined in a continuous, everyday setting. A key finding is that while political ideology used be a symbolic boundary between reviewers, it is today nowhere to be seen. Surprisingly, given the reputed autonomy of criticism, this correlates with diminishing political party ownership over newspapers.

### Keywords

Critics | reviewers | quality | aesthetic judgment | evaluation | literary criticism | sociology of literature | elite

### INTRODUCTION

“One should be careful about assuming public acceptance of one’s personal judgments”, the Norwegian poet Olav H. Hauge (2011: 41) warns in an entry in his diary from June 1944.<sup>1</sup> It is the beginning of an essayistic passage on preferences, taste and conceptions of quality in fiction literature, which also is the topic of this article. In particular, the question of how aesthetic judgments are embedded in culture, and how aesthetic judgments are communicated publicly, will be central. Hauge also cautions that one should “be careful about casting judgments”, a common temptation originating from everyday situations where one disagrees about quality. He continues by describing Baudelaire and Wilde as “better poets” than popular reading but at the same time reminding the

1. All translations is by the author, from Norwegian to English.

reader that engaging with “high culture” comes with a loss. The firm grip of the farmer’s linguistic tools is out of reach for the “aesthete”. This paper explores how these kinds of aesthetic judgements are made and communicated in the public sphere in Norway through the continuous, everyday work of book reviewers.

Aesthetic judgments contribute to the establishment of cultural hierarchies, and by casting them, one draws symbolic boundaries. Symbolic boundaries are seldom only a reflection of individual taste. How they correlate with, or make use of, background variables such as social class, gender or ethnicity has been widely debated academically over the last 20 years (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, Løvgren & Orupabo, 2018). In a Bourdieusian theoretical framework, it is claimed that the middle class(es) exert symbolic boundaries against lower classes – where the lower classes wield a “taste for necessity”, those above display a “taste for freedom”. In Norway, this has been especially widely debated given the extensive welfare state policies and reputedly egalitarian culture. Several studies claimed that the middle class do not in fact distinguish themselves from lower classes. This was explained by the exceptional egalitarian culture in Norway. On the contrary, one could talk about a “popular symbolic power” (Skarpenes 2007), where the middle classes appeal to popular culture instead of claiming to define cultural quality themselves. This is often contrasted with the case of France, where the middle class, according to Bourdieu’s (1995) analysis, exert symbolic power over lower classes (Skarpenes 2007, Fagerheim 2006). A hypothesis that sought to explain this, could assert that those in elite positions in Norway are dependent upon appealing to egalitarian values and symbols in order to legitimize their position and/or their actions (Mangset and Andersen 2007). Olav H. Hauge is, as such, a telling example of Norwegian culture. He was well-read in classic and international literature, but grounded in Norwegian culture, and therefore a poet that few will protest is better than other poets<sup>2</sup>.

In this article, symbolic boundary work by a specific group within the literary field in Norway, namely critics<sup>3</sup>, is analysed, based on interviews with a selection of members of the Norwegian Association of Critics, the *Kritikerlaget*. Book reviewing in print newspapers is understood as being challenged in recent years by the increase in Internet-based criticism (Nørgaard Kristensen and From, 2015). *Kritikerlaget* mainly organizes book reviewers working in print newspapers, and works to maintain their traditionally strong position there. However, recent research shows that the inclusion of new types of criticism does not necessarily imply the exclusion of traditional expert criticism (Roberge, 2011, Verboord, 2010, Strand, 2014, for instance). *Kritikerlaget* is chosen because they represent traditional expert criticism, are in a position between “academia, journalism and art” (*Kritikerlaget* 2012), and their influ-

2. For instance when NRK (2016) had a competition to rank the best Norwegian poems, Olav H. Hauge won. This is only meant as a brief illustration, and not as a thorough analysis, but the position of Olav H. Hauge is well worth a sociological study.
3. As Philippa K. Chong (2015) I use the terms critics and reviewers interchangeably.

ence on conceptions of quality among the general public. As Hylland (2012) asserts, “the very concept of quality and the process of evaluating it, constitutes a basic principle for cultural policy”. Reviewers, consultants and prize committees all struggle with separating the good from the bad (Hylland, 2012). The question of cultural quality might be especially controversial in an egalitarian culture<sup>4</sup> such as Norway, which has a unique literary policy where “most of the national fiction literature” (Engelstad, Larsen & Rogstad, 2017: 59) is bought by the Arts Council and sent to the public libraries across the entire country. Another indicator of the relevance of the question for cultural policy is Arts Council Norway’s big research program on this issue running from 2014 to 2018 (Eliassen & Prytz, 2016, Hovden & Prytz, 2018, Eliassen, Hovden & Prytz 2018, Prytz, 2018). The preferences of, and judgments by, critics nonetheless influence which books are being borrowed, read and bought. The research question of this article is:

– How do literary critics legitimize cultural judgments and hierarchies in an egalitarian culture?

