

The Literary Canon in the Publishing Apparatus: The Book Series “Les Grands Ecrivains Français” (1887–1913)

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This essay shows how publishing mechanisms can influence literary discourse in its most critical part, the literary canon. The example of the book series “Les Grands Ecrivains Français” (1887–1913) illustrates how publishing practices such as serialization, material features such as format and the frontispiece, and functions such as that of a series editor contribute to the construction of a literary canon in ways that can be essential to its meaning.

Keywords: French publishing / 19th cent. / book series / French writers / literary canon

At the end of the nineteenth century, French editors developed their businesses to the point that they became intrinsically linked and could therefore influence literary discourse and practice in a way that had not been seen before. In this “era of editors,”¹ an author could not write without thinking about where to publish, in what format, in what series, with what frontispiece, and, last but not least, how to obtain the money for the publishing rights. These questions could determine the very “essence” of the author’s work, and all the answers to those questions lay with the editor.

This essay deals with an example of this situation that influenced some of the essential levels of literary discourse because its object was not any individual literary work (e.g., a novel, a poetry volume, or a theatre play), but works of what one could call literary history. The object of my research is the book series “Les Grands Ecrivains Français,” which was published by Hachette between 1887 and 1913 and contained fifty-six volumes about the greatest French writers. As one can easily see from its name, this book series acted openly as a canon-formation instrument, situating itself at the center of the literary field, which was, as always, disputed by many forces of French society. Deciding who the greatest authors of

the past were, explaining why, and thus providing a definition of literature was a way of imposing upon writers, publishers, readers, and other actors in the literary field the very conditions of their existence as actors in this particular “art field.”

Adapting Foucault’s definition of the “apparatus” (*dispositif*), the publishing apparatus is a heterogenic ensemble containing discourses such as literature, institutions such as publishers, administrative measures such as publishing or organizational decisions, functions such as editor, translator, and so on, laws and regulations such as those about copyright—all of which strategically influence the balance of power. Book historians (see *Histoire de l’édition française*; Mollier, *La lecture*) have shown how publishing practices are among the factors that determine the meaning of literary discourses and of all associated discourses. In the case at hand, the publishing apparatus determined the creation of a version of the literary canon that had two main objectives: to surpass the antagonistic views of literary history in French society, and to make this comprehensive canon accessible to the mass of readers that emerged in the late nineteenth century.

The practice of book series

Although the book series “La Bibliothèque bleue” from Troyes existed before the French Revolution, the book series as a publishing practice was invented in the middle of the nineteenth century (see Olivero). By that time, books came to be published as parts of coherent series that were designed as long-term projects and were to be more accessible to the common reader. Although for the French world the system was invented by Gervais Charpentier in the 1840s, all major nineteenth-century editors used it, and among them Louis Hachette was the largest. He created a proper publishing empire in which all the books were ordered in series designated for all categories of the public. Although literature was not the only domain in which he succeeded (he sold travel guides and magazines such as *Le tour du monde* as well as schoolbooks), he used the prestige of French classical literature as an opportunity to develop his business.

Hachette always had a sense of social trends and managed to adapt in order to make the best of them. When the railway system expanded in France, he opened rail-station bookshops to reach large numbers of readers in a situation in which reading was the first help in dealing with long-distance travel. When the methods of German philology were adopted in France, he created the perfect occasion for their application: the first complete series of French classical writers, “Les Grands Ecrivains de la France.” In this

book series, all the great names of seventeenth-century literature such as Mme de Sévigné, Corneille, Molière, and so on were published along with the critical apparatus (notes, variants, annotations, comments, glossaries, etc.) that German philology proposed to the French scholars.

His successors followed his lead and, when the new idea was materialized in 1887, they quickly saw its potential and embraced it. Their idea was to create a series not of literary works (they had already done that, and in the best possible form, that of the critical edition), but of literary volumes about the best French writers of the past written by the best French historians of the present.

