

Popular and Highbrow Literature: A Comparative View

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**Abstract:** In his article, "Popular and Highbrow Literature: A Comparative View," Peter Swirski discusses the role and status of popular fiction in contemporary culture. Starting with the basic question, "Who needs popular fiction?," he surveys select sociological evidence and prevailing aesthetic arguments in order to take stock of the ways in which highbrow literature and popular fiction relate to each other. He begins with statistical and socio-economic data which casts a different lights on many myths prevailing in scholarship as well as in general social and cultural discourse, such as the death of the novel, the alleged decline of the reading public, and the role of paperback publishing and commercial pressures in shaping literary production. In the second part of the article Swirski examines the most persistent aesthetic arguments used to deride and attack popular literature. Both parts of the article are, in fact, extended arguments for a greater literary democracy, reflected in his recommendations for a critical response to popular fiction more compatible with its actual socio-aesthetic status.

**Peter SWIRSKI**

### **Popular and Highbrow Literature: A Comparative View**

Music historians record that when ardent admirers mobbed Verdi at the opening of one of his operas, brown-nosing him that it was sublime, the maestro said only, "Fine. What was the ticket sale?" Seconded by no less a champion of literary sense and sensibility than Doctor Johnson, famed for quipping that no man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money, Verdi's brazenly mercantile attitude challenges one of the most dogged myths about art. The Pure Art myth wants us to believe that high art abides in the realm of creation untainted by the cupidity of its lower caste cousins. Like Disney's Seven Dwarves, who typically hang out in a troop, this myth does not dwell alone in the forest of literary and cultural misconceptions. On most days it can be seen having cocktails atop the Ivory Tower with a small but influential coterie: the myth that the Novel Is Dead, the myth that People Don't Read Books Anymore, the myth that the Paperback Is a New Kid on the Block, the myth that Reading Pulp Fiction Is Bad For You, and the grand myth that We Can Ignore Popular Literature. In what follows I would like to take a closer look at some of the ways in which highbrow literature and popular fiction relate to each other. My aim is to take stock of select sociological data and aesthetic arguments that have accrued between the birth of popular literature -- the term I will use interchangeably with fiction -- in the eighteenth century and its *drosophila*-like explosion in the twentieth century. Its career may be all the more remarkable in that, for the most part, it has taken place without the sanction of the "eliterati" or literary scholarship in general. Like a backyard fungus, mass fiction conquered the world without the benefit of a gardener's pruning knife (in the shape of systematic criticism) or clods of fertilizer (art grants, writer in residence funds, poet laureate stipends, government subsidies, etc.) which midwife the efforts of highbrow *littérateurs*. More than two hundred years of fruition in all corners of the world warrants the examination of popular literature as a *literary* phenomenon, rather than as a mere cultural nuisance.

In one of his inspired cartoons, Gary Larson depicted a bunch of hyperactive animals in a jungle clearing, all swaying and dancing to a blasting transistor radio. The caption read: "What Sloths Do When No One Is Around." I suspect that being at once an aficionado of "serious" literature and a buff of pulp fiction may be the lot of many scholars, students, and critics of literature. Professing the classics and, when no one is around, languishing over a well-thumbed copy of a Simenon, LaPlante (of *Prime Suspect* fame), or a McMurtry, may be typical symptoms of a literary split-personality syndrome. One is reminded of a playful scene from Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*, in which a small-time stockbroker, Binx Bolling, tries to conceal the book he reads at work from the eyes of his secretary (for Percy, see Mills <<http://metalab.unc.edu/wpercy>>). With a full professional mien, he thus buries himself in *Arabia Deserta* enclosed in a Standard & Poor binder. In another incarnation, it seems, he might be reading Tom Wolfe's new (old) social novel *A Man in Full* inside the covers of Thomas Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again* (for Wolfe, see Farrar et al. <<http://www.tomwolfe.com>>; for background, see, e.g., Varsava).