The long history of literary criticism in Norway (Furuseth, Thon & Vassenden, 2016) makes it unprecedented compared with criticism in other art forms. Skarpenes (2007a, 2008) also explicitly points at the cultural sector and the cultural elite – the putative home of criticism – as spaces in Norway where it might be legitimate to rank cultural products after certain criteria. The selection from *Kritikerlaget* can be considered an elite, or at least members of a historical elite institution, and definitively in the cultural sector. Khan (2012: 362) points out that the concept of elite is notoriously difficult to pin down, but defines it nonetheless as those with “control over and access to a resource”. It thus has to do with power and access, and in the case of reviewers, with access to writing in public newspapers as well as the power to define quality. In this article elite is not used as a characteristic for single individuals, but as a hallmark of institutions that outlast individual lives. As Laura Miller (2006) notes, defence of literary culture and independent bookstores culturally connotes “eliteness”. Sub-questions that follow the overall research questions are therefore: Is it possible that there is an aversion to ranking cultural products hierarchically even in these groups? Moreover, if so, can this be understood as an aversion to ranking people based on their cultural preferences? In general, how does Norway’s egalitarian culture influence the practice of literary critics?

## THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF BOOK REVIEWING

Literary criticism has existed in Norway since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and has always held its place in the newspapers. *Norsk litteraturkritikks historie* (Beyer and Moi 1990, Linneberg 1990) describes the establishment and development of

4. By an egalitarian culture I refer to the descriptions by Witoszek (1997), Slagstad (2001), Ytreberg (2004) and Fagerberg (2006), as well as Gullestad’s thesis about a Norwegian egalitarian culture.

Norwegian literary criticism from 1770-1940, and the aforementioned project (Furuseth, Thon & Vassenden, 2016) analyzed the development up until 2008. As with most texts about literary criticism they start with the question of what it is (Imerslund 1970, Forser 2002, Bjerck Hagen 2004, Høghaug 2009, Jul-Larsen 2010, Tenningen 2012 or Furuseth 2013). Jul-Larsen (2010: 64) quickly deals with it by describing literary criticism as “texts about literature written by literary critics”, and then defines a literary critic as “one of those who writes literary criticism”. With this opening, he shows the difficulty of arriving at a final definition, and chooses a more pragmatic way of defining it where he points out what is typical for the kind of texts he analyzes. Literary criticism can take the form of a critique of society, and can encompass all kinds of texts about literature written for nearly any kind of publication: “papers, magazines and journals; radio and TV, as well as commercial and idealistic webpages – these are “places”, old and new, which today are spaces for literary criticism.” This is something, writes Høghaug (2009: 93), “we can agree upon”. But Høghaug also problematizes this understanding of criticism because there are other “places” as well: “Where does literary criticism take place? In the papers, we say, in the journals, on the Internet. But also, and this shouldn’t come as a surprise: in the novels” (Høghaug 2009: 103). In this article, literary criticism is, for practical reasons, defined more narrowly – as texts about literature with an intention of assessing quality which are published in Norwegian newspapers. The most important defining characteristic for a reviewer is credibility (Blank, 2007), and the definition here ensures credible reviewers.<sup>5</sup> Typical for this kind of text is that it sets out to explain whether a book is of good or bad quality.

The academic study of criticism often follows the traditional separation in cultural sociology between the sphere of creation, the sphere of production and the sphere of consumption (Childress, 2017). In this separation, critics become “cultural intermediaries” who bridge the sphere of production and the sphere of consumption. To some degree, the book reviewer can be considered the first consumer, and thus potentially influencing the rest of the consumption. In reality, the logic is not so straightforward, and the consumption might just as well be the opposite of the reviewer’s judgments. Still, the attention of newspaper critics is decisive and necessary in the beginning for authors who aim at being consecrated (Chong, 2015, Bourdieu, 1993, van Rees, 1983, Halvorsen, forthcoming). Childress (2017), however, calls for a more holistic approach to understanding culture, beyond the traditional focus on creation, production or reception. An attempt to research the “intermediaries”, such as book reviewers or literary agents, who link these spheres also provides us new insights into how, in this case, literature enters status hierarchies.

