

Book and Literary-Life Imaginaries: A Historical, Sociological and Socio-Critical Project

Les imaginaires du livre et de la vie littéraire. Un projet historique, sociologique et sociocritique

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Article abstract

What can works of fiction about the literary life teach us about books, publishing, reading, and about the people who animate the communications circuit? As representations of the writer's own milieu, novels that portray the literary life possess a particular reflexive knowledge about the universe of the book. It is to this astonishingly vast corpus from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century that the GREMLIN (Groupe de recherche sur les médiations littéraires et les institutions) has dedicated the core of its work. The publication of essay collections and special journal issues (*Fictions du champ littéraire* et *Bohème sans frontière* in 2010, "Le livre dans le livre" in 2011, *Imaginaires de la vie littéraire* in 2012, *Romans à clés* in 2014) has joined the online publication of bibliographies of French and Québécois novels about the literary life and of a vast database containing detailed records of more than 80 novels (see legremlin.org). Its intense collecting of raw material and analytical articles (about a hundred) has allowed the GREMLIN to map the territory of fictional literary life in France. This paper will endeavour to sketch some of the perimeters (the transmission of the book object, the mise en abyme of the creative process in the fiction itself, and forms of sociability such as salons as sites of encounter among principal fictive actors in the literary life). By way of example, I will examine at length the configuration of the publisher in the French novel. Once almost invisible in French novels of the literary life, characters of publishers later abound. Beginning with the novel that fashioned the lasting fictional image of the publisher, Balzac's *Illusion perdue* (1839), I move into the contemporary moment to study (in the case of Échenoz, Pennac, Robbe-Grillet, Christine Angot, etc.) the representation of the publisher – his/her physical traits, places of sociability, social function, and speech. I will show that, contrary to what was usual even into the 1970s, the discourse of the publisher is now often elevated to the level of that of the fictive writer to express resistance to the commercialization of literary production.

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BOOK AND LITERARY-LIFE IMAGINARIES: A Historical, Sociological and Socio-Critical Project

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* Editor's note: The following text is taken from the keynote address delivered on the occasion of the 23rd Annual Conference of the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing "The Generation and Regeneration of Books / Générations et régénérations du livre." The traces of oral presentation have therefore been retained. Moreover, the audio file includes exchanges with the audience that followed the presentation. The audio file is accessible here: http://www.usherbrooke.ca/grelq/fileadmin/sites/grelq/documents/Colloques/SHARP_2015/Anthony_Glinoer_2015-07-10_1.mp3.

ABSTRACT

What can works of fiction about the literary life teach us about books, publishing, reading, and about the people who animate the communications circuit? As representations of the writer's own milieu, novels that portray the literary life possess a particular reflexive knowledge about the universe of the book. It is to this astonishingly vast corpus from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century that the GREMLIN (Groupe de recherche sur les médiations littéraires et les institutions) has dedicated the core of its work. The publication of essay collections and special journal issues (*Fictions du champ littéraire* et *Bobème sans frontière* in 2010, "Le livre dans le livre" in 2011, *Imaginaires de la vie littéraire* in 2012, *Romans à clés* in 2014) has joined the online publication of bibliographies of French and Québécois novels about the literary life and of a vast database containing detailed records of more than 80 novels (see legremlin.org). Its intense collecting of raw material and analytical articles (about a hundred) has allowed the GREMLIN to map the territory of fictional literary life in France. This paper will endeavour to sketch some of the perimeters (the transmission of the book object, the mise en abyme of the creative process in the fiction itself, and forms of sociability such as salons as sites of encounter among principal fictive actors in the

literary life). By way of example, I will examine at length the configuration of the publisher in the French novel. Once almost invisible in French novels of the literary life, characters of publishers later abound. Beginning with the novel that fashioned the lasting fictional image of the publisher, Balzac's *Illusion perdues* (1839), I move into the contemporary moment to study (in the case of Échenoz, Pennac, Robbe-Grillet, Christine Angot, etc.) the representation of the publisher – his/her physical traits, places of sociability, social function, and speech. I will show that, contrary to what was usual even into the 1970s, the discourse of the publisher is now often elevated to the level of that of the fictive writer to express resistance to the commercialization of literary production.