Such professional dereliction/curiosity/openness (choose one) is not too likely, however, to be tolerated/accepted/encouraged in contemporary departments of literature. Many appear not to have heard of the large corpus of scholarship about *Trivialliteratur* or *paralittérature* in German and French scholarship, let alone the existence of such studies in comparative literature. The sentiment expressed to me by a senior English professor at a major North American university may be typical in this regard. Asked why *literary* scholars by and large ignore popular *literature*, he replied that this is not really the domain of departments of literature but of cultural studies. This strikes me as a grave abdication of professional responsibility. Any demarcation of a field of study that leaves 97% of its subjects camping outside the city gates must be regarded as methodologically suspect. A chemist contending that the proper domain of chemistry is only one element, even one as valuable as gold, would surely not be worth his NaCl. A botanist who identified all flora with a well-manicured hibiscus garden, ignoring the leaves of grass which surround it on all sides, would not be likely to have the fruits of his studies accepted in any self-respecting journal. And yet the opinion persists, often as part of an unarticulated and thus unexamined set of background beliefs, that popular fiction has no merit and thus no place in literary studies. In the absence of an authentic axiological theory, backed with

rigorous analysis and systematic evidence, such a sweeping verdict sounds more like wishful thinking than a viable research position. A scientist who declares a compound worthless just because it smells funny is as misguided as a literary scholar who a priori limits himself/herself to the study of what other scholars study, while ignoring what the rest of society depends on for its daily cultural bread. It remains to be examined if a given set of cultural perceptions, no matter how widely shared or deeply entrenched, can be relied upon to check with available data. Indeed, as I will try to show, many of the perceptions favoured in academic circles and in society at large are but distant shadows of reality outside the highbrow cave.

I begin with a careful look at the statistical and sociological data which sheds light on many of the myths accepted as part of our cultural subconscious, among them the death of the novel, the decline of the reading public, and the impact of paperback publishing and commercial pressures in shaping literary output. All of them have been used as argumentative spades to dig literary trench lines, or quarried for rhetorical stones with which a Great Wall of China has been built around a handful of perennial literary classics. I will also discuss many of the aesthetic arguments used to divert traffic away from the teeming ocean of popular literature to the literary corner-store, with its carefully labeled, safe-to-drink bottles of filtered water. Both parts of my discussion are, in effect, extended arguments for greater literary democracy. As such, they conclude with a few recommendations for the type of critical response to popular fiction more compatible with its actual socio-aesthetic status. Further, the comparative character of this study is a direct reflection of its focus on *both* popular and highbrow literatures, including the nature of their more or less uneasy cohabitation. Quite apart from this intrinsic reason, the fact that popular fiction is by now a truly international cultural and business phenomenon which transcends all national, political, or language barriers, demands a non-sectarian comparative approach. Given this situation, wherever possible I have tried to include statistics on global and select European trends in addition to the homegrown market. The fact that much of my data comes from the North American continent is a simple reflection of the availability of resources and the sheer size of its market which renders it one of the global trend-setters.

### **Popular and Highbrow Literature: A Sociological View**

The novel is dead. The author is dead. So hail two dicta which have gained much currency in contemporary culture. Browbeaten by their air of finality, one might indeed be inclined to accept them at face value. And yet, authors Barthes and Foucault notwithstanding, other authors seems to be doing fine, despite the poststructuralist campaign to drop them from the curriculum (for a trenchant critique, see Livingston). After the tragic executions in Nigeria and the lifting of the *fatwa* which hung for years over Rushdie (see Rushdie, see Grewal <<http://www.subir.com/rushdie.html> >) and who is now free to appear for photo-ops with ex-Playboy bunnies at high-profile West Coast book fairs (see *Playboy Magazine* <<http://www.playboy.com>>), the quantity of authors on the endangered list has grown scarce. In fact, the real challenges to authorship seem to be coming from the directions so far overlooked by critics: fiction "factories," novelizations, direct mail-order publishing, or multimedia-packaging. But what about the death of the novel? Somehow the myth refuses to crawl into a dark hole and say uncle. The novel is dead, we hear, slain by the twin dragon of TV and Hollywood films. Yet, as Patricia Holt reports in 1979 the *Publishers Weekly*, a full one third of all movies made annually in America are based on published novels. "People don't read any more," we read in the print media. Yet the postwar decades have witnessed a runaway boom in publishing (see below), so much so that the book industry keeps sending red flares calling for some form of reduction in numbers. Books are going the way of the dodo, chip in the tekkies, clipping to their belts, next to the pager and the cell-phone, the electronic book (a hand-held computer that uses plastic cards holding the entire contents of a novel and even provides the illusion of page turning). Yet, although such reading devices have been around for some time now, the paper-bound, dog-eared book refuses to throw in the towel -- and for a good reason. After all, as John Tebbel observes in his short history of book publishing in the United States, "Who wants to go to bed with a floppy disk -- or with a microfilm projector?" (155).

