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How to Read the Literary Market: An Introduction

<https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2020-2025>

Understood as a modern institution, literature is historically bound to the extension of market rationality. The commodification of literature since the late eighteenth century has changed the ways in which we handle literary works: rather than just perused by individual readers, books are promoted, traded, consumed, and legally protected. Over the past three decades, scholars have focused increased attention on how to conceptualize this encroachment of market principles into the sphere of culture (Agnew 1986; Bourdieu 1996; Woodmansee 1994). They have shown that concepts like ‘the fine arts’, ‘high literature’, and ‘aesthetic autonomy’ have evolved not in opposition but rather as historical responses to and functions of the commercialization and professionalization of culture. In so doing they have reflected upon an array of intersecting cultural developments such as the specialization of the poet as professional writer and distributor of a marketable commodity and the diversification of literary practice across artistic and commercial spaces. What conjoins these projects is the broad question of how to read the literary market.

Many approaches toward literary market economies have pursued the aim of identifying the absent causes that determine literary production and consumption. This objective informed the works of marketplace critics of the 1980s (e.g., Gilmore 1985; Michaels 1987) but has also inspired the bulk of the more recent “New Economic Criticism” (e.g., McClanahan 2016; Poovey 2008). These branches of revisionist scholarship revolve around the social and economic, the material and ideological implications and constraints conditioning the production, reception, and distribution of literature. They emphasize literature’s crucial function as a site of political resistance and complicity, albeit by positing a rather static causality between the social and the cultural, politics and literature.

A number of competing contemporary approaches stemming from the resurgence of the sociology of literature have provided alternatives to the premises

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established by economic literary criticism. This development deserves a word of explanation. For what literary scholars think is sociology differs notably from how sociologists would identify their own discipline. Moreover, “‘sociology of literature’ has always named a polyglot and rather incoherent set of enterprises. It is scattered across so many separate domains and subdomains of scholarly research, each with its own distinct agendas of theory and method, that it scarcely even rates the designation of a ‘field’” (English 2010, v). For example: Birmingham School cultural materialism does champion a broad sociological interest in the life worlds of readers and writers. But that type of work is only peripherally relatable to some of the projects that sailed under New Historicist flags in the 1980s, although scholars in the wake of Stephen Greenblatt had a similarly committed interest in the social. Likewise, the reception of Michel Foucault’s bio-political writings of the 1970s and early 1980s encouraged a good deal of critics to inquire into the social and discursive foundations of power regimes. But that interest remained insular, almost disconnected from projects designed in pursuit of site-specific, empirical analyses of social power.

This sense of diversity notwithstanding, there is a set of vaguely identifiable thematic concerns and methodological premises at the center of sociological literary scholarship. When literary scholars turn into sociologists they typically focus on different actors in the literary market: publishing houses, agencies, and retailers; they look at matters of literacy and reading techniques, the interrelations of publishers, authors, and readers, and the history of production technology, treating the book and the literary text as objects of commerce and trade, and as cornerstones in the diverse constructions of socio-historical and cultural identities. These issues, to be sure, have troubled literary scholars since the beginnings of academic English studies in the early twentieth century, but they have never been clustered exclusively within a subfield called ‘sociology of literature’ or ‘marketplace criticism.’ In part this has to do with the evolution of literary theory during the post-45 period on both sides of the Atlantic, wherein Marxism was long considered to be the go-to paradigm for all things social. And while the continued interest in Pierre Bourdieu’s cultural sociology has helped to reintegrate sociological study into the domains of the English department since the 1990s, this interest has turned the field of literary production into a somewhat predictable metaphor customarily used to describe various forms of capital exchange (and barely anything else).

Focusing on these putative limitations, a number of recent studies have pointed out that the bulk of Bourdieu-derived scholarship still rests on the opposition between aesthetic and economic value, arguing that modern literature is marked by the tension of withdrawing from the mechanisms of the market and, at the same time, being shaped by it (English 2005; Griem 2017; Leyoldt 2014; Theisohn and Weder 2013). In seeking to circumnavigate such binary models of the literary field, these critics have brought back to the forefront of scholarship

questions of aesthetic experience, affect, or singularity, and thus re-conceptualized the market as a social institution – and a Latourian actor-network (Felski 2015) – irreducible to its function of monetary allocation (e.g., Sklansky 2017). Following these interventions, aesthetic and economic value are neither irreconcilable nor indistinguishable, and questions about the form, appearance, and experience are put in fruitful dialogue with questions about the commodification and marketability of literary works.