Granted, the idea was not an absolute original—its source, curiously mentioned in all the copyright contracts for the volumes, was the “English Men of Letters” series directed by John Morley (see Kijinski). This was in fact the first, and the most successful, example of what one might call an international editing and literary practice: that of the canon-formation book series presenting the great writers of a nation’s past, written by the most learned minds of the present, and addressed to the common reader. Morley’s series inspired the series of Jean Jules Jusserand, but also, on the other side of the Atlantic, Charles Warner’s series “American Men of Letters.” There were similarities between the three series, such as the material presentation of the books, the national approach to literature, or the valorization of the “glorious past” compared to the “corrupt present”; but, even though the model was the same, its actualization in the different literary spaces produced different results, with different success. In the United Kingdom, the series “English Men of Letters” offered a comprehensive view of English literature, trying to establish some unifying characteristics that would grant it an identity through biographies of its great writers (in what Stefan Collini called a “Whig interpretation of English literature”). In the United States, the series “American Men of Letters” was initiated by an author (Charles Warner) whose biography had been refused by Morley and who wanted to give an American answer to the British series in order to establish the national specificity of the young American literature (see Casper). In France, Jusserand, developing Morley’s model, wanted “to offer biographies not only of the greatest writers of all times, but of their works,” making the decisive step towards the book and the formula that defined French literary studies until the *Nouvelle Critique*, *l’homme et l’œuvre*.

In the French case, the idea of the series perfectly addressed the situation Jusserand² described in the *avertissement*:

On les aime et on les néglige. Ces grands hommes semblent trop lointains, trop différents, trop savants, trop inaccessibles. Le but de la présente collection est de ramener près du foyer ces grands hommes logés dans des temples qu’on ne visite

pas assez, et de rétablir entre les descendants et les ancêtres l'union d'idées et de propos qui, seule, peut assurer, malgré les changements que le temps impose, l'intègre conservation du génie national. [We love them and we neglect them. These great men seem too distant, too different, too learned, too inaccessible. The purpose of this collection is to bring closer to our homes these great men who live in temples that we do not visit enough, and restore between descendants and ancestors the union of ideas and words that alone can ensure the conservation of the national genius despite the changes imposed by time.]³

Originally designed to be called “Les Immortels” and to have only forty volumes, as homage to the forty members of the French Academy, it finally came to be published under the label “Les Grands Ecrivains Français” (a name that points to the extant “Grands Ecrivains de la France” series). Between 1887 and 1913, “Jusserand’s series,” as it was known, was one of the most successful and intriguing enterprises among those that had tried to retell the story of French literature. The research on the matter (see Compagnon; Jey) showed that, at that time, the history of French literature was the terrain of continuous debate about the essence of the French *Volksgeist* (*l'esprit français*) and of the nation’s qualities. For example, to Gustave Lanson, a literary historian that strongly influenced the reform of French literary education, a writer like Molière was a crucial embodiment of the French spirit because of his common-sense philosophy that was considered the most defining feature of the French people.

In this context of nation-building (see Thiesse), literature had political meaning, and every writer, every work was considered a carrier of a quality of the French nation (Corneille’s theatre was representative of the courage and bravery the French should show if they were confronted again with Prussian invaders, who defeated them at Sedan). One phrase of Gustave Lanson, who contributed two volumes to “Jusserand’s series,” shows particularly well how great writers of the past were seen at the end of the nineteenth century:

C’est une absurdité de n’employer qu’une littérature monarchique et chrétienne à l’éducation d’une démocratie qui n’admet point de religion d’Etat. [It is absurd to use only monarchic and Christian literature in order to prepare for a democracy that does not accept a state religion.] (cited in Jey, 1998)

Following this argument, the series “Grands Ecrivains Français” has a particular content. If one asks what century was most represented, the “absolutist” seventeenth century or the “democratic” eighteenth century, the answer will be surprising: it is neither the “absolutist” writers, nor the “democratic” writers, but the writers of the nineteenth century that are the most represented in “Jusserand’s series.” This is a curious fact because,

originally, the series could have easily been considered “conservative” for at least two reasons: because of the academic patronage of the series (not only had Jusserand intended to name it after the members of the French Academy but, in 1893, he was even awarded a prize for his initiative), and because of the ban stipulated in the original contract between the editor and the publisher Hachette that no living author was to benefit from a volume in the series.

To determine which volumes were the most successful, the sales figures are also surprising. The list of the great French authors “voted” by the buyers was not exactly the same as that of the literary historians and critics. Granted, the big names (Corneille, Molière, and Voltaire) were there, but the top three best sellers were Mme de Sévigné, Pascal, and, surprisingly, the nineteenth-century romantic poet Alfred de Musset. This demonstrates that readers’ preferences did not exactly correspond with those of the historians, either conservative or modernist.