Let us examine, then, the facts behind the "decline" of the novel. Despite all forecasts and most people's media-fed impressions, book publishing has flourished since 1950 and the dawn of the TV era. UNESCO and other sources (e.g., Curwen; Escarpit) report that worldwide book production, as expressed in number of titles, has increased more than threefold between 1950 and 1980 (see UNESCO <<http://www.unesco.org/general/eng/publish/index.html>>). The accepted estimate for 1950

is 230,000 titles, with the total climbing to 725,000 titles in 1980. This rate of increase is much higher than that of the world's population which, during the same period, grew from 2.5 billion to 4.5 billion. The number of book copies printed is estimated as 2.5 billion in 1950, and a whopping 9 billion in 1980. In other words, where there was one book per person worldwide in 1950, thirty years later there were two -- a 100% increase in little more than one generation. It may be worth noting that during the same three decades the global literacy level has risen from 1.2 billion to 2.5, which puts it (regrettably) at a rate far below that of book production.

The numbers closer to home are even more impressive. It is hard to square the myth that people do not read books anymore with the fact that book production, the quantity of bookstores, or total sales fail to display any signs of decline. Quite the contrary. The number of new titles released each year in the United States, for example, more than quadrupled between 1950 and 1991, with the respective figures of roughly 11,000 and 49,000 (after peaking at 50,000 in 1985). In the same period the number of bookstores shot up from over 8,000 to more than 25,000. And, driving a symbolic stake through the heart of the myth of a nonreading public, the total 1991 book sales were 35 times greater than in 1950, ballooning from under \$0.5 billion to \$16.1 billion. These trends are, needless to say, not confined to the US. As reported in the 1996 edition of *Five Hundred Years of Printing*, the approximate number of new titles released in Great Britain in 1955 and 1995 was, respectively, 14,000 and 90,000 (Steinberg 243). In North America, a sure sign of the publishing industry's vitality is the keen interest that the Wall Street has evinced in its operations over the last three decades. The 1960s, with skyrocketing college enrollments and post-Sputnik investment in education, research and libraries, were boom years for publishing. The key players thrived by becoming public stock companies to fund a tsunami wave of expansion (e.g., Random House, Houghton Mifflin), diversifying into other fields (e.g., Macmillan, Harcourt), swallowing its smaller brethren (e.g., Harper & Row buying out J.B. Lippincott, the Hearst syndicate adding the hardcover Arbor House to their softcover Avon Books), or succumbing to the widely publicized "urge to merge" (e.g. Doubleday and Dell, Viking and Penguin). The clearest index of how profitable book publishing has become is the speed with which the movie industry got into the act. MCA, Filmway Pictures, Gulf & Western, and others, all now own reputable publishing houses (Gulf & Western, for instance, boasts Paramount, Simon & Schuster, and Pocket Books in its entertainment division), with Warner Communications having founded its own Warner Books (see Warner <<http://www.warnerbooks.com>>). In the long run, the emergence of such multimedia octopi, with tentacles in film, TV, cable TV, video, magazines, newspapers, and book publishing, is likely to be one of the more significant cultural trend-setters for the future.

Besides establishing beyond reasonable doubt that book reading is *not* in decline, what else can recent statistics tell us? Two things may be worth singling out. One is the negligible percentage of books traditionally accorded attention by literary critics and scholars -- time-tried classics, poetry, and new literary fiction -- among this renaissance of reading. The estimates for book distribution through US general retailers reveal that, for the four most relevant categories of fiction, their respective shares of the 1985 market were: popular fiction (31.5%), best-sellers (12.1%), classics (0.9%), literary fiction and poetry (0.3%). In relative numbers, the situation is even more lopsided, with the classics, literary fiction and poetry amounting to less than 3% of all four fiction categories under discussion. Let us face it. The sea of literature that washes daily over our society, the type of ideas it disseminates, the nature of values it feeds back into public opinion and political decision making, the range of subjects and concerns it touches on, and the level of cultural awareness it shapes, dwarves the Ivory Tower into a check-threatened ivory castle on a busy cultural chessboard.

