“Who Chooses?”: Literature and Literary Mediation

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The question *Who chooses?* rarely comes to the fore of serious interest in literary studies. Quite the opposite; even in the traditional sociological perspective focused on the author-work-reader triangle, the question of mediation seems to be a bit suppressed, as though it were too trivial. Derivatives of Roman Jakobson’s communication model offer better opportunities to conceptualize mediation, but truly promising approaches are only offered by newer systemic views on literature.[1] Among the four types of action roles that the participants in the literary system can adopt, in his empirical theoretical model Schmidt has justifiably grounded the role of a *literary mediator* as one of the constituent pillars of intra-systemic communication. Similarly, in Bourdieu’s sociological model of the cultural and literary field, the mediating function turns out to be the crucial spot where the trajectories of two antagonistic types of capital – economic and symbolic – most obviously intersect; and it is art in particular where such crossings produce the most contradictory effects. The importance of literary mediation in the formation of national literary repertoires has also been clearly indicated in research on the dynamics and interactions of literary polysystems – especially regarding the innovations and influences that reach target systems through the corpus of translated literature (cf. Even-Zohar, Codde).

Traditional institutions of literary mediation in modern European literatures seem to be the literary magazine and (literary) publisher. Literary sociology (e.g., Norbert Groeben, Hugo Verdaasdonk, Kees van Rees, etc.) has systematically investigated how new works travel through the mechanisms of the literary market and media and has offered an empirical description of these dynamics. The journey of literary works through editorial filters, reviews, critiques, and essays, and later through the post-processing of literary studies (which the procedures of canonization can return to the cultural space in various ways) has been a legitimate field of research at least since literary studies became intrigued by the literary canon. However, if we remain faithful to our initial question *Who chooses?* we must seriously consider all that takes place *before* – precisely that which often becomes a topic of café conversations, but seldom a subject of systematic reflection.

It comes as no surprise that many answers will be connected to a figure; that is, to the function of an editor. We are interested in the "editor" both as a theoretical model and as a historical figure in various social, political, and economic circumstances. The "editor" is a point where the art world makes contact with the economic world; with one foot he stands in the world of unlimited freedom of authorial creation characteristic of modern artistic systems, and with the other foot he is firmly anchored in a specific structure and specific hierarchy (economics and politics). Indeed, the editor represents the figure through which an artist – if he does not want to remain obscure – must actually meet the economic order of the society that merely enables his artifacts to be brought into the world.

In the first place, an editor is an individual with a specific aesthetic taste, and good editors are often also ideal midwives of a text, sometimes even its (co)authors. However, in this particular case we are not so much intrigued by this "maieutic" role of the editor; of far more interest is his position as *a decision-maker*. In practice, a fairly complex network of factors plays into the process of "co-deciding" with the editor, which therefore define what is to be "chosen" in a certain situation and, eventually, what is to be "read" in a certain culture. The concept of *taste,* complicated and problematic in itself, turns out to be insufficient and a set of other parameters must be considered.

One of these is connected to the fact already alluded to that a modern editor is always part of a publisher's organizational structure; part of its internal hierarchy, which is ultimately limited by *the market economy* – that is, by a positive financial balance. An editor therefore always thinks with his "sixth sense" for sales success. However, when the system is regulated differently, not only left to the free market but subsidized in various ways, the question arises in what ways and to what degree active or passive politics choose instead of an editor, or with him. Here, a wide range of problems can be envisioned, ranging from the quiet exclusion of anti-regime works in the regulated presses of totalitarian systems to contemporary cases of positive discrimination in favor of marginal social groups; from expert readers and committees, their structure and methods of nomination, to lists of works that ensure the translating publisher a certain subsidy – all of these are the ways that (cultural) politics are translated into practice in the production of an unstable intra-systemic boundary between "artistic" and "trivial." Another parameter that needs to be considered carefully in this context is censorship, which again can be understood in a broad range: from its explicit authoritarian form and perfidious communist (self)censorship to the contemporary legalistic variation, which comes under the threat of unpleasant defamation lawsuits.

These ways of "helping" the editor in the selection process are relevant for both the corpus of literature created by domestic authors as well as the corpus of translated literature, which itself is also always mediated through editorial choices. However, these two corpuses also differ in several significant ways. Regarding the choices of *translated literature* – which actually has enabled the spiritual space of the world "republic of letters" – the role and motifs of the cultural mediators (i.e., enthusiastic translators) that often motivate and trigger certain publishers in the target systems have to be considered at the micro level. On the other hand, the growing role of national and international literary awards and the phenomenon that turns writers into media icons are also among the unavoidable questions. Another problem that should be addressed is international cultural strategies, active promotional politics, and the obvious *lack of symmetry* in the formation of trans-national canonical structures, "world" or "global" literature, which has been discussed passionately in contemporary comparatism (e.g., Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova, David Damrosch, etc.).[2]

Regarding *domestic literatures,* one should not overlook the fact that the participants in the literary system usually adopt several different action roles simultaneously so that they remain in mutual tension, which is particularly true for the mediatory role. The combination of a literary producer and an (influential) mediator is especially interesting from the viewpoint of the concentration of symbolic capital and power in the cultural field. In the past, such combinations have often effectively promoted certain literary streams, groups, generations, or simply ambitious *cliques*. Its inherent (potential) conflict of interests can also affect translation politics while it encourages linked sales and "compensatory" under-the-table deals about mutual translations and editions in the spirit of one hand washing the other. The impact of the distribution of power and the operation of *informal social networks* within the literary field on the careers of individual authors and groups – which is often reflected at a pre-theoretical level – is far from being investigated sufficiently.

