

Introduction: Literary Public Spheres

By Torbjörn Forslid & Anders Ohlsson

Why a thematic section on “Literary Public Spheres”?

Literature has always constituted an important part of the public sphere. For instance, drama in ancient Greece was performed within the popular festivals of Dionysus. However, drama was also an important part of life in the city state. Writing drama was part of a competition, and those selected for performance were sponsored by wealthy citizens. Using well known myths of the time, these dramas typically dealt with central issues in the daily life of the city states and its citizens. Each performance was attended by close to 15 000 spectators, which makes ancient Greek theatre a dominating medium before the invention of print technology.

Examples abound that literature influences public debate and public life: Taslima Nasreen challenging Islamic fundamentalism in her documentary novel *Lajja Shame* (1994), and Elisabeth Alexander performing her own poem “Praise Song for the Day” at Barack Obama’s presidential inauguration in January 2009. Literature has always affected its readers and listeners, it has exerted influence on politicians and legislators, and it has called upon action or defense.

The complex relation between literature and the surrounding society has of course been a much debated issue. At the turn of the 20th century, Swedish literary historian Henrik Schück considered the study of literature as part of the history of culture in a broad sense. In literary biographies, which for long held the position as dominant genre within literary studies, and which in recent years has experienced a noticeable revival, the life of the author was put in relation not only to his or her literary works, but also to the surrounding society. Within the sociology of literature, the social production of literature and its social implications are considered.

Since the mid-20th century, however, literary studies have been dominated by theories focusing on formal aspects of the literary text. Suffice it to mention theories such as Russian formalism, new criticism, structuralism, and post-structuralism. Literary studies have given precedence to the interpretation of single works, groups of texts, or whole authorships. Also in cultural studies, interpretation has been a key analytical tool, although the focus here has not been on canonical texts.

The developments in society in the latter half of the 20th century have made this traditional text analytical approach difficult to defend. In today’s literary public sphere, different artistic and commercial interests converge. Dissolution of genres and transgression of borders has become the rule, rather than the exception. In-

depth readings of, for instance, Nasreen's *Lajja Shame* will give us a more thorough understanding of this documentary novel. These types of literary studies, however, will not explain the function and effect of this novel in today's media-tised public sphere.

The objective of this thematic section on Literary Public Spheres is to broaden the scope of literary studies by exploring how writers and different categories of readers employ literature for a variety of purposes – some explicit, some only vaguely defined – in a wide range of public settings. Thus, we seek to explore how literary texts become the subject of debate, negation or dialogue centered on contemporary values and opinions of popular concern. Furthermore, we consider the public conversation – the debate – about literature, as a crucial part of literature itself.

The literary public sphere may be approached from a number of theoretical perspectives. One natural, yet partly problematic starting point is Jürgen Habermas' classical *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962; eng. transl. 1989). Habermas develops a slightly idealized concept of "public sphere", which emerged in 18th century Europe. It is a space outside of state control, where individuals can get together for debates, conversations, and discussions, thus forming a "public opinion". The best argument, not the prestige or status of the debater, should be conclusive/decisive. According to Habermas, the bourgeois public sphere had its heydays in Britain during the 18th and 19th centuries. Already in the 1870s, the economic decline and the growth of commercial mass media caused what Habermas refers to as the "decay" of the public sphere.

Several objections can be raised to Habermas' idealized and normative view of the public sphere; some of these are displayed in the very first article below. Still, the concept of the public sphere offers a point of departure for the study of today's modern (literary) public spheres. Habermas' concept should not be considered a static and normative theory, but a productive hypothesis. Furthermore, it highlights the function of (the debates of) literature in a wider context. The concept of the public sphere might also be used for bridging the gap between internal interpretation of texts and a wider cultural analysis, focusing on the effects of *different* texts in society. Consequently, Habermas forms a background to the predominant "deliberative" view of democracy (compare lat. "deliberare" meaning "discuss", "deliberate") where literature and culture hold a prominent position.

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In "Participation, Representation and Media System: Habermasian Paths to the Past", Patrik Lundell argues that Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere may serve as heuristic tool for the study of today's media situation and media development. In order to achieve this, Lundell argues for further historical investigation into three aspects of Habermas' theory: Actual media participation, the representative features of media institutions, and media systems. These can and should

be combined, and historical specificity is of utmost importance. Focusing on concrete situations and places makes the neat grand-scale chronologies (Habermas' and others') fall short.

In her article "An Amateur's Raid in a World of Specialists? The Swedish Essay in Contemporary Public Debate", Emma Eldelin focuses on the role of essayists in late modernity. Referencing on Edward Said's plea for an attitude of *amateurism* in the public sphere in response to the contemporary specialization, Eldelin argues that the essay, as a genre, should be considered a vital part of public culture today, because of its devotion and interest for the larger picture. Some examples of essayists and essayistic writing of later decades, mainly from Sweden – among others Kerstin Ekman and Peter Nilson – serve as illustrations. These writers, however, have also gained at least part of their authority from being acknowledged in other fields or genres: Ekman as a distinguished novelist and member of the Swedish Academy and Nilson as a trained astronomer.

In her article "Personal Readings and Public Texts – Book Blogs and Online Writing about Literature", Ann Steiner states that the blogging culture has become an important and integrated part of the book trade and has influenced the publishing, marketing and distribution of literature in North America and in many European countries. The question is how this potential agency among bloggers operates. Focusing on Swedish book blogs during the autumn of 2009, Steiner addresses two issues in her article: the position of the amateur book blogger with regard to concepts like professionalism, strategies and hierarchies, and secondly, the connections between the book bloggers and the book trade, especially the publishers and their marketing departments.

After the "cultural turn", the question of how to legitimate the study of literature has become an urgent matter within Western educational systems. In her article "The Literature Curriculum in Russia: Cultural Nationalism vs. the Cultural Turn", Karin Sarsenov examines the development of educational discourse in Russia. Despite radical educational reforms since 1991, literature still holds a prominent place in Russian schools. Sarsenov identifies the specific objectives of the authorities in devoting so much time to literature in school, as well as to elucidate in what way literature is to achieve these aims.

According to German media theorist Friedrich Kittler, the turn of the 19th century meant an intimization of language and literature. Coinciding with this development, Jon Helgason states in his article "Why ABC Matters. Lexicography and Literary History" that radical institutional attempts were made to regulate and discipline language and to codify spelling, inflection and, not the least, meaning – all on scientific grounds. Influenced by "The Encyclopaedic Idea" – the will and ambition to collect and order all human knowledge – institutions and researchers began working on and publish impressive lexicographical projects such as *The Swedish Academy Dictionary* (1893 –). Helgason describes its origin, and considers its importance for the literary culture.

Media development has profoundly affected the literary public sphere. Authors as well as politicians may feel obliged to follow “the law of compulsory visibility” (John B. Thompson). All contemporary writers, be it bestselling authors or exclusive, high brow poets, must in one way or another reflect on their marketing and media strategies. Meeting and communicating with the audience, the potential readers, is of critical importance. In our article “The Author on Stage”, we consider how different literary performances by Swedish novelist Björn Ranelid (b. 1949) help establish his “brand name” on the literary market place.

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