RÉSUMÉ

Qu'est-ce que les fictions de la vie littéraire ont à nous apprendre sur le livre, l'édition, la lecture et sur les acteurs qui animent toute la chaîne du livre? Fruits des représentations que se font les écrivains du milieu où ils évoluent, les romans qui mettent en scène la vie littéraire possèdent un savoir réflexif particulier sur l'univers du livre. C'est à ce corpus étonnamment vaste des romans de la vie littéraire du xix^e au xxi^e siècle que le Gremlin (Groupe de recherche sur les médiations littéraires et les institutions) a dédié l'essentiel de ses recherches. La publication d'ouvrages collectifs et de numéros de revue (*Fictions du champ littéraire* et *Bobème sans frontière* en 2010, « Le livre dans le livre » en 2011, *Imaginaires de la vie littéraire* en 2012, *Romans à clés* en 2014) s'est ajoutée à la publication en ligne des bibliographies des romans français et québécois de la vie littéraire et d'une vaste base de données contenant des fiches détaillées de plus de 80 romans (voir le site legremlin.org). Son intense activité de rassemblement de matériel brut et d'articles d'analyse (une centaine) a permis au Gremlin de cartographier le territoire de la vie littéraire fictionnelle en France. C'est quelques-uns de ces périmètres (la transmission de l'objet-livre, la mise en abyme du processus créateur à même la fiction, les formes de sociabilité comme les salons et les cénacles comme lieux de rencontre des acteurs fictifs principaux de la vie littéraire) que cet article s'attachera à dessiner. À titre d'exemple, je me pencherai plus longuement sur les figurations de l'éditeur dans le roman français. Autrefois presque invisibles dans les romans de la vie littéraire français, les personnages d'éditeurs abondent désormais : partant du roman qui a façonné durablement l'image fictionnelle de l'éditeur, *Illusions perdues* de Balzac (1839), je remonterai jusqu'à l'époque contemporaine pour étudier (chez Échenoz, Pennac, Robbe-Grillet, Christine Angot, etc.) les figurations de l'éditeur : ses traits physiques, ses lieux de sociabilité, sa fonction sociale et sa parole. Je montrerai que, contrairement à ce qui était de mise jusque dans les années 1970, cette dernière est souvent élevée à l'échelon de la parole de l'écrivain fictif pour exprimer la résistance à la marchandisation de la production littéraire.

Throughout the last two hundred years, French literature has never been able to rid itself completely of one concern: that of the socialization of the creator of art (writer, painter, poet).¹ Let us begin by considering this

famous example: in the play by Alfred de Vigny based on the unfortunate fate of the English poet Thomas Chatterton (1835), the poet devotes himself to his writing and occupies a separate floor of the home of the bourgeoisie family with whom he lives. Kitty Bell, the mistress of the house, secretly in love with the young eighteen-year-old, attempts to help him to overcome his misery, but the confrontation between the poet and the outside world leads only to disappointments for the first one. The worst occurs when a literary critic accuses him of plagiarism and the local seigneur offers him full patronage if he will become the seigneur's servant. Overwhelmed with disgust at the social comedy, the young man takes poison and commits suicide, and Kitty Bell dies too. In the extreme, this work expresses the dominant tension in the French literary imaginary: it is the irreconcilable tension between the individual and the collective. Literary individuals, whose prestige rests to a large degree on their names, assert their uniqueness and seek to present themselves as irreducible to any one group. Dedicated to their work, they isolate themselves in order to turn themselves over to it entirely. They flee society, scorn the crowd, and despise gatherings. If they speak to the People, if they dream of being a guide, it is from afar or from above. Only there, on the margins of social mayhem, are they able to serve Art and Thought, exercise their vocation, give their all. Claiming their uniqueness, convinced of their dual position as both Prometheus and as victims of philistine rejection, they will have nothing to do with their fellows. Opposing them is the socializing collective, which assumes two stances, one as menacing as the other: on the one hand, the group at large, the always threatening crowd, the people of the city on the move, the multitude in which, as Gustave Le Bon sought to reveal in *Psychologie des foules* (1895) / *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, the faculties of the individual disappear and exaggerated emotional reactions dominate; on the other hand, the restrained group of peers and other actors in the world of the book (theatre directors, journalists, publishers), their "small world" (David Lodge). Nothing or close to nothing good can be found there for authentic writers. Apart from one or two instances of artistic communion with individuals who are as exceptional as they are (think here of Cénacle in Balzac's *Illusions perdues* / *Lost Illusions* and of the fantasies of the bohemians assembled by Murger in *Scènes de la vie de bohème* / *Scenes from the Life of Bohemia*), writers encounter only animosity, incomprehension, or temptations that prove dangerous for the artistic creation in progress whenever they mingle with their colleagues.

This image of the sublime and solitary writer is, however, far from being the only one: one need only consider engaged writers, directors of political journals (Sartre), writers who are involved with the major events of their time (Orwell), or worldly writers skilled at witty remarks (Wilde). These imaginary models are all, nevertheless, associated with a sort of decay in relation to the pure creation ideal, disinterested, unhappy. The key principle in the French image of the author, since the Revolution, is that of being separate or even absent from the common world. Take, for example, Flaubert, or Hugo in exile, or Proust, each of them pre-eminent national writers. Creative solitude signifies purity, integrity, while social life represents corruption. This biased perception is made possible by the privileged place that writers occupied in the social imaginary from the nineteenth century up until just recently. Discredited, even ridiculed, for the longest time throughout the classical age, writers during the nineteenth century rose to become the “great man” archetypes that France is so fond of and that it sends to the Panthéon. For great men are solitary, while the mediocre are socialized—at least, such is the portrait, fabricated by consensus, as much by great authors themselves as by journals, specialized magazines and academic critics.

The privileging of this image of authors in relation to others is, at least in appearance, surprising, for the social reality of authors is completely different. If the act of writing is a solitary one, it occupies but one portion of the typical day of the man or woman of letters. Their correspondence, their personal diaries and their archives reveal to us that, far from being isolated, writers, almost without exception, lead a full social life, taken up with visits to other writers, evenings spent at restaurants, in lounges or at the bistro, meetings with publishers, etc. Writers are professionals in their domain, practitioners in the world of books, magazines and publishing. They are involved, even if it is against their own will, in a multitude of social relationship networks.