It can thus be suggested that the “contemporary opening” of the series can be explained by the fact that it was not only an academic literary project, but also a public-oriented one and, last but not least, a business venture. In 1887, the editors at Hachette accepted the proposal of the young Jusserand because they had seen it as a profitable opportunity unexplored by other publishers. To reach larger audiences, such a series should have obviously aimed for the “classics” (at a time when educational reforms were redefining the notion of “classic”), but also for writers known to the common reader: writers of his own time, his father’s time, or his grandfather’s time.

There is another key element to be taken into consideration: the idea was not of a book written by a single author (like Lanson’s best-selling *Histoire de la littérature française*, 1894), not even of a book with multiple authors, but of a series of books that contained and respected the practices of this kind of publishing. Beginning with Charpentier, the book-series practice had two main purposes: to order knowledge and to disseminate it. Every book series was a unifying project respected by each book published in it, and every book series wanted to reach the largest audience possible, thus continuing the enlightenment ideas of the eighteenth century. “Jusserand’s series” was no exception to this model, and the aim of this project was to reunite all the great writers from the recent or distant past under a single framework that would render them equal to each other and equally accessible to the common reader.

This is why counting the writers and respective periods (the “literary centuries”) does not make much sense in this kind of project, in which the publishing apparatus puts the emphasis on the global approach to the

past: every writer is as good as any other (because this is the condition of their existence in the series) and they are all “Grands Ecrivains Français.” When the fortieth volume was published and the editors realized that several great authors such as Molière and Voltaire had not been covered yet, they extended the series until the final fifty-sixth volume, which covered Ronsard and was written by Jusserand himself and published in 1913.

The material meaning

Publishing the volumes in a book series brought about not only a serialization of the titles, but also a more complex standardization that made them materially similar as well. As always, the material side had its own meaning. In the case of Jusserand’s series, the format, the frontispiece, and other features that Genette called the peritext can help in understanding the general meaning of the collection.

First of all, the format chosen by the editors indicates what kind of audience they wanted to reach. The dimensions of the book, dictated by the number of foldings of the paper, determine the way the book is used. The format affects the price (smaller formats are cheaper and hence more accessible) but also reading practices (larger formats could only be read in libraries, whereas smaller formats were easier to carry and could thus be read everywhere).

Judging by the printers’ textbooks of the nineteenth century, the 16° format of Jusserand’s series was a rather small one, used mostly for “books of instruction and leisure.” The other popular formats were 8° (“elegant and beautiful, most appreciated by readers and most frequent”) and 12° (“adapted to the classics, novels, and other common books, it is the middle way between the 8° and the 16°”). One can see, then, that with the 16° format, Jusserand and Hachette were aiming at a large audience that needed to be reunited by the great writers of the past in order to rediscover the virtues of the French nation. The volumes had to be more than common (which was 12°) because they needed to be present in every house and accompany all those that the school apparatus had rendered citizens.

Another material feature of the series went into the same direction: Jusserand forbade the use of footnotes that could distract the common readership, recalling complex scholarly editions. On the other hand, he claimed that the names of the authors were enough to vouch for the quality of the volumes:

L'idée de l'édition en beaucoup de volumes, des notes qui détourneront le regard, de l'appareil scientifique qui les entoure, peut-être le vague souvenir du collègue, de l'étude classique, du devoir juvénile, oppriment l'esprit. [The thought of an edition in multiple volumes, of footnotes that distract the view, the scientific apparatus that comes with it, and the possible vague memory of the college, the classical study, and the school homework oppress the spirit.]

One of the most interesting features of the series was the frontispiece portrait, an image of the covered great French writer reproduced at the beginning of the book. By grasping this new possibility in printing, Jusserand inscribed himself into a trend that came to dominate nineteenth-century publishing practices, that of the image that not only accompanies the text, but also explains it and makes it more attractive. The “physical reproduction” of an “authentic image” of a great writer had the purpose of offering readers an intimate sensorial knowledge of their ancestor, whom they could see even before starting to read about the writer’s life and works. Like all reproductions of works of art, a portrait of an author brings the common reader closer to the otherwise inaccessible original. The reduction of the portrait to a very accessible format and its reproduction in thousands or tens of thousands of copies enabled the publisher to reach readers that could never visit the museum or the library in which the original was stored. I should also note that this was the time when family albums were becoming common to the bourgeois readers, who received access around 1890 to photos of their parents and perhaps even grandparents, and with it a new consciousness of the past. In this context, frontispiece-portraits of the great writers of the past made them become part of the extended family that was the French nation.