Moreover, there has been a strong comeback of studies in the history of the book that in many ways complements the symbolic readings of the literary market both in terms of its transatlantic dimension and in its historical evolution. While there were incipient forms of what we now understand to be a literary market in eighteenth-century Britain (Siskin 1998), the idea of a professionalized literary field did not become plausible on US soil before the 1840s. And even then, there remained a tremendous influence of British and continental European publishing on American authors, publishers, and retailers as the American market was constrained by rigid copyright laws (McGill 2010). As Joseph Rezek has argued, conceiving of literary history in national terms denies the material and economic realities of early nineteenth-century literature: “British and American publishing were not separate affairs in the early nineteenth century” (Rezek 2015, 25). Literary practitioners at the time were aware that the literary marketplace of the early nineteenth century spanned the Atlantic. And they also knew how incoherently and unpredictably this market evolved across nation-states and institutions. For example: Boston, New York, and Philadelphia developed relatively early into powerful publishing centers in the US, not least because of their favorable geographical locations in the Northeast. But the Midwest and the Southern colonies, lacking stable trade routes to Europe, remained isolated as literary regions for the better part of the nineteenth century. Similar discontinuities can be observed in the case of London’s ascent into “world literary space” (Casanova 2004), to borrow Pascale Casanova’s term, and the consequent emergence of an Anglo-European literary periphery in the eighteenth century. Given these contexts, any inquiry into the relationship between economy and literature must take account of this complex history, rather than simply assume that a literary market and its variously entangled hierarchies of value have always been there.

This special issue creates a critical forum on theories, methods, and techniques currently used for scholarly work at the intersection of culture and the economy. Reflecting the issue’s concerns with literature and the market, the articles cover a wide historical scope, ranging from the nineteenth century to the present. And by conjoining theoretical and historical concerns, they highlight the aesthetic, cultural-sociological, and narrative dimensions of literature and the market. Among other issues, the contributors focus on particular theoretical

trajectories to refine our understanding of the relation between literature and the market, and they discuss the methods of analysis that are most promising for the study of modern literature and its integral role within market society. At the same time, most of the contributors relate their arguments to concrete sites of literary practice so as to maintain that any theoretical argument about the literary market can only make sense on the grounds of the market's empirical foundations. Understood as social practices, reading and writing are never context-free.

This special issue's methodological intervention grows out of a literal understanding of its title, "How to Read the Literary Market." We move beyond an understanding of the literary market as a context or institutional setting that must be analyzed with extra-literary means, as if the market remained external to the literary text. Rather, works of literature themselves can be instructive for how to *read* (i.e., to form, comprehend, and reform) dynamics of the literary market. A number of our contributions therefore explore literary texts that highlight and draw on market dynamics and their effects on literary aesthetics and narrative structures. Accordingly, the essays assembled here seek to show that a sociology of literature must not only reflect upon the social and economic forces emerging from and around literature, but that it needs to tackle the very questions literary texts pose vis-à-vis the social; questions, that is, which target issues of race, class, gender, and the issue of creative production itself.

Considering the meaning and the status of the 'literary' within the framework of the literary market, Tim Lanzendörfer's essay is both a critical reflection of the historically established and culturally inherent conflicts between 'high' and 'low,' avant-gardist and commercial, autonomous and complicit, and thereby an inquiry into this issue's larger methodological interest. Philipp Löffler, in turn, offers a more specific account of central developments in the antebellum book market, focusing on two case studies: Nathaniel Hawthorne's ascent into the literary establishment of the 1840s – based mainly on the promotion of his short fiction – and the attempts to advertise Harriet Beecher-Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* across socially and politically diverse readerships in the South and the North.

Nicola Glaubitz's essay explicitly asks "How Useful is Bourdieu's Notion of Capital for Describing Literary Markets?" Her answer – "Yes, Bourdieu's notion of capital is useful" – is grounded in a careful analysis of three major critical works indebted to Bourdieu's work: John Guillory's *Cultural Capital* (1993); James English's *The Economy of Prestige* (2005); and Clayton Childress's *Under the Cover* (2017). Julika Griem integrates conceptions of literary markets, marketing, and marketability into the study of literature. By combining textual and sociological analysis, Griem turns to spatial and spatializing strategies on various levels of literary communication, relating Bourdieu's sociology of literature to more recent

studies on literary ecologies and consumer culture by David Alworth and Jim Collins.

The essays by Florian Sedlmeier and Stefanie Mueller explore the relationship between African American writing and the sociocultural implications of the literary market. Sedlmeier's essay confronts Pierre Bourdieu's notions of literary capital with William Dean Howells's criticism of African American writers. The lens of Bourdieu, Sedlmeier argues, allows us to see the tension between the possibility of converting cultural difference into literary capital and the necessity to maintain a universal notion of literary capital, with which Howells endowed writers such as Paul Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt. In her essay "'No more little boxes' – Poetic Positionings in the Literary Field," Stefanie Mueller analyzes Thomas Sayers Ellis's poem "Skin, Inc." (2010). In her close reading, Mueller shows that Ellis uses the metaphor of incorporation in terms of its economic and its formal affordances. Also drawing on Bourdieu's work, Mueller thinks of the poem as a form of poetic position-taking in the early twenty-first-century United States. While she explores the literary marketplace as presented in Ellis's poem, Mueller draws particular attention to the role of race in the US literary field, in particular with regard to what has been labeled a 'post-soul aesthetic.'

The editors would like to thank Eleni Patrika and Aiden John for diligently formatting the issue.

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