In Norway there is one single sociological study of literary critics, written by Sigurd Skirbekk in 1972. He found that critics and schoolteachers share the

5. However, credibility as a reviewer seems to be more and more achievable without connection to traditional media organizations such as newspapers, and Blank (2007) provides an interesting starting point for how to bring this together in a “sociology of reviews”.

same view of literature as a driving force in the development of society, something I interpret as a potential for them to belong to the same sphere of values. By that I mean that they take part in the egalitarian culture and share a resistance toward ranking cultural products, as described by Skarpenes (2007a).

### LITERARY CRITICS IN NORWAY

Both the critic and the author are often considered free intellectuals, ascribed a freedom frequently applied to literature as such and its public role. By reading literature, we engage in an open dialogue about a subject that is, in principle, open to everybody. In Norway the public libraries are an obvious instance of this normative and democratic view of literature as something that should be open to everybody. It can also be viewed as a meritocratic principle, which is a system where you are recognized based on your knowledge and skills, in contrast to a system where you are recognized based on your heritage or other grounds. This makes it possible for everyone, or nearly everyone, to achieve knowledge, and through that, maybe, autonomy on specific areas. “The Cultural Backpack” is also a public initiative for a policy toward the democratization of culture (Mangset 2012).

Despite an active policy to democratize culture in Norway there have been, and still are, great differences when it comes to what is being read by whom, how it is being read and how it is valued (Mangset 2012). Erik Bjerck Hagen (2012: 195), professor of comparative literature at the University of Bergen, wonders if it is at all possible not to develop preferences toward what is good and what is bad if one has an interest in literature. At the same time, readers can be perceived as consumers, who instead of cultivating preferences are focused on enjoying literature as a leisure activity. Habermas (2002) specifically places the literary critic and literary criticism in an important historical position for the development of the public sphere. At the same time, the critic is subject to constantly changing circumstances, and does not have a clear job description or template for how to locate quality. Author and former leader of *Kritikerlaget*, Leif Høghaug (2009: 97), describes the work of literary criticism as to “travel the waters of fictional writing”.

The analysis in this article shows how the critics describe their own work, and makes a separation into three ideal types of critics. In search of a legitimate culture among literary critics, the empirical material pointed to their disparate ways of relating to Norwegian culture. Therefore one can say that there is no one single legitimate culture among literary critics, but rather three different ways of relating literary criticism to culture structures in Norway. The ideal types show how the interviewees describe their profession, how they legitimize aesthetic judgments and how they communicate them. First, I will give a short historical account of literary criticism in Norway, as a background for the analysis. Then the ideal types are described with backing from the empirical material.

## The study

The research question indicates interview as a method, because it asks how the critics talk about their practice. Interviews are advantageous in studying assessments of quality since they provide an opportunity to reflect on the process, which is not observable in the published reviews (Chong, 2015). Kritikerlaget is divided into three parts: (1) art, (2) theatre, music and dance, and (3) literature. Through Kritikerlaget I sent an open invitation by email to their members of the literature section, and eight people responded with an interest to participate in the project. The sample is, in other words, for the most part self-selected. The additional three interviews comprise one that was initially a pilot interview, and two recommended by the original sample. Despite being self-selected, which runs the risk of getting an unbalanced selection, the interviewees come from many different newspapers: *Klassekampen*, *Morgenbladet*, *Dag og tid*, *Dagbladet* (2), *Fædrelandsvennen*, *Adresseavisen*, *Bergens Tidende*, *NRK*, *Varden* and one freelancer. All the interviewees gave their consent to be quoted by the names of the newspapers. The interviews lasted from one to three hours. They took place at different locations, such as the home of the interviewee (3), the office (2), cafés (5) and by telephone (1), and covered a wide range of topics regarding criticism and Norwegian culture. The interviews were then transcribed and coded with help from the programs, HyperTranscribe and HyperResearch, before a thorough analysis by the author.