Finally, the mediatory role has to be put into a time perspective. We have to acknowledge the fact that the practices and models of literary mediation as well as the functions of editors and other mediators were not at all constant in different times and circumstances. This is why we need to carefully consider the historical evolution of the mediatory sector, the influence of various models of regulating book markets, the impact of political systems and their changing ideological foundations (e.g. liberalism, capitalism, communism, or democracy) and the specific problems of literary mediation in small (peripheral) and large (dominant) systems. Finally, it is hardly possible to avoid the question of whether the literary mediation

in modern literary systems such as we have known since the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries will preserve its typical features in the future, or whether more fundamental modifications are to be expected.

Contributions

By putting our initial question, the apparent simplicity of which may be deceptive, into a historical perspective, it turns out quite clearly to what degree the setting of this question is bound to a particular epoch – the epoch of the printed book. The papers in this thematic issue of *Primerjalna književnost* are arranged as chronologically as possible[3] and are bracketed by four papers that go beyond or deviate from the above framework to a certain degree. They either reach back into the times when the book had just begun its triumphant conquest of the Occident and when the relations among the systemic action roles – productive, mediatory, and receptive – were still being established (cf. Chartier, as well as Habjan in part); or they are already announcing the inevitable changes in the modes of literary mediation introduced by the internet revolution (Schreier) and even more radically by the new media literary practices (Vaupotič).

The path then leads us from printers and typesetters from the beginning of the modern age that try to understand the text "better then its authors" to the interactive ergodic literature of the twenty-first century, in which the delimitation of the roles of the author, the mediator, and the receiver loses clear-cut contours. This path shows that answers to the question *Who chooses?* are not necessarily only to be sought at the level of mediation. From this perspective, it is precisely the papers on the "edge" that also properly contextualize the question of mediation – by placing it sense-wise between the issue of production/authorship (cf. Chartier, Vaupotič), which was in the focus of the thematic issue of *Primerjalna književnost* last year, and readers' reception (cf. Schreier), planned for such an issue next year.[4]

Thus in the opening paper, the distinguished researcher of the history of modern written culture Roger Chartier turns his attention to the complex mediatory role of editors, copyists, typesetters, correctors, and other individuals that were involved in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century printing and publishing in addition to the authors. Such mediators have contributed substantially to the collective dynamics of publishing and by changing the materiality of texts they also affected their meanings and interpretations. If Chartier's contribution challenges both the presumption of the mediator's neutrality and its separation from authorship, Jernej

Habjan – even if focusing on texts from the same period – tackles the problem of selection from an entirely different aspect. He examines the discourses and the ideologies of (academic) literary criticism, which reproduces canonical interpretations and evaluations of literary works and in this way maintains and reinforces both the vernacular canons (as the institutional pillars of nations) and the canon of world literature. Following the meanders of Shakespeare studies, Habjan attempts to show that literary criticism's choices are made in advance and enforced by its social and institutional context.

Such a context is also one of the problems that occupy Els Andringa. With empirical precision, she presents an almost palpable picture of the extraordinarily vigorous publishing activity of exiles that fled from Hitler's Germany and settled in Holland between 1930 and 1940. Her basic question is how this parallel literary field affected the domestic one and what kind of traces this coexistence left behind. Although her research results show a surprising impact of politicization of the literary field on the behavior of mediators, the fact that the particular focus of Dutch literary history has basically ignored this coexistence hardly comes as a surprise – simply, this is a fact that exposes the problem of selection in its ideological dimension one more time.[5]

The contributions by Marijan Dović and Darko Dolinar introduce a set of papers that share at least two features: they deal with contemporary literature and art (after the Second World War) and try to grasp the selective aspects of literary mediation more directly. In his theoretical-typological paper, Dović focuses on the mediatory function of the book editor in modern literary systems and attempts to classify the network of various factors (economic, political/ideological, and networking) that affect his mediatory choices and activities. Dolinar emphasizes the significance of readers' initial freedom of choice at the beginning of his paper, but later on points to the complexity of the selection processes at all levels of literary communication, and by analyzing some successful publishing enterprises also turns attention to the specificity of the Slovenian literary field in transition from predominantly ideological regulation in the communist period to more market-oriented environment.