Letters and emails, personal diaries, biographies and autobiographies, descriptions of authors, chronicles, inquiries, brochures, the list of the kinds of documents that enable an understanding of the socialization of authors is long. Added to that, in notably large amounts in certain eras (1880–1930 and since 1990), are novels dedicated entirely, or at least in part, to the

controversial or satirical representation of the life of letters and of books. Authors often highlight their own social reality and that of their colleagues in their stories. That makes professional authors, rather rare in society, after all, one of the most common topics of social discourse. The diversity of these texts demonstrates that authors are never alone in the world, no more in reality than they are in fiction, that they interact with their peers and with various members of the literary, artistic, cultural, intellectual and even political life.

The Gremlin Project

Gremlin (the Groupe de recherche sur les médiations littéraires et les institutions) has made the tension between the individual and the collective in imaginary representations of the book and the literary life one of its primary research subjects.² The objective we have set for ourselves is to study texts that feature diverse men and women of letters and of books, particularly in novels of the past two centuries. How do authors that we willingly rely on to provide a description of the social worlds that they observe (in a realistic, poetic or even fantastical manner) take their own universe into account? How can literature present itself as a place of socialization, of the anchoring of identity and of collective work at the same time as it asserts that it is a relatively autonomous social space? In what way is the reference to the real world, and especially to that portion of the world that authors know intimately because they participate in it directly, integrated into the heart of the literature itself? These are only some of the questions with which we have been preoccupied in a research project whose vocation consists of, briefly, explicating the sociality of texts that explore the socialization of literature.

At the base of our collective effort, there is the sense of an intellectual convergence among the doctoral theses that have become books (on the literary curse, on worldliness, on the coteries or on literary mediators); there is the communal experience of the [Collège de sociocritique de Montréal](#) (2000–2007); and there are solid and lasting friendships. There is, finally, one scientific, historical and hermeneutic practice—“literaturology” (“littératurologie” for André Belleau)—which consists of demanding space, however uncomfortable, for those who seek analytically to articulate both textual and social phenomena; for that, we posit no theoretical ecumenism,

that dogmatic minds tend to delude us into believing, but rather a critical pluralism that, for researchers, consists of seeking out their own theories wherever they find them, without deluding themselves about the compatibility of the concepts amongst themselves nor obliging themselves to tirelessly exercise the same methodologies or to forever plumb the same theoretical sources. The history of the book and of publishing, the poetical history of texts, sociocriticism, social history of literary personages, socioanthropology, the resources are numerous and rich with learning for those who want to seize the opportunity with as much precaution as conviction. The Gremlin has already put forward suggestions along the lines of an interdisciplinarity founded on mediational thought.³ The *Lexique Socius* also bears witness to this spirit of critical receptivity.⁴

For the Gremlin, a group consisting primarily of specialists in modern Francophone literatures (for the most part, French, Belgian and Québécois), this project responds to a sort of urgency created by recent contemporary literature. When Amélie Nothomb shows herself in her own novel *Pétronille*, published for the 2014 literary season, signing her books in a bookstore and entering into business with a young author, she conforms to one of the most significant narrative techniques in contemporary fiction in the French language, that is to say, the representation of the literary life of her time with its typical scenes and its range of coded depictions. In doing so, Nothomb joins Éric Chevillard, Michel Houellebecq, Dany Laferrière as well as Christine Angot, to take only the twenty-first century into consideration, in the ranks of those writers who have featured the literary life and offered characterizations of the individuals who enliven it.

Thanks to two research grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and with the help of research assistants, we were able to embark upon an exploration of this immense body of material. Seven years later, we have succeeded in collecting a certain amount of research results. To use the expression “research results” here is not to fall into the administrative language privileged by granting organizations. In fact, the Gremlin project is part of an ever-expanding movement in humanities and social sciences research that no longer consists of strictly hierarchizing publications, scientific events (study days, conferences) and tools (databases, bibliographies, etc.) that serve team members and the community of students and researchers.

First result: a vast [bibliography](#) that spans the years 1800–2010 with close to 500 novels about the literary life; by that we mean narratives in which more than one character has a connection to the literary life without the story necessarily being completely centered on the world of literature itself. Whenever possible, the bibliography proceeds from a systematic list (for example, at the end of the nineteenth century thanks to novel headings in the *Mercure de France*) or by cross-referencing. This collective research, put together without any judgement of the “value” of the work, consists of a number of major authors such as Balzac, Musset, Sand, Daudet, Zola, Gide, Queneau, and Yourcenar, and several obscure novelists. The bibliography has recently been complemented by [a second](#), also posted on the Gremlin Internet site and dedicated to Québécois novels about the literary life.