In the vein of the sociology of critique (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006) the actors' own claims were analysed. Interviews are particularly good for bringing forth information about what actors perceive as legitimate answers, and what cultural context they place themselves in (Pugh, 2013). The analysis is therefore done by looking closely at the arguments made by the book reviewers. If they used the amount of books sold as a quality criteria this was coded, and if they used the rumor or 'buzz' surrounding an author or book as a quality criteria it was also coded. However, most of the interviewees were hesitant toward demarcating clear categories, and often mentioned several relevant ones, but none that were applicable for all. The answers nonetheless provided information on where they directed their attention – toward specialized readers, common readers or writers – and this provided the basis for development of the ideal types.

## A SHORT HISTORY OF LITERARY CRITICISM IN NORWAY

The Norwegian history of literary criticism was started in the political entity Denmark-Norway by Norwegian critics writing for Danish newspapers. The first daily newspaper in Norway, *Morgenbladet*, appeared on January 1, 1819. It contained a generous space for literature and criticism – for instance an “aesthetic supplement” on Sundays (Beyer and Moi 1990). Andreassen (2006: 404) traces the birth of Norwegian literary criticism to the 1840s, based on two specific events: the establishing of *Norsk Tidsskrift for Videnskab og Literatur* in 1847 and the first collection of literary essays, *Forsøg i Kritik og Æsthetik*,

published in 1848 by Bernhard Roggen. Sigurd Skirbekk (1972) sets the starting point for the central position of fictional literature in Norwegian cultural history in the 1850s, and claims that it has been more important for the national identity than theology, natural sciences, social sciences or philosophy. Norway has, since the historian Ernst Sars first used the concept (in 1914), been described by many as a “poetocracy”, which means a system where the poets have particular influence on society and policy. Sars wrote especially with the influence of the author Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson on Norwegian politics in mind, but the impact of other authors, such as Henrik Wergeland, also had a bearing. The philosopher Gunnar Skirbekk (1984) later became known for declaring the death of the poetocracy which, in his view, happened during the 1960s after new disciplines achieved autonomy on their respective subjects, making little room for literature and authors to influence politics. The new disciplines which took up this space were, according to Skirbekk (1984), political science and sociology.

Sigurd Skirbekk (1972) briskly describes the development of literary criticism in Norway; from an idealistic activity, to a naturalistic activity and later a new romanticism. The idealistic period is known for the conception of a harmony between ideals and reality, and the view that it is the responsibility of the literature to bring this about. The naturalistic period, by contrast, wanted literature to represent reality truthfully, with all its details. The reaction against naturalism claimed that this was impossible, because there would always be some details left out of the works, and ‘the solution’ became the “new romanticism”, and a new focus on situations and individual perceptions. For instance, the author Knut Hamsun (1994 [1890]) is a part of this period, with his articulation of people’s “unconscious life of the mind”. Skirbekk (1972) describes the new romantic criticism as an approach fixated on describing the immediate moment and mood a book conjures. After that, he describes the next type of criticism, called the historical-biographical method, which concentrates on the book in its circumstances and how it is formed by the author and contemporary surroundings.

Bjerck Hagen (2012) divides the period after World War Two into three main parts: (1) The Modernism of the 1950s, (2) The Literary Criticism of *Profil*<sup>6</sup> and (3) “avant-gardism, documentarism, popular culture”. He describes what he sees as a tendency toward a criticism which “tries to build down the differences not only between ‘high’ and ‘low’, but also between ‘good’ and ‘bad’” (2012: 174). Furuseth (2005) also writes about how this type of criticism took form during the 1970s, and claims that the conservative Bildung tradition, and the norms for what was perceived as good literature from “New Criticism”, were now no longer accepted. “The Sociology of Literature” developed at this time as well, at the same time as Marxist-inspired institutional theory, and contributed to making popular culture a serious topic for academia and criticism

6. An influential Norwegian literary journal published between 1959 and 1992 (for more see Thon, 1995).

(Furuseth 2005). In Norway the essay collection of the author Kjartan Fløgstad (1981), *Loven vest for Pecos*, is a central reference when it comes to the re-evaluation of popular culture, as important in Norwegian culture as the Birmingham school and the emergence of cultural studies is for the English-speaking world. Implicit and explicit in this line of thought is a view that many cultural products do not get the recognition they deserve. The protest against what is considered ‘high’ and ‘low’ has continued until the present, even though it might not have the same intensity today.