Each in their own way, the contributions by Maja Breznik and Jola Škulj demonstrate that a certain degree of antagonism between the market and the ideologies is not at all an exclusive feature of authoritarian regimes. Commenting on examples from the Slovenian neo-avant-garde arts, Breznik deals with contemporary "artistic procedure" and the crucial role of institutions in maintaining and reproducing the art system (especially after the technological turn that cut artworks off from their "documentary" function

and stimulated the production of "anti-art works"). Even though the institution of art has proven its self-restorative potential many times, Breznik resignedly concludes that art can no longer cope with the "hidden structures" of the market that turn the production into predictable and banal. Departing from Bourdieu's views as well, Škulj examines the idea of the literary field and its position within the cultural production with Lotman's semiotic approach to literature. Like Breznik, she is highly critical of the effects of the exclusively market-driven regulation of literary production.

Instead of theory, Andrew Wachtel offers insightful reflection on his own editorial practice. His perspective is hybrid: he writes as a professor at a distinguished American university and at the same time as the editor of a series of literature in translation that obviously co-creates the canon of eastern European literature in the United States. To the introductory question *Who chooses*? he can simply answer *I do*, and then go on to critically reflect on the facets of his role as a selector and intercultural mediator. Wachtel is well aware that in a system with low regulation that is (consequently) extremely closed to translations, his choices do have immediate canonizing effects.[6] From a slightly different angle, literature in translation is also one of Slávka Rude-Porubská's topics, who carefully examines the translation selection mechanisms in Germany – especially those that are meant to correct the effects of the law of supply and demand. In her paper, Porubská also addresses the problem of asymmetry between the center and the peripheries, and somewhat skeptically concludes that the programs that support literature in translation do not manage to affect the prevailing trends to a significant degree.

The tone of the contribution presenting the results of a collaborative research project by two distinguished experts on contemporary book markets, Miha Kovač and Rüdiger Wischenbart, is quite different. Their analysis dispels some of the stereotypes and myths regarding best-sellers in Europe. By scrutinizing bestseller lists (2008–2009) in many European countries, Kovač and Wischenbart show that among bestsellers original literary works and the translations from major European languages prevail (and not, for example, only translations from English). Among the lessons of this study is definitely the insight that the "unifying effects" of the market cannot be overemphasized, and also that the practice cannot be interpreted satisfactorily only by using simple binarisms (such as the opposition *commercial* vs. *quality*).

The concluding two papers depart from studying the mediatory role in its traditional context. Margrit Schreier deals with book selection and recommendation in the internet age and explores the factors that influence the choices of "popular" reading. By empirically analyzing the "most

useful" user reviews at the Amazon.com internet site, she shows that the strongest impact factor is involvement, followed by author- and topic-related reasons. Thus, she concludes, the choices in the internet age still follow certain patterns but, with the change of the mediatory role of readers from the informal towards more "institutional," the traditional mechanisms of mediation are loosing significance. This process is even more evident in the cybertextual perspective of Aleš Vaupotič. Vaupotič starts by exposing the crucial difference between the rigidity of the classic printed text and the interactive new-media and ergodic literature. Such literature strives to structurally incorporate the reader into the process of both production and mediation. In this way it turns the laws of traditional literary communication upside down and raises a set of important theoretical questions, such as the issue of digital communities, collaborative authorship, automatically generated texts, and so on.[7]

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The bilingual thematic issue entitled *Who Chooses?* – subtitled *Literature and Literary Mediation* – was created through the collaboration of twelve scholars from various European countries and the United States and three editors. Its ambition was never to cover the problems of selection and mediation in the age of the printed book in their entirety. However, even if the majority of contributions deal with cases from the twentieth century, all of the crucial questions that can be posed in this respect are present here; at the same time, theoretical sensors have been oriented towards new areas that must still become a subject of reflection. The value of such focus on the mediatory role in literature – which is actually not frequent, neither in Slovenian nor international literary studies – is historical and theoretic-analytical in the first place. At the same time, though, the results may already have a certain applicability: European cultures – especially small ones such as Slovenian – will probably have to regulate literary production and book markets to some extent in the coming decades. The materials and ideas presented by this issue – if read properly – can serve as an excellent expert basis to inform cultural policy when planning for the future.

NOTES

[1] Such as those in the works of Niklas Luhmann, Pierre Bourdieu, or Siegfried J. Schmidt (see also Dović).

[2] See also Juvan.

[3] Most of the papers deal with actual cases that enable such arrangement. Nonetheless, some of them are predominantly theoretical, and so the selected order is not the only one possible.

[4] The significance of the readers' reception is also emphasized by other papers, such as Darko Dolinar's.

[5] The "methodological nationalism" of traditional historiographical approaches has by now become commonplace in discussions on renewing literary historiography; cf. Dolinar and Juvan (eds.).

[6] At the same time, his contribution demonstrates how the market orientation stimulates publishers to contextualize their products (the name of the series, *Writings from an Unbound Europe,* is a good example), even when speaking of a comparatively less turbulent academic publishing environment (see also Sapiro and the papers by Kovač and Dović in this issue).

[7] The new media literary practices have not only turned the mediatory role upside down, but even more radically problematized the authorial role (see also Hartling, Lessig).

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