One last feature that appeared in every volume and therefore needs to be mentioned is the list of volumes already published and of those that were in print. This list was a constant reminder that every book was part of a series and should be read as such. Initially, the list followed the order of publication, but in the last years (and in the “posthumous life” of the series, after 1913, when reprints of the original volumes were published), the list became alphabetical. This material feature is a strong argument in favor of the “democratic” view that the series founder and editors held of the canon. The great writers were arranged not by their greatness (once they were included in the series, they were as great as any other), but by external, objective criteria (publication year and the alphabet).

It can then be said that all the material characteristics of the series had the purpose of opening the literary canon to the emerging mass audience. By opening, I mean two things. First, the canonical list was comprehensive and all writers had the same “rights” in the series: the same yellow cover, dimensions, number of pages, and type of frontispiece, and no

footnotes in any volume. Second, the lives and works of the great writers became accessible to a larger audience than before, through the low price, the user-friendly format, and the familiar photo.

The series editor

The decision to publish a book about one writer or another, placing him or her among the Great French Writers, was a result of a complex set of circumstances. The decisive factor, however, was the series editor. If, according to Foucault, the author is a function that brings order into a discourse, in the case of a book series this definition applies more than in the case of a single book. The series editor is “the author” of all the volumes, sharing with the individual authors not only the philosophy and guidelines of the series that the authors had to follow, but also the money that Hachette offered for the copyright.⁴

The position of the series editor—much different from that of the publisher, who owned the press—was relatively new; it was introduced in the 1860s by Louis Hachette, who had several important people such as Education Minister Victor Duruy, or Member of Parliament Edouard Charton, run individual series of his press. It was the first time that an editor persuaded important figures to serve as intermediaries between him and the writers and to coordinate a number of publications that could not be managed by a single person (see Mollier, *Louis Hachette*). In the 1890s, this practice became common and the position of series editor became one of the key positions in the literary field, functioning like a double mirror between the authors and the public (see Charle).

Jean Jules Jusserand, who had served as *élève-consul* at the French embassy in London, where he witnessed the success of a similar series, “The English Men of Letters,” directed by John Morley, thought that this kind of series might also be useful in France, and presented the project to Hachette publishers. Seeing the potential for success, they accepted it and named Jusserand the series editor. What is important for my argument is the kind of activity (“intellectual work”) that Jusserand was engaged in and that made him the “author” of the series, who was more important for its meaning than the authors of the individual volumes.

First of all, in cooperation with Hachette, Jusserand adapted his project to the constraints of serial publishing and the market. Each book had to have the same structure (what counted was the “life, work, and influence” of each great writer), format, number of pages (around 200), and price. Due to these unifying interventions in some of the key features of a vol-

ume, Jusserand became a decisive factor in the writing of the volumes even before the first author started to write it. In a second step, he had to find the authors, those “important figures whose names alone could guarantee the quality of the volumes.” Given the differences in political positions that characterized the literary field at that time (see Compagnon), this was not an easy task, especially because Jusserand had to convince the authors to respect his guidelines. In the beginning, he managed to gather around his project the most prestigious literary figures such as Anatole France, Jules Lemaître, Ferdinand Brunetière, Gaston Boissier, Gaston Paris, Jules Simon, and Albert Sorel. Eventually, some of them retired or refused to respect their contracts (e.g., the conservative critic Brunetière), but other important people joined the project; most importantly the literary historian Gustave Lanson, who wrote the volumes Brunetière had declined, symbolically modernizing literary scholarship. Finding authors was always a networking task for the series editor but, when the series became better known in the literary field, participation in this project was a sign of prestige. However, the criteria upon which an author was accepted into the project were complex, and the ideological explanation does not cover all the stakes. Writing for a series designed for the common reader and thus presenting knowledge acceptable by all rather than some highly provocative scholarship, the authors could also swap the “great writers” with each other. The result depended mostly on two factors: the author was suitable if he had previously worked or published about that particular “great writer” or if he was famous enough to contribute to the prestige of the series.

After an author had been assigned a particular “great writer” (and the contract with Hachette had been signed), the most difficult part was waiting for the manuscript. According to the publishing principle of the series, the volumes were to be published regularly in order to form and retain a faithful audience. However, as Jusserand wrote in a letter, “these authors have simply no word” (“ces auteurs manquent tellement de parole”). The publishing rhythm of the series and the order of publication changed continuously, depending on the delays by the authors. In retrospect, one can see that, during the first ten years, there were approximately four volumes per year, but from then on the number decreased to two (or even one, in the last decade). Once the author had sent him the manuscript, Jusserand had to proofread and negotiate with him on all the features that did not follow the original guidelines. There were also cases when Jusserand rejected the manuscript because it was too long and did not fit the standard model of the series. Jusserand was also preoccupied, as can be seen from his letters, with the frontispiece portrait of each “great writer,” perhaps even more preoccupied than the authors themselves, which means that he

was more aware than them of the importance of the portrait to potential readers.