### WITHER IDEOLOGY?

As briefly mentioned, Sigurd Skirbekk (1972) did a qualitative study of literary critics because he was interested in the view of people who had influence on what was being read. He made a comparison between critics and schoolteachers, with focus on what they perceived as driving forces for societal development. The study’s title can be translated as *Understandings of Culture and Societal Development*. In the study, Skirbekk makes a “sensible division” into three types of critics, based on a schema with answers and his own “general knowledge”. The division shows what ideology is foundational for the different types, classed as: (1) The Moderates, (2) The radical non-Marxists and (3) The Marxists. The moderates, according to Skirbekk, claimed that the societal function of literature was to ethically defend the individual and the Bildung tradition. The radical non-Marxists claimed that the function of literature was to exert influence on society, while the Marxist critics claimed that literature reflects power relations in society and therefore most books reflect what the bourgeoisie considers fine literature. The Marxist critics were thus focused on giving attention to books which reflected the experiences of other classes of society, such as the working class or the underclass.

Generally, Skirbekk (1972) found an individualized understanding of culture among both the schoolteachers and the literary critics. This means that very few of them considered culture as having any particular influence on societal development at large, but rather as important for each and every reader. Their focus was on the encounter between book and reader, as opposed to the impact of literature on society.

The ideological dividing lines between the critics that Skirbekk identified are not present in the interviews I conducted. When talking about the development of public debate with a particular focus on the position of criticism, there was tendency toward other dividing lines, such as divisions based on knowledge (about literature) among the critics themselves. There are several different demarcations between the critics today, but to divide them along ideological lines would give a misleading picture of how they are as a group. That is not the way the critics draw symbolic lines between themselves, for instance. Rather they draw symbolic boundaries between those who give an impression of being knowledgeable and smart, and those who appear less skilful. This can



also be described as a difference between “professional” and other critics. As one of the interviewees from *Dagbladet* puts it: “(...) How many critics are there really, which can be considered professional full-time critics in Norway? It is probably not more than six or seven. Hardly more.” This distinction also applies to how many working hours are spent on criticism as a criteria, implying that those who do it full-time have another perspective compared with those who only do it part-time. This type of distinction is also based on knowledge about the canon. In the words of the same interviewee:

There are many good critics in Norway, very many good ones [...] many critics who believe in a canon, they are typically into American literature as well as Norwegian, and feel like [they are] “in the center of it”. They probably know Proust, but if they actually have an overview of French literature, is totally random. Some have, but it’s very rare.

The interviewee from *Bergens Tidende* draws a similar distinction based on knowledge:

[...] I’m not sure if the critics [in the 18<sup>th</sup> century] had read more [classical literature] than the critics do today, but today, as [the Norwegian author Dag] Solstad have mentioned many times, we are very oriented toward our own time, the present, so I think that there are many critics who do a poor job when they’re not considering new literature in the light of the literary tradition.

The distinction here is drawn between those who use references to classical literature [the canon], and those who, to a larger degree, compare new literature to other new literature. A third interviewee to make a distinction based on knowledge is the critic from *Varden*:

I count myself as a common reader, and my aim is to get people to read and care about literature [...] I do read *Morgenbladet*, *Klassekampen* and *Dag og tid*, but I think they’re too oriented toward the universities. I’m at least dividing the criticism into a criticism for the people and an academic criticism.

A potential cause, which the interviewee from *Varden* mentions, is the establishment of literature as an academic discipline at Norwegian universities, and the increased focus on theory in nearly every aspect of literature (Hamm 2005). Maybe one can say that art has become more autonomous in Norway because its theoretical foundations have become more firmly established, and that it is possible to use these foundations to achieve legitimacy (Bjerck Hagen 2012). The fact that ideological dividing lines do not make as much sense today as they did during the 1970s is expressed by the interviewees as well, such as the freelance interviewee (previously working for both *Klassekampen* and *Profil*), who says: “In *Klassekampen* you had a motivation in writing for the people, because that was what you did at the time (...) No one would talk in that way

today. I could never have written reviews today like I wrote then.” This interviewee shows that it is not necessarily the specific reviews that have changed, but the whole approach from the critics. Another way of expressing the diminishing relevance of ideology as a relevant distinction is that they claim their reviews can be published in any newspaper. This does not mean that every newspaper contains the same type of reviews, but that they do not follow a political editorial line. The critics also report that they feel a freedom to write however they want, independent of which newspaper they write for. They do adjust their writing to the newspaper, but they do not talk about this as a constraint.