How to broach a corpus so huge, consisting of so many works with multiple aims and from different eras? To do so, we have developed a precise [reading protocol](#) and an information database into which the fruits of the work of annotating the books are integrated (to this point about a hundred, of which only a part have already been made available on the website.) Aside from information about the author, the publisher, the publication itself, etc., [the database](#) assembles data regarding the meta-literary aspects of the story in the form of tabs (What information does the book reveal concerning fictional and real life?); regarding situations involving dialogue (What are the narrator’s interventions? Is there an identified interlocutor?); the “configurations” to take up Norbert Elias’ concept (What are the sociability scenes throughout the novel? How many participate in it, or where do they take place [literary salon, reading circle, café, garden, newsroom, academy]? Who is speaking? How is the conversation divided between men and women? What kinds of groups are found in the novel? Are there scenes involving the consummation of drugs or alcohol etc.?); on the texts (Is there evidence of explicit or implicit intertextuality in the novel? Are books written, published, advertised in the course of the story?); with regards to the setting (Where does the story takes place? What description of the writer’s living accommodations is given? What are the places that they frequent?); and for other cultural spheres (With which cultural participants and situations do the writer or the writers interact? What roles do music, theatre, journalism and teaching play?)

Narratology, sociocriticism and poetics have long reflected upon the role of characters in the modern novel. Equipped with this knowledge, we have dedicated a significant portion of the database to the study of the “representations of literary personnel,”⁵ that is to say, characters coming from the “society of the novel” (Claude Duchet) about the world of literature, of publishing and of the arts: what their social and geographic origins are, what their sexual orientation is, their source of revenue. How do they evolve in the course of the story (recognition from their peers, deterioration of their physical or mental health)? How do they express themselves, what literary, political, ideological stances do they take, etc.? The data collected takes several forms: boxes to check, open lists, excerpts which one can use for full-text research, comments by the person creating the entry.

The questions to which the database contributes elements of responses are numerous. The more we gather the results of our annotated reading, the better we are able to analyze the permanent features, the variables, the inflections of our corpus. For example: what forms does the relationship between master and disciple take? Is alcohol often associated with poverty? How often does the term “bohemia” occur? Are writers often in the company of actresses? How has the difficult relationship between writer and journalist played out over more than a century? Do we find communities of readers? What and how much importance is attributed to the recognition of a work of fiction by a prize jury? The database also allows and, once complete, will allow to an even greater extent, the ability to conduct quantitative research in the corpus: how many novels, for example, feature in the first few pages a young man originally from the country, heading for Paris in the hopes of pursuing a writing career? How many of these novels end with the total insanity or the suicide of the hero? In contrast, how many feature an aging writer, successful, with an abundance of publications? How many present scenes of drunken debauchery? How many novels place an author and a publisher in the same location? The results of these computer inquiries are of course only suggestive, their value linked to the selection of novels (approximately 20 percent of the corpus that makes up the bibliography of French novels of the literary life). Nevertheless, it is possible to extract from them indications that allow for a better understanding of the practices and the stakes involved in the literary field in question.

In addition to their usefulness in their own right, these tools are also designed for serious research on this or that theme, book or author. There is, therefore, a genuine complementarity among these research tools and the [conferences and study days](#) that punctuate what Gremlin does. Since 2008, no fewer than fifty researchers have been invited to share their ideas in the form of study days, international conferences and joint collections, with neither geographical restrictions (articles on Quebec, American, and British, etc., literature) nor restrictions concerning the types of texts being studied, even if the majority of contributions focus on the traditional “novel”: literature for young people, comic books and “chick lit” have thus been the subjects of articles and papers. The Gremlin web site offers access to many of these findings: for example, papers from the 5th annual conference, dedicated to representations of the book, of literary personnel and of reading in literatures of mass distribution are available in their entirety [online](#), making it possible to listen to papers on Stephen King or on popular magazines. Of the [collective publications](#), I will mention: an issue of a magazine on imagined sociabilities, an issue of *Mémoires du livre / Studies in Book Culture* on the representations of the book and of book people in fiction, a research notebook on fiction that is about the field of literature (*Fictions du champ littéraire*), a book on romans à clef, and the *Imaginaires de la vie littéraire* collective, a product of an international conference held in 2010.

For the purposes of this article, and in the interest of time constraints, I will focus on four examples of articles that we have brought together in one or other of these collective publications.

In *Les Sœurs Hortensias* by Henri Duvernois (1931), which Olivier Lapointe⁶ examined, the narrator, Roland Cavellier, writes pornographic novels. This practice places the fictional writer on the margins of the literary field, a field that he rarely sets foot in: he approaches writing as a professional, even a mercenary. However, the practice also positions the protagonist on the margins of his own life, incapable of loving and of being loved, and of finding his place in the novel’s society. The private life is thus confused with the literary life in order to signify the error of the protagonist’s ways.

Aline Francoeur from the University of Ottawa is, for her part, interested in the presence of dictionaries in nineteenth- and twentieth-century French novels (working from the digitized body of work in the FRANTEXT and

Gallica databases.)⁷ She shows that the dictionary can play all sorts of functions: obviously, the dictionary can be a source of knowledge and references that come to the aid of the character; the dictionary can be an authority, a unifying norm, as in the case of Flaubert's *Littre*; thirdly, the dictionary can appear as a book that one uses, leafs through, that one travels through within the contents of the novel; the dictionary can be the sole source of revenue and the main activity of a fictional author, as it is for d'Arthez in Balzac's *Lost Illusions*; finally, the dictionary can be an object that a character uses as a footrest, or as a writing desk.