It is true that, in terms of titles released annually, highbrow fiction commands a much greater share of the market than distribution figures allow. On the other hand, there is little doubt that there yawns a gulf the size of Norman Mailer's ego between the public and the academic custodians of letters in what they buy, read, and peg their cultural literacy on. The knee-jerk defense that the highbrow 3% forms the cream of the literary crop must contend with several obvious rejoinders. Quite apart from the accuracy of such claims -- as I show below -- such aesthetic elitism seems misplaced in the consideration of literature in its socio-cultural context. Moreover, a defense of this kind could hold fort to the extent that popular novels routinely ranked a level of critical analysis comparable to the classics, which they manifestly do not. When occasional pulp writers are pulled out of the literary cellar, however, with their jackets dusted and their pedigrees suppressed, they are discovered to be

not so shabby at all, as evidenced by the recent MLA convention panels on Raymond Chandler, Stephen King, or Bram Stoker.

Outside of allegations of popular literature's inferiority or its inability to pollinate culture with commendable ideas and attitudes, there may be quantitative reasons for critical inattention to popular fiction. More books have seen the light of day since 1950 than in all previous stages of history combined. "The point has long since passed," conclude the editors of *Five Hundred Years of Printing*, "when any library or bookseller can stock more than a fraction of the books in print, or when every book which merits reviews receives any" (Steinberg 243). Noting the "enormous number of manuscripts received by any editor," the authors of *Books: The Culture and Commerce of Publishing* opine that, "Were editors to rely solely on formal means of manuscript submission.... publishers would soon go out of business" (Coser 73). Doubleday, for one, estimates that each year it receives an average of 10,000 manuscripts "over the transom" (the industry's term for "unsolicited") alone, of which only a few may be signed on (see Balkin 6).

At the threshold of the new millennium, the estimated number of new titles published worldwide in a given year approaches 1,000,000. The number of books in print in Great Britain alone is today well in excess of 700,000. More than 300 paperback titles are released *monthly* in the United States. The number of pulp-fiction booklets (cheap 64-page popular fiction novelettes) which flood the German market is over 200 million a year. And so on, and so forth. More than ever before in the history Western civilization, the production, and consumption of books has reached inflationary proportions. Neither the market, nor the critical superstructure can sustain such a "Honey, I Blew Up the Book" tempo of growth. The volume of words deposited daily on library bookshelves, already sardined to the point of bursting, is staggering. An instructive metonymy of this state of affairs may be the microworld of scholarly and scientific publishing. Before the formation of the Association of American University Presses in 1932, only 8 presses were reported at an informal meeting of directors; fifty years later there were more than 70. The flood of publications in learned journals and conference proceedings is so urgent that most institutional libraries have been forced to impose draconian limits on book acquisition. In the 1980s it gradually became necessary to publish indices to indices of publication titles as a measure of coping with this deluge of information. One can only wonder how much time such meta-indices can buy, and how many years away we are from having to resort to publishing indices of indices of indices.