The work of Jusserand as a series editor is therefore situated into a space defined, on the one hand, by the freedom of each author and, on the other, by the contractual stipulations that commanded the project. The importance of all his tasks marks the transformation of the series editor into a professional with a clearly defined job. However, there is more to Jusserand's work. By partaking in the creation of this project, and by intervening at different moments of its execution, he questioned the very meaning of the concept of the "author"—in this particular case, the author as a literary critic or as a literary historian. The auctorial intention lies not in a single person, but in at least two: the one that writes the volume and the one that runs the series project.

Conclusion

The problems raised by Jusserand's series are more numerous than those I have tried to suggest here. Even the definition of the volumes as he puts it ("life, works, and influence") poses the problem of the biography's role in literary history as well as the problem of the concept of the literary canon that I have reduced to a simple list of "great writers." However, all I wanted to demonstrate is that every discussion of literary concepts must be made with regard to the practices that bring them into reality. The publishing apparatus, with all its different elements (the practice of standardized serial publishing, the materiality of the book, the intellectual activity of the series editor, etc.), cannot be reduced to a simple context because it contributes to the creation and recreation of the literary concepts and figures. The "Grands Ecrivains Français" series marks a moment in the evolution of the idea of literature when it was considered an expression of the nations' spirit, while inscribing itself in mass culture and opening itself to a mass audience.

NOTES

¹ The third volume of the *Histoire de l'édition française*, which covers the nineteenth century, has the subtitle *Le temps des éditeurs*.

² Jean Jules Jusserand (1855–1932) was an important literary and political figure of the period. He served as an ambassador in Denmark and the United States (between 1902 and 1925) and published several books and articles on English literature.

³ The *avertissement* was written by Jusserand and published in all the volumes of the series, as well as in all of the publisher's other catalogues. The source of this and the following citations is the first volume of the series, *Mme de Sévigné*, by Gaston Boissier (1887).

⁴ According to the copyright contract preserved in the Hachette archives, for each volume the author received 2,000 francs, and the series editor received 500 francs. Each volume was thus, so to speak, 80% written by the author whose name was on the title page and 20% by Jusserand. However, Jusserand's contribution to all the volumes makes him the real "author" of the series.

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Literarni kanon v založniškem aparatu: knjižna zbirka »Les Grands Ecrivains Français« (1887–1913)

Ključne besede: francosko založništvo / 19. stol. / knjižne serije / / francoski pisatelji / literarni kanon

Po Michelu Foucaultu diskurze obvladujejo nekateri nadzorni postopki in mehanizmi, ki vanje vnašajo »red«. Po mnenju Rogerja Chartierja naj bi bila prav knjiga kot materialni predmet eden takšnih mehanizmov, saj s tem, ko uvaja nekakšen »red knjig«, njeni procesi in značilnosti vplivajo na sam pomen besedil, katerih posrednica je. Prispevek namerava na podlagi teh podmen ugotavljati in ocenjevati takšne pomenske učinke na konkretnem primeru. Leta 1887 je založba Hachette začela izdajati

zbirko kritičnih monografij, posvečenih »Velikim francoskim književnikom«. Te knjige, namenjene širokemu bralskemu krogu, ki so jih napisali najpomembnejši tedanji zgodovinarji in kritiki (Gustave Lanson, Émile Faguet, Gaston Paris in drugi), so skušale sodobnemu bralcu približati »velika imena preteklosti«. Na zbirko »Veliki francoski književniki« (1887-1913) in njeno poslanstvo kanonizacije lahko gledamo kot na mehanizem, ki vnaša poseben red v diskurz o literaturi nekega obdobja, ki je bilo priča vzpostavljanju literarne zgodovine.

Raziskava se torej vprašuje o naslednjem: kako ta mehanizem (zbirka poljudnoznanstvenih monografij) vpliva na ta diskurz? Kakšne so založniške omejitve (pogodba, struktura knjig, format, naslovnica itd.) in kakšen je delež teh formalnih omejitev pri izvedbi pomena in idej, ki jih posredujejo te knjige?

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