Sylvie Ducas focusses on the character of the librarian in contemporary French fiction.⁸ She questions the representation, almost always negative, of the conveyor of books that librarians are. The treatment they receive is far from impartial in comparison to that of booksellers and, as we will see, publishers. However much the French love going there, the library is depicted as a burial site for literary works, a place of interment for which the author shows no consideration, rather than a place that preserves books. In these representations, the author, the solitary writer, a sort of guardian of lettered elitism, clashes with the librarian, the purveyor, the public servant, the democratizer of literature.

Finally, in a collection dedicated to romans à clef, and more generally to the question of references to reality in fiction, Mathilde Barraband paves the way for a poetics of the contemporary roman à clef.⁹ Taking the case of novels that feature the milieu of the far left in the May '68 generation as her point of departure, she explores the instigating role played by family names and by descriptions of characters, then provides a useful interrogation of reasons that can push authors towards the practice of narrative cryptography.

These examples, remarkable as they are, do not do justice to the wealth of topics that are addressed in the Gremlin's collections and during the scientific events that it has organized. Nevertheless, they demonstrate the variety of possibilities offered by profound analyses of works that have the reflexivity of literature as a key element (literary works that feature literary creation and the social world around it).

The Roles of the Publisher

In all of the above discussion, I have allowed myself a rather large historical framework (nineteenth to twenty-first centuries), but because of the diversity of the results to be presented, I have barely taken into account the historical transformations that occurred during the period in question. Stories about the literary life, about books and about writers have their historicity, one that intersects with the history of the literary publishing field without ever merging with it. That is what I will attempt to exemplify with representations of the character of the publisher in books about the literary life.¹⁰

Authors like Flaubert, Goncourt, Mallarmé, etc., whose voices remain prominent in our minds and who were convinced of the sacred and absolute character of literature without ever losing an extraordinary lucidity in their understanding of the social mechanisms of the literary world, experienced the nineteenth-century dawning of the media era in a painful fashion. In their eyes, the commodification of literature assumed proportions that were more far-reaching than those of the private patronage systems that, as far they were concerned, collapsed with the French Revolution. Following the lead of Chatterton de Vigny, these writers could only conceive of the commercialization of books with either fear or vexation. For a long time, there ruled, among those who defended the autonomy of the literary vocation, a mistrust with regard to a literary system considered to be corruptive and a contempt for those who were primarily responsible for maintaining this system, that is to say, publishers, journal editors and literary critics.

It is at this point that the book publisher becomes important (but not to be confused with either the printer or the bookseller whose functions tend to be specialized). The first appearance was also the most defining: we are talking here about the collection of pen portraits of publishers, of “varieties of booksellers,” as Balzac calls them in *Un grand homme de province à Paris*, / *A Great Man of the Provinces in Paris*, the second part of *Illusions perdues* / *Lost Illusions* published in 1839. The route that the young poet and journalist Lucien de Rubempré takes is paved with publishers. One is a down-and-out used bookseller. The other tries everything to lower the price paid to authors for their work. A third sits enthroned in his boutique where he

receives young, ambitious authors as if they were courtesans, etc. Through these portraits, it is possible to have an overview of the book publishing business in the Romantic era. However, it is merely a collection of pen portraits, none of which comes to life. Despite all the perspicacity of Balzac with regard to the publishing market in the 1830s, this nomenclature does not make the publisher a fully-fledged fictional character. Balzac is describing social types here, without attributing fictional depth to his publisher/bookseller characters. They may be present, but they have no real role in the narrative.

What happened then? Strangely, the publisher is the great forgotten one in stories about the literary life. With a few less-than-notable exceptions, the huge wave from 1880–1930 that multiplied the number of journalist, artist and socialite characters completely submerged this character, even as the symbolic and commercial significance of publishers increased in the literary field itself (think of Lemerre, Flammarion, Grasset, Gallimard.) It is only with the rise in the power of literary prizes, in which the publisher has a key role to play, that the publisher would enter the world of the story, albeit timidly. Whether it be in *Le prix Lacombyne* by Renée Dunan (1924) or in *Ariste ou L'apprenti intellectuel. Conte immoral* by Joseph Jacquin (1931), the role of publishers remained secondary, but they guided the protagonists' journeys, generally, according to the model in *Lost Illusions / Illusions perdues*, a young writer determined to break through but unaware of the moral dangers that lie in wait for him. The publisher always has a negative connotation: in *Ariste ou L'apprenti intellectuel*, the publisher Maigrelon (Thintall in English) is of the opinion that the publisher lacks the ability to judge that which he publishes and that it is pointless for him to read: "he bets on his jars of jam even if they have a pumpkin, gelatine and sugar base: guaranteed to be pure sugar and pure fruit. It is up to the buyer to taste and realize what's in it."¹¹ In *Le prix Lacombyne*, the publisher Taxi-Sabas is introduced as "a merchant without literature, a negotiator beyond compare,"¹² and the publisher Gargol as a "most illustrious merchant of printed paper."¹³ The semiotic disqualification of publishers is therefore without recourse and their fictional interest remains very limited.