With the volume of writing growing at a head-spinning rate, the literary culture loses its ability to function critically, buried under pyramids of books that no one will ever have time to read. The critical community has traditionally followed a strategy inherited from the days when books were scarce enough to command individual attention and attract universal response. Out of what for centuries has been a genteel trickle, then a middle-class river, finally a modern deluge of print, critics filter out a manageable and increasingly smaller fraction. This select group, its aesthetic status bolstered by the virtue of having been separated from a field so large, is subsequently awarded the luxury of in-depth analysis and critique. There is not much talk about the literary detritus which does not make it to the tip of the critical Ararat since, as everyone knows, it is inherently inferior to the anointed sample. The elitist nature of this process is satirized by the folksy aphorism about two kinds of literature: that which is read and that which is studied by critics and literary scholars. One can detect behind this polarity the capricious shadow of the machinery of canon selection. During his career, few writers could rival Ring Lardner in popular *and* critical acclaim, with Hemingway among the cognoscenti who lauded and applauded his popular style (for Lardner, see Topping <<http://www.tridget.com/lardnermania/>>; for Hemingway, see, Joedaisy, <<http://www.ernest.hemingway.com>>). Lardner's syndicated sales exceeded Hemingway's, and his best fiction, such as the celebrated "You Know Me Al" series, earned him critical accolades around the country. Yet today the posthumous author of *True at First Light: A Fictional Memoir* (1999) is a bull of a classic, while Lardner's stories are buried at the "sematary" labelled "popular fiction." Is it because Lardner was a humourist writing in the hale, low fallutin' vernacular he knew from years as an itinerant sportswriter? But that should place him squarely in the populist tradition of Dickens or Twain. Is it the lowbrow stigma of baseball as his first subject matter that cost him the laurels lavished on writers on proper literary subjects, such as bull-fighting, rum-running, or marlin fishing? But then, how could Bernard Malamud attain the first rank in American letters, having inaugurated his career in

1952 with a novel about baseball (*The Natural*)? Such questions about canon formation are worth deliberating inasmuch as the answers to them may have far-reaching critical consequences. A prior verdict about the bloodline of a given novel (popular or "literary") may affect the verdict about its aesthetic attributes, given that highbrow fiction is for the most part approached in a symptomatically a-generic fashion. It would be iconoclastic and contrary to established critical practice to approach works from the top of the big literary pile in terms of popular genre novels. Few connoisseurs could be induced to interpret Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* as an inferior (because suspenseless) murder mystery, Mann's *Doctor Faustus* as an inferior (because unscarifying) satanic fantasy, or Malamud's *The Assistant* as an inferior -- because failed -- Harlequin romance. Yet no such categorical benefit of a doubt is granted to works booted to the other end of the literary spectrum.

The typical view of popular fiction may be summarized by two tacit equations: Popular Literature=Bad Literature (if it were good, it would not be popular in the first place), and Popular Literature=Genre Literature (it appeals to many by being simplistic, schematic, and repetitive -- in other words, by amply betraying its heritage). Given such premises, it is hardly surprising that many studies of contemporary fiction continue to subscribe to the myth of a categorical disunity between "serious" literature and mass entertainment. When popular fiction enters the picture at all, it is mostly in case studies which exemplify and buttress the same hierarchical system which can accept the literature of entertainment in the past, but only the literature of enlightenment from the present. My point here is not that all popular fiction is good literature, because much of the time it manifestly is not. There are good reasons to believe that a great deal of popular fiction goes in one eye and out the other, and that many a novel is no more than a short-lived and forgettable experience for its readers. Granting all that, popular fiction is by now a ubiquitous phenomenon which refers to and comments on many aspects of contemporary life, in the end informing (and in some cases perhaps even forming) the background of many popular values and beliefs. Moreover, it bears reminding ourselves that among its offerings, almost a priori destined for the cultural trash can, are literary works as worthy of notice as anything in the canon. The charge that genre fiction has no aesthetic merit could only be parroted by someone ignorant of the quirky horror novels of Thomas M. Disch, the ground-breaking police procedurals of Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, the neo-noir trilogy of Philip Kerr, the literate spy fiction of David Cornwell (alias John Le Carré), the revisionist westerns of Larry McMurtry, the scientific fiction of Stanislaw Lem (see Swirski 1997, 1999, 2000), the tragi-comic fantasies of Karel Capek, or the stylish erotica of Erica Jong. For that matter, one of the funniest and brainiest comedies of the recent years was the madcap *The Road to Omaha*, from the writer touted as incapable of writing anything but *ludlums* (espionage thrillers of the tritest and most repetitive repetitive repetitive sort) -- Robert Ludlum.