It is nevertheless important to point out that ideological reviews are written today as well. There are also reviews where the critics are focused on showing ideological motivations behind books – where the critic shows how books work to “naturalize political contrasts”. This type of review is most often about non-fiction literature, according to the interviewees.

### **Ideal types**

An ideal type is a construction where typical aspects about a phenomenon are highlighted based on empirical material. Empirical observations and cases are used to compare to the ideal types. The typical can also be called ‘the special’ or ‘the characteristic’, and shows that there are some aspects which get attention at the expense of others. This is done to make comparisons easier. The use of ideal types is often ascribed to Max Weber, despite it being a normal part of German social science during the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Clegg 2007), probably because he wrote explicitly about ideal types as a methodological tool. The classical example of an ideal type is the bureaucracy, as Weber described based on ideas and concepts he observed in the actual bureaucracy of his time (Clegg 2007: 2201). The ideal type does therefore not represent reality, but condenses certain aspects and presents the meaning of things. In analyzing the empirical material for this paper, three ideal types were identified: (1) The Popular Educator, (2) The Judge and (3) The Interpreter. They are ideal types because they are constructed based on the empirical material, and because they condense certain aspects of the critics. Therefore, no one actually fits exactly into one of the types, but rather there are some aspects that are close to how they are. In what follows the ideal types will be presented and the material they are based on shown.

### **THE POPULAR EDUCATOR**

The interviewees who articulate the basis for the ideal type “The Popular Educator” present themselves by saying that they are first and foremost readers, and they prefer to be called “a reviewer” rather than “a critic”. This is done to make a distinction to the connotations people have about “a critic”. A reviewer is often perceived as something more casual and less elitist than a critic, even

though there is no difference between them in principle. The popular educator focuses upon the entertainment aspect of reading, and that reading is supposed to be fun. S/he will also say that reading is a part of being, or becoming, a good citizen. The popular educator also claims that literature reflects society, and that reading is important because you learn a lot about society. The popular educator regards the other critics as people who are not really interested in ‘opening up’ and informing about literature, but rather as solely interested in writing for ‘the few’. Critics also take themselves too seriously. Paradoxically the popular educator voices anti-intellectualism, which makes it possible to relate him/her to the moral-egalitarian order of worth (Skarpenes, 2010). One of the interviewees from *Dagbladet* says something that expresses the popular educators view on the role of the critic: “I think that the serious criticism isn’t particularly important, but reviews sometime help readers”, and further: “Sometimes I get sick of Kritikerlaget, of ‘The Importance of Criticism’. When you ask ‘might it damage the serious criticism?’, I understand what you’re referring to but I don’t want to say something like that; ‘it’s damaging to the serious criticism’ [repeating the question in a mocking tone]”. Here we observe someone who takes a distance from serious criticism, and rather wants to appeal to readers. The other interviewee from *Dagbladet* says:

I regard art and culture as surplus phenomena for humanity. So when you ask if we need literary criticism, I’d say: if we want it, we need it. What we really need is food, sleep, warmth, sex (...) I don’t think it’s sound to ascribe literature and criticism to that level, because they’re not. ‘People are existentially concerned, that life is meaningless without criticism’... come on! Of course you can say it, but it’s just nonsense.

This quote shows a need to establish a distance toward people who take criticism too seriously and is a good example of the popular educator’s view. The popular educator can be regarded as an agent for the earlier mentioned, “popular symbolic power”, and the role can be interpreted as an indirect way of exerting power. The popular educator is concerned with enlightenment and wants to get everybody to read. The interviewee from *Varden* shows signs of this when saying: “It is the common man who should read”. The goal for the popular educator is to get as many as possible to read as much as possible, because it is good to be oriented, and that awareness should not be exclusively for privileged people. This is an example of how the popular educator draws upon the moral-egalitarian order of worth, by referring to equality as a value. We can also draw a line to the enlightenment ideal that has been a part of the culture of equality in Norway historically, according to Slagstad (2001). The popular educator makes symbolic boundaries towards literary journals, because “these are spaces for elitist criticism”. The interviewee from *Varden* again says something that relates to this: “I try to make my text easy to read. Sometimes I use difficult words, but then I know that the readers, they do not get it easily”, and further “when people use the word *discourse*, for instance, then you know that they are writing for a certain type of person”. The ambition to write in an easy fashion and avoid “difficult words” is typical of the popular

educator. The popular educator wants to avoid words like “discourse” because it allegedly does not divulge any information but rather is understood as an act of distinction.