After World War II, although not represented in a great number of stories, fictional publishers began to appear as rounder, more profound characters, not only in occasional walk-on roles, but as key actors in the narrative. A

fine example is found in a little-known novel by Paul Vialar entitled *Belada éditeur* (1957). Set in the 1930s, the story begins at a Parisian exhibition: James Belada, (who could well be a fictionalized description of Robert Denoël), recently arrived from Alsace, meets a woman who will become his mistress and his patroness in the world of letters. He is able to devote himself to his passion for books: he opens a bookstore followed by a publishing house. Belada obviously finds his voice in literary publishing. He encounters his calling. The profession of faith that he pronounces for himself is without a doubt that of the cultivated publisher:

That very night, yes, he defines himself, as such, and at the same time defines the publisher that he had always believed a publisher should be, his own role at the same time: the work for the work, whatever it was, considering nothing but its quality, its value, and without focussing on all those details of little importance whether they be moral or political, opportune or dangerous. To publish means to battle against cowards, imbeciles, sectarians, against oneself when necessary, and to do so as if one were accomplishing a mission, as if it were a calling, giving no thought to risk and in certain cases even to the possibility of martyrdom. A few years later, Belada said: “I publish” as if he were saying “I battle.”¹⁴

Nevertheless, in the novel, this discourse of justification without concession is accompanied in Belada’s publishing practice by a submission to the laws of the publishing market, particularly to the pricing system. His “battle” for a pure literature undergoes all sorts of compromises: Belada benefits from his social connections. He flatters the critics and attacks his competitors. He even launches a literary hoax: he invents a composite author consisting of the best of the most talented of his “stable” in order to be sure to win the “Grand Prix des Écrivains” (an obvious transposition of the prix Goncourt). Subsequently, history catches up with the publisher when his mistress become the publisher of “le parti bleu” (transposition of l’Action française). Under the Occupation, Balada must contend with the Nazis and contribute to official propaganda. He even ends up half-heartedly collaborating with the collaborationist journal that he publishes. It is that which finally leads him to commit suicide after the Liberation.

With the explosion over the past twenty-five years in the number of novels about the literary life, the publisher has finally become a required character,

almost always present and often playing a key role. How to explain this relatively sudden multiplicity and complexity? I offer three hypotheses that are in no way exclusive. First, in today's world, the publisher certainly still appears as a dangerous representative of the "literary strategy," but also as the author's partner whose role as an intermediary in the creative process is acknowledged. Whether they are managers or owners of publishing houses, publishers have been stripped of their financial power, which is now in the hands of an evil mega-administration. Subject to analogous constraints, they are forced to take up a position potentially aligned with that of the author against economic decision-makers (in *Quitter la ville* by Christine Angot¹⁵ or again in *Journal intime* by Nathalie Rheims). Second, there has been diversification in their mediating roles, which, even in fiction, can share the double burden of creativity and marketing: literary director (In *La petite marchande de prose* by Daniel Pennac, Benjamin Malaussène plays the role of the "scapegoat," paid to announce to authors that their book will not be published.), literary agent (*Les Sœurs de Prague* by Jérôme Garcin), or ghost writer (*Roman nègre* by Dan Franck). Third, there is the advent of that which I will refer to here (even if the term is problematic) as auto-fiction, that is, fiction in which the publisher takes up considerable space. If romans à clef don't disappear (Christine Arnothy seems to blame Bernard Fixot in *Une rentrée littéraire*), auto-fictions that feature publishers have multiplied since Louis-Ferdinand Céline began amusing himself at the expense of the "Nénéref," whether it be in *L'Auteur* by Vincent Ravalec, in which the author character dreams that Françoise Verny sticks needles into his body under the eyes of the reading committee, or in *Jérôme Lindon* by Jean Échenoz who retraces his own history at the Éditions de Minuit. Authors no longer conceiving themselves as exceptional beings (or conceiving themselves as such less often), separated from the social world (they are largely responsible from now on for the promotion of their books), they can no longer disregard the people who are primarily responsible for their relationship with readers, namely publishers.

Thus, the current era expresses a profound change in the representation of publishers: since the nineteenth century, they were always on the wrong side (in the eyes of the narrator) of an axiological line: on the side of money (economic capital) against the side of art (symbolic capital), on the side of industrial literature, enemies of pure literature.

This representation changed at the same time as the structure of the literary field. Pierre Bourdieu's theorization of the literary and publishing field with regards to a period (from 1848–1945) in which the ideology of the denial of the market economy came to its peak, all the more so because capitalist publishing was entering its phase of full development, created an irreconcilable tension between two production systems: one dominating on the symbolic level, the other dominating on the economic level.¹⁶ This agonistic vision of publishing, which is that of the elite in the publishing field, must be reconsidered in our times, marked as they are by a profound restructuring of this sector. One need only mention a few of the most noteworthy phenomena in order to be convinced: the take-over of publishing by huge multimedia giants, the democratization of critical and evaluation platforms, in particular on the Internet (lists personalized by “preference” algorithms, stars awarded by readers, “likes”), and the recentering of the field around a mainstream culture that embraces the marginalized (murder-mystery author Pierre Lemaitre winning the 2013 Prix Goncourt, the television host Bernard Pivot taking over the reins of the Académie Goncourt, and Frédéric Beigbeder, the recipient of the prix Renaudot, writing a column in the gossip magazine *Voici*). The context of today's literary publishing is the desanctification of great literature and the interpenetration of the commercial, artistic and media spheres, which is leading writers, publishers, librarians and other mediators to create a common front against the logic of rapid returns privileged by big business.