But what about the much deplored invasion of paperbacks and their commercial threat to the noble art of writing in the post-war years of this century? As documented in the *International Book Publishing: An Encyclopedia*, between the arrival of the first printing press in the Massachusetts Bay colony in 1638 and the end of the eighteenth century, about 50,000 books, pamphlets, broadsheets, and newspapers were printed. Most were paperbacks. In fact, the first clothbound book, Charlotte A. Eaton's *Rome in the Nineteenth Century*, did not appear until 1827. While in the eighteenth century, we may also set the record straight on other supposedly twentieth-century bogeymen: the best-seller and formula fiction. Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*, published in 1793, was *the* best selling book of the century, continuing to retail for another 100 years and becoming one of the best-selling books of the nineteenth century as well. Combining illicit sex and melodramatic characters, and alluding to well-known national events, the novel mined a recipe which is proving its selling power to this day. The next wave of paperbound books arrived between 1830 and 1845, triggered off by the replacement of the Gutenberg screw press by the high-speed cylinder press which for the first time allowed publishers to reach a mass market. These modern paperbacks were, for the most part, pirated popular British novels, sold for a quarter in peacetime, or shipped in bales to the front lines during the Civil War. After the paperback fiction boom of the 1890s, the 1920s saw yet another paperback revolution when E. Haldeman-Julius launched the cheapest of all mass market lines, the Little Blue Books, marketed with the aid of full-page newspaper ads. Priced at a nickel, and with hundreds of numbered titles to be ordered simply by circling, these books became an American institution. The paperback novel received another boost in 1939 when Robert F. de Graff created Pocket Books, alchemizing the

quickly yellowing (owing to a high acid content) pulp paper into gold. Packing racy, modern content in catchy, multicoloured covers, mass-printed by rotary presses, and sold through newsstands and outlets run by print-media wholesalers, these 25-cent book-wonders sold in the millions. Available during World War II through the Armed Services Editions, they offered countless soldiers reading material, laying the groundwork for the vast expansion of the postwar market.

It may be true that nineteenth-century publishers thought of themselves not as merchandisers but business men of letters, intent on promoting good literature. It did not save them, however, from charges of commercialization and sellout which, if anything, show that the cultural battle lines of today were drawn much earlier than commonly supposed (a good source on the origins of popular fiction critique is Lowenthal and Fiske's "The Debate Over Art and Popular Culture in Eighteenth-Century England"). The well-known *North American Review* bemoaned in 1843: "Literature begins to assume the aspect and undergo the mutations of trade. The author's profession is becoming as mechanical as that of the printer and the bookseller, being created by the same causes and subject to the same laws" (Douglas 82). As early as 1890, *Publisher's Weekly* thundered at the creeping commercialism: "This is an age of ambition.... If literature and art are to be treated as common merchandise ... it will make commonplace the manners of our people and their intelligence restricted to the counting-room" (qtd. in Coser 17-18). Such sentiments reached crescendo in the clerical and political anti-fiction crusade of the 1890s, in the heyday of a fiction boom which swept America between 1890 and 1920. With publishers devoting up to 70% of their advertising budgets to popular literature and the public clamouring for more, popular novels were accused of depleting the moral fibre of the country, with calls for curbing the production of novels by law. Clearly, today's publishing trends are *nihil novi sub sole* -- the fact apparent once again from Henry Holt in "The Commercialization of Literature," published in 1905 in the prestigious *Atlantic Monthly*. "The more authors seek publishers solely with reference to what they will pay in the day's market, the more publishers bid against one another as stock brokers do, and the more they market their wares as the soulless articles of ordinary commerce are marketed, the more books become soulless things" (578), remonstrated Holt, the dean of American publishers.

As I examine these and related charges below, we should keep in mind that, while in absolute numbers popular fiction may indeed contain more inferior prose than its highbrow counterpart; it is not at all certain that this relation can be sustained in *relative* terms. For all we know, the percentage of intelligent prose against the total volume of output may be no different for popular and highbrow fiction. If so, it would mean that in real terms there is *more* good writing coming out of the popular, rather than the highbrow region of the literary spectrum. Chandler, at once a lifelong purveyor of hardboiled mysteries and one of the most accomplished authors of his time, demurred in the introduction to *The Simple Art of Murder*: "The average critic never recognizes achievement when it happens. He explains it after it has become respectable" (*Later Novels* 1016; for Chandler, see Moss <<http://www.geocities.com/athens/parthenon/3224/>>). It might thus be worth the while of Chandler's better-than-average critic to prospect the less charted regions of the literary country to see if we have not lost anything by sticking to the well trodden highways.