## THE JUDGE

The Judge is the type of critic who would say that the most important thing about a review is to say whether something is good or bad – and after that – to describe why as neatly as possible. These quotes from *Klassekampen* and *B.T.* can serve as examples: “In daily newspapers you give a verdict, and you have to give as good reasons for the verdict as you can on the space you’re given” (*B.T.*), “(...) The most important [thing] is for me to show what I think about a book as clearly as possible in the space I’m given” (*Klassekampen*).

The judge is the one that most obviously does not fit into Skarpenes’ findings on egalitarian values, in that s/he is explicitly concerned with casting cultural judgments. It is especially surprising that the *Klassekampen* reviewer voices this, given the political history of the newspaper<sup>7</sup>. When it comes to aesthetics, the judge will say that equality is not an important value at all, rather the opposite. The judge will draw a clear distinction between aesthetic and moral judgments, and will claim that literature must be judged independently of ‘politics’. S/he will, of course, find political and moral aspects of books, but claim that it is rarely relevant for a critic to take them into consideration because their work is to value the aesthetical aspects, which can be the language, form and composition. The judge will claim that literary criticism should have an elite position, and will be comfortable being perceived as having one. The interviewee from *B.T.* looks at it this way: “The large amount of people will never read serious literature. It will always be like that, and that is fine”. Here s/he is different from the other types, because the other types regard it as important to try to get as many people as possible to read serious literature. They would, in other words, never say “that is fine”.

The judge is concerned about the democratization of culture, and ties it to the fall of the status of literary criticism, as one of the interviewee does in this quote:

(...) Critique as an institution was established in a totally different culture from what we have now, in an elite culture, where a small part of the culture read *Morgenbladet* and *Aftenposten* and newspapers like that, they’re concerned with aesthetic questions, they are educated in the way that they have

7. *Klassekampen* [The Class Struggle] started as a monthly newspaper in 1969 with an explicit leftist policy, and was owned by the political party AKP [the Worker’s Communist Party]. Today the ownership structure is more complex, and it entitles itself as the newspaper for the left. However, it has been established as one of the largest national newspapers in Norway, and has become a fully professional journalistic product (Skjeseeth, 2011)

read Goethe and Shakespeare and the like (...) And then you get the democratization of the culture, and then it becomes more of a stir, maybe (...) The loss of an elite culture has been of great significance for literary criticism, there's no doubt about that.

Here s/he regards an elite culture as a kind of premise for good literary criticism. The democratization of the culture, according to the interviewee, has made literary criticism weaker. The quote can be interpreted in a way that people nowadays make up their own minds about what is good or bad, and thus the interest in professional criticism has declined. The judge as ideal type wants more authority as a critic. The criticism is done and legitimated by the critic by separating between quality and taste: to look for quality is described as making aesthetic considerations, while looking for taste is described as making moral judgments. This distinction has been much debated through history and is what Bourdieu breaks with through the subtitle of *Distinction* (1995) – “a sociological critique of the judgment of taste”.

### THE INTERPRETER

The Interpreter is more focused toward the authors and the cultural field internally rather than toward an external audience, and concerned with artistic intention. Reflecting on their own role, some of the interviewees voice the views of the interpreter:

Of course I'm interested in working with good literature, and show why it is good. But that something is good doesn't mean that it's better than something else. It just means that it has qualities, and then the task is to explain the qualities and describe it to the readers (...) (*Dagbladet*).

I read a lot of books, so I'm probably amongst those with a lot of cultural capital in some way. But I am not fond of theorizing too much (*Freelance*).

The interesting thing is the critic's ability to discuss the topics, the form, go further, show openings, possible stops, to give more life to it. Good or bad – what the fuck – it's quite irrelevant, that's up to one self to consider, while going into a dialogue with the literature, that's not for everybody. That's where the criticism starts (*Morgenbladet*).

I think I'm here in the world to try to understand things, simple as that, and this, the profession, is a part of it all (*NRK*).

The interpreter operates in a space between the popular educator and the judge. One of the interviewees, who conforms to the basis for this type, says something interesting about Norwegian culture: we are a young nation that has climbed a lot socially in a short period of time, and therefore a lot of those who can be considered the cultural elite have a brief experience of being part of it.