While before, they represented only an ethical or even a moral danger for art and authors, publishers have thus become central characters in stories about the literary life, finally taking on bodies and faces in the contemporary novel. They even speak on their own behalf.

Here it is important to note that at the same time, certain publishers have become more outspoken about general issues associated with culture and publishing. Since the nineteenth century, a few of them (Girardin, Charpentier, Michel Lévy, among others) had already been doing so. The only problem was, they were speaking out about subjects connected to the profession, such as the Belgian forgery scandal, the publishing crisis at the end of the nineteenth century or, more recently, the fixed book-price policy. It was not until the publication of Bernard Grasset's *L'Évangile de l'édition selon Charles Péguy* (1955) that editorial discussions that were not bibliophilic,

legal or technical became institutionalized. In the past few years, publishers like Hubert Nyssen (Actes Sud), Thierry Discepolo (Agone) and, above all, André Schiffrin, have worked to develop a more wide-ranging discourse with public appeal, a discourse aimed at counteracting assaults on lettered culture by the globalized market.

Another sort of narrative has had the tendency to take up more space during the course of the last half-century, namely the autobiographies of publishers. It seems to have now become a custom for an important publisher (Françoise Verny, Maurice Nadeau, Jean-Jacques Pauvert in France, Jacques Fortin in Québec) to join in on the game of memoirs rich in anecdotes about authors, colleagues and the literary underworld. In short, if an author has reached the status of a public figure for whom an absence of media attention is practically impossible (Salinger in the United States and Réjean Ducharme in Québec), then that is also the case, *a fortiori*, for the publisher.

A new genre has finally appeared. Just when media coverage of the internal workings of the intellectual world was creating profits unheard of since the nineteenth century, a few novels appeared that were determined to turn the talk over to publishers and that even made their voices the principal ones.¹⁷ Take these two examples from France: *BW* by Lydie Salvayre, in which the voices of the author and of Bernard Wallet, her companion and founder of the Éditions Verticales, intermingle; and *La liseuse* by Paul Fournel, who was himself publisher at Ramsay and at Laffont. The former novel features the words and deeds of the character, Bernard Wallet, who becomes BW: an exceptional personality, he is a traveller-turned-publisher of avant-garde texts before he gives up on that profession and then, because of an eye disease, finds himself incapable of reading; Salvayre, therefore, becomes his eyes and his hands in order to tell the story of his life, his anger, his opinions. Written by a novelist who is also a publisher, Paul Fournel's *La liseuse* focusses on the character of Robert Dubois, who is also the narrator and who works as literary director in the publishing house that he founded but had to sell due to financial problems. A publisher who is disillusioned by the entire literary production and promotion game, he rediscovers his enthusiasm when a trainee puts an electronic reader into his hands. Together with a few of the publishing house's other trainees, he decides to found a "secret society" whose mission will be to publish texts that will

rejuvenate contemporary literature. Their goal: develop a form of electronic publishing that favours the revival of literary genres.

It is important to note that, in *BW*, the publisher Bernard Wallet expresses himself through the voice of his writing companion (with the support of a series of stylistic procedures such as free indirect discourse, *mise en abyme*—“I am in the process of writing the preceding when BW calls me¹⁸...”), while Paul Fournel, a member of the Oulipo, the group of authors adept at working within writing constraints, selects the ancient closed form of the “*sixtine*” for the structure of his novel. The choice of these oblique modes of enunciation is explained by the situation in which the authors find themselves (Lydie Salvayre speaks on behalf of her companion publisher; Paul Fournel is both author and publisher at the same time), but also by the publisher’s particular position of enunciation: responsible for expert judgement, he avoids putting himself into a classical narrative mode of expression on the same level as that of the author, as if this always ambivalent being (intermediary in creativity, financial player, worldly figure) has to find a distinctive mode of expression within the fictional framework.

In both cases, the publisher is the one who takes a stand. One finds sententious declarations (“We have emptied the books of what they had in them in order to sell more of them, and we don’t sell more of them. Everything is our fault.”¹⁹) and regret for a time when publishing “was a culture, a resistance, a world that we can no longer conceive of.”²⁰ The dominant theme of these declarations of the publisher is the decline of the literary system: nostalgia for a sort of golden age when publishers exercised their mastery, or their expert judgement made them exist symbolically and socially; dispossessed by the publishing business, publishers make their mark through resistance. *BW* and Robert Dubois produce a discourse of truth, a discourse that reveals the backrooms of an intellectually corruptible milieu.

Much has changed, therefore, since Balzac’s gallery of publishers’ portraits. A period of major development in fiction about the literary life, the contemporary era is the theatre of an unprecedented coming together of authors and publishers within the framework of fiction. It is certainly not new that these people in real life attend the same social functions or even participate in the same sphere of influence (Charpentier and the naturalist

novel; Gallimard and Gide's then Paulhan's *Nouvelle revue française*; Éditions de Minuit and the Nouveau Roman), but henceforth, this coming together also occurs in fiction. Publishers, privileged witnesses and agents that they are, have finally reunited with authors in the revelation of a corrupt literary and publishing life, which they vigorously denounce because they resolutely adhere to their primary cause, Literature.