### **Popular and Highbrow Literature: An Aesthetic View**

Below, I outline and discuss briefly some of the most persistent criticisms brought to bear on popular fiction. I will follow the analysis developed by Herbert J. Gans in his ground-breaking study of contemporary taste cultures, *Popular Culture and High Culture*. In the process I will update and refine his insights to reflect what is distinctive about the contemporary American literary market. In a break from Gans, I will focus exclusively on the literary domain both in my theoretical remarks and in my choice of examples. Also, while not shying away from sociological data when available, I will extend my discussion to some of the structural and aesthetic aspects of popular novels. Finally, while I will examine each of the charges in some detail, for reasons of space and focus I will largely refrain from elaborating the separate arguments or nuances of opinion among individual critics that go into these censures. Broadly speaking, the critique of popular fiction can be separated into four related charges: 1) the negative character of popular literature creation: popular fiction is objectionable because, unlike high literature, it is mass-produced by profit-oriented hacks whose sole aim is to gratify the base tastes of a paying audience; 2) its negative effects on high literary culture: popular literature steals from highbrow literature, thus debasing it, and it lures away potential contributors, thus depleting the



latter's pool of talent; 3) its negative effects on the audience (readership): the consumption of popular fiction at best produces spurious gratification, and at worst can be emotionally and cognitively harmful to the reader; 4) its negative effects on the society at large: the mass distribution and wide appeal of popular fiction lower the cultural level of the reading public and encourage political, social and cultural dictatorship by creating a passive and apathetic audience rendered highly responsive to the techniques of mass demagoguery and propaganda. Let us look more closely at the first indictment. It consists of three causally related charges: 1a) commercialism: popular literature is just another profit-oriented industry; 1b) uniformity: in order to be profitable, this industry must create a homogenous product with the lowest common denominator; 1c) alienation: this implicit or explicit transaction turns creators of popular literature into assembly line drones who surrender the individual expression of their skills, emotions, and values.

In a partial response, let us consider the following: 1a) Popular literature naturally operates on the premise of maximizing audiences and turning a profit, but so does much of highbrow fiction, especially in the contemporary climate in which government subsidies have become scarce and wealthy patrons few. It is true that one cannot yet buy books by Calvino or Eco printed on rolls of toilet paper, as is the case with some homegrown popular novels (e.g., William Morrow's *The Book of Lists*) for a nominal price of \$3 (1980s' price). Oh, Dawn, a New York company promotes its publication list in this way in the hope that people, after having used the toilet paper in the standard fashion, will remove to the bookstore and get the paperback for more leisurely reading. Yet, the same processes are at work in the case of renowned highbrow writers whose names function precisely as trademarks which are used to promote their marketability. Who would ever dream of purchasing a bad first draft of a self-aggrandizing safari memoir (*True at First Light*) if the name of Hemingway was not attached to it? As a matter of fact, the bottom-line pressures may be, if anything, more acute for high literature, if only because its limited market makes the struggle to make a living much harder. The fact is that ambitious writers frequently turn to popular genres or techniques, as Walker Percy did in his detective cum medical cum philosophical thriller, *The Thanatos Syndrome*, to broaden their appeal and score a best-seller (see Mills <<http://www.ibiblio.org/wpercy/>>). In general, the Pure Art myth which lies behind the anti-commercial bias of this critique, fails to explain adequately why so many writers of Pinter's or Faulkner's stature should be drawn to the greenback pastures of Hollywood. With regard to uniformity (1b above), although academic readers pride themselves on the high individuality of their tastes, just because as a group they form such a small and select audience, highbrow literature which appeals to them is, in fact, often *more* homogenous and uniform than popular fiction. Furthermore, imitation and formulaic solutions are no less common in highbrow than in mass literature. Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, by all accounts a fine novel, is in numerous ways derivative of other works. In structure, for example, it clearly imitates Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Henri Barbusse's *Under Fire*, two trend-setting World War I novels which focus on a typical platoon of men of diverse backgrounds to document individual reactions to combat conditions. In narrative technique, Mailer mimics Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* in its flashback vignettes. For example, Dos Passos's "Camera Eye" becomes Mailer's "Time Machine" and even in the more innovative "Chorus" parts he is indebted to Dos Passos's experiments with montage. There are, of course, countless other examples of this kind. Some of them are obvious even to a sociologist like Gans who points out: "many recent 'serious' novels have made the theme of the artist as a young man, borrowed originally from Joyce and D.H. Lawrence, into a formula, featuring a stereotypical young man striving to develop his identity as an artist" (1974, 22). The stream of consciousness technique, another *bona fide* highbrow invention, became at one point so heavily imitated among the literati that it began to be ranked as a separate sub-genre: the stream of consciousness novel. A highbrow reader who reaches for a self-reflexive or minimalist piece of writing knows in advance what formula was conformed to in its design, in a manner comparable to popular genres and categories. So much for the myth of highbrow uniqueness and originality.