They are, therefore, in a kind of a conflict between elitist judgments and egalitarian values. It is worth mentioning that whether this historical account is true or not is of lesser importance here since the telling of the story is interpreted as “a presentation of self”. One of the interviewees from *Dagbladet* says something that can be ascribed to this type: “I’m careful, and it’s because I really don’t have any important feelings about criticism, I have many thoughts, but I often think that other critics are very pompous when they talk.” Here it is considered important not to be too pompous or too serious, flaws which certain critics are guilty of.

The interpreter legitimizes his/her position by appealing to the public good – that literature and art has to have a reception, it must be “met” and “contested”. The interviewee from *NRK* says something that suits this type: “(...) when people say that all fiddle music sounds the same, it is because they do not know the distinctions, and the world becomes much more exciting when you know the distinctions and can consider the different aspects, the world gets more colors in that way. That is also one of the things criticism can contribute.” In other words it is something positive to separate between different sorts of music and books, according to the quote, but not necessarily to classify something as good and something else as bad. This is where the interpreter is clearly different from the popular educator, who is focused upon making potential readers aware of books. However, just as with the popular educator, the interpreter establishes symbolic boundaries toward literary journals and for the same reason – to declare a distance to what they perceive as elitism.

## CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

How we value something as good and something else as bad is a founding question for cultural policy (Hylland, 2012), and is a starting point for this paper. I have looked at how literary critics talk about their practice, and what values they refer to while making judgements. Several institutions in the cultural sector constantly have to legitimize their practice just as literary criticism does, by referring to certain values (Larsen 2013). By interviewing literary critics about their work the context they establish around themselves is brought out – their professional self-perceptions, so to say. The ideal types of critics have different perceptions of Norwegian society, and therefore they refer to different values when legitimizing their quality assessments. For the popular educator and the interpreter it is important that their quality assessments are rooted in an egalitarian culture, and they draw symbolic boundaries toward the judge. The judge fits Skarpenes’ (2007) assumption that there are, in fact, some places where people rank cultural products without referring to egalitarian values. They all conceive quality as something devoid of political contention. This might reflect the depoliticization of the press in general in Norway. What they all have in common is a depoliticized conception of quality, in a traditional narrow party political understanding, which reflects the depoliticization of the press more generally over the last decades in Norway. This correlation

of influence with media logic in both journalism and criticism, might go against the self-understanding of literature as “putting social issues at debate.” Terry Eagleton (1984, p. 21) writes about criticism that “the very business of criticism, with its minatory overtones of conflict and dissension, offers to disrupt the consensualism of the public sphere; and the critic himself [...] represents a potentially fractious element within it”. The potential might be present in criticism in Norway, but it is not voiced by the critics as a part of their professional self-understandings.

Through looking at how Norwegian critics describe their practice, I have identified three different ideal types. They are (1) the popular educator, (2) the judge and (3) the interpreter. This is a meaningful way of describing the literary critics based on the empirical material at hand, and hopefully applicable in further research on reviewing in the Nordic countries. The critics are different from each other when it comes to how they present themselves and how they legitimize cultural judgments. The typology can be read as an answer to my research question. Alternatively, it could be answered by pointing out that there is no one legitimate culture, but three different ways of legitimizing how to practice literary criticism in Norway. Literary criticism is loosely organized in Norway, with few formal meeting places and discussions other than in the newspapers. Very little goes on behind closed doors, but the strong history and literary tradition nevertheless makes criticism symbolically heavy, and thus not as fragile as changes in the media landscape might suggest. Still, the literary criticism of tomorrow might just as well reside in new spaces, such as social media platforms, as general journalistic trends point toward.

Arenas for literary criticism have decentralised and multiplied and are being used by publishing houses to create attention around books. Blurbs on the cover of books might, for instance, just as well be from a blog, an Instagram account or a chat forum, as from a newspaper or a television show, which might make us question what literary culture today actually is or where it resides (Collins, 2011). From the perspective of a reader, literature – as well as criticism – tends to occur in ever more aspects of our lives. But the book reviewers who organize through Kritikerlaget seem to hold traditional print media in high regard – as able to co-exist with new developments within literary cultures – and this contributes to the status of reviews in print media. Literary criticism thus might resemble the status of novels which do not seem to lose status despite the emergence of new forms of literature.

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