Novels about the literary life, and more largely locations of expression of literary-life imaginaries (journal articles, plays, poems, novels inspired by news about the literary life) are closely related to transformations in the world of the book, of publishing and of authors. They do not necessarily embrace these transformations, and they remain conditioned by the fact that they express the point-of-view of the writers. However, it is clear that this genre apparently without a history (which no doubt explains why each appearance of a novel about the literary life, especially if it is a roman à clef, has a whiff of scandal although it is essentially telling the same story as hundreds of others before it) in fact unfurls a parallel history, both social and imaginary, of literature, of the book and of publishing.

NOTE BIOGRAPHIQUE

Anthony Glinoyer holds the Canada Research Chair in the history of publishing and literary sociology and is a professor at the Université de Sherbrooke. His work focusses primarily on the history of publishing (*Naissance de l'Éditeur. L'édition à l'âge romantique* with Pascal Durand in 2005), on the study of representations of the literary life in literature (co-editor of *Fictions du champ littéraire* in 2010, of *Imaginaires de la vie littéraire* in 2012 and of *Romans à clés* in 2014), and on groups of authors and artists (*L'âge des cénacles. Confraternités littéraires et artistiques au XIX^e siècle* with Vincent Laisney in 2013). The director of the Gremlin, Anthony Glinoyer also launched the Socius project in 2014, which has produced re-editions of the classics in literary social theory, re-edited or original bibliographies, and a lexicon of concepts introduced by an international team (see the open-access site ressources-socius.info).

Notes

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² The Gremlin is currently composed of Mathilde Barraband (Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières), Pascal Brissette (Université McGill), Björn-Olav Dozo (Université de Liège), Anthony Glinoyer (Université de Sherbrooke), Olivier Lapointe (Université de Montréal), Michel Lacroix (Université du Québec à Montréal), Marie-Pier Luneau (Université de Sherbrooke), Guillaume Pinson (Université Laval), Marie-Ève Riel (Université du Québec à Montréal), Chantal Savoie (Université du Québec à Montréal), together with more than thirty other collaborators. See the group's web site <http://legremlin.org>.

³ See the article "Sociocritique, médiations et interdisciplinarité," *Texte*, 45 (2009), re-edited on [socius : Ressources sur le littéraire et le social](#).

⁴ In this regard, I refer to [Lexique socius](#), which elaborates concepts specific to social literary approaches and to which the Gremlin is a major contributor.

⁵ For more about this concept, see the Gremlin article "Fictions, figurations, configurations: introduction à un projet," published in 2010 *Discours social* and available on the [Gremlin website](#).

⁶ Olivier Lapointe, "De l'étoffe dont on fait les pornographes. Pornographie et atopie dans *Les sœurs Hortensias* d'Henri Duvernois," in *Fictions du champ littéraire*, ed. Le Gremlin (Discours social, 2010) 95–112, new edition on the [Gremlin website](#).

⁷ Aline Francoeur, "L'écrivain français et le dictionnaire dans son œuvre: objectivation, symbolisation, symbiose constant," in *Mémoires du livre / Studies in Book Culture*, 2, no. 2 (Spring 2011). <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1001763ar>.

⁸ Sylvie Ducas, "Fables contemporaines du 'bibliothécaire en morceaux' ou l'auteur bibliophobe et l'a-bibliothèque," in *Imaginaires de la vie littéraire. Fiction, figuration, configuration*, eds. Björn-Olav Dozo, Anthony Glinoyer and Michel Lacroix (Presses universitaires de Rennes, coll. "Interférences," 2012), 237–250.

⁹ Mathilde Barraband, "Organisations secrètes. La Gauche prolétarienne dans la littérature française contemporaine," in *Romans à clés. Les ambivalences du réel*, eds. Anthony Glinoyer and Michel Lacroix (Liège: Presses universitaires de Liège, 2014), 179–193.

¹⁰ This research is expanded upon in the article "Figurations d'éditeurs dans la littérature française contemporaine" published in the journal *French Forum*, 40, nos. 2–3, 2015.

¹¹ Joseph Jacquin, *Ariste ou L'apprenti intellectuel. Conte immoral* (Lille-Paris : Éditions du Mercure de Flandre, 1931), 38.

¹² Renée Dunan, *Le prix Lacombyne* (Paris : Mornay, 1924), 64–65.

¹³ Renée Dunan, *Le prix Lacombyne* (Paris : Mornay, 1924), 68.

¹⁴ Paul Vialar, *Belada, éditeur* (Paris : Del Duca, 1957), 60.

¹⁵ The bibliographical reference for this text and for the others in the list that follows it can be found in the French Novels about the Literary-Life [bibliography](#) compiled by the Gremlin.

¹⁶ See, in particular, “Une révolution conservatrice dans l’édition,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, no. 126–127 (March 1999), 3–28.

¹⁷ Moreover, it is not unique to France: Jonathan Galassi, former poetry editor of the *Paris Review* and editorial director of Farrar, Straus & Girou, recently published the novel *Muse* (Knopf, 2015) which features a publisher.

¹⁸ Lydie Salvayre, *BW* (Paris : Seuil, 2009), 48.

¹⁹ Paul Fournel, *La liseuse* (Paris : P.O.L., 2012), 35.

²⁰ Lydie Salvayre, *BW* (Paris : Seuil, 2009), 69.

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