As for homogeneity on the popular front, we may begin by observing that in some ways the sheer magnitude of the field determines some of its structural and even aesthetic qualities, such as originality and diversity. Given the size of its cultural environment -- of continental, if not global proportions -- popular fiction invades and explores every niche available as part of a self-organizing process known to evolutionary biologists as adaptive radiation. Competing to stand out from the

crowd, popular writers diversify to a possibly far greater extent than their highbrow counterparts (this conjecture is open to empirical verification). Because the competition is so numerous and so fierce, there is pressure on adding to and transforming the winning formula of any successful theme/technique/genre, much as the sonnet underwent its metric, thematic, and rhyming transformations while remaining bound to the genre. Sustained by numbers unheard of in the canonical kingdom of Lilliput, such an adaptive process produces a variety which appears homogenous or static only from the top of Mount Brobdingnag. The charge that popular fiction is blandly homogenous, that it erases distinction between one novel and another, is in many cases simply false. A connoisseur of a popular genre finds significant differences between books and writers who contribute to it, much as a highbrow critic differentiates between the (anti)novels of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Jean Genet or the stories of John Cheever and Raymond Carver. This is not to dispute the existence of fiction "factories," such as Lyle Kenyon Engel's Book Creations Inc., whose 80 authors "manufacture" up to 3,000 titles a year by filling out story outlines provided by the Engel enterprise. But the fact remains that, just like highbrow literature, popular fiction mutates, radiates, and diversifies constantly, in the course of the last several decades giving us such new types of writing as science fiction, the hardboiled novel, the police procedural, or the techno-thriller, and their countless thematic and structural subcategories.

As far as the charge of alienation is concerned (1c above), all available data indicates that the proverbial image of a highbrow *littérateur* who does not care to communicate with his/her readers but creates only for himself/herself, and of a popular hack who suppresses his/her own values and caters only to the appetites of the audience, is simply false (for a good analysis of the problem, see Bauer). From the innumerable examples which belie this picture I singled out Robert Ludlum who, with almost a quarter *billion* copies sold to his credit, single-handedly defines the popular in contemporary fiction. In the Iran-Gate era (1989) introduction to *Trevayne*, a novel written in the direct aftermath of the Watergate scandal, Ludlum summed up his feelings in this way: "For me, one of the truly great achievements of man is open, representative democracy.... But wait. Someone is always trying to louse it up. That's why I wrote *Trevayne* nearly two decades ago. It was the time of Watergate, and my pencil flew across the pages in outrage. Younger -- not youthful -- intemperance made my head explode with such words and phrases as *Mendacity! Abuse of Power! Corruption! Police State!*" (v). Are these the words of a browbeaten hack who relinquishes what is dear to his heart in order to pander to the big boob of popular readership? Hardly. In fact, popular and financial success may allow writers precisely to swim *against* the current, liberating them from prevalent tastes and fashions. Between Ludlum, assured of mega-sales no matter how much he *expresses* rather than *suppresses* his own values, and a postmodern deconstructionist fashioning his art with the aim of making a splash on the minimalist market, it may well be that it is the popular writer who enjoys more creative space in which to manoeuvre. Neither is it true that canonical writer do not defer to their audience's tastes. After the critical success and total financial failure of *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), the newly married Faulkner conceived to make a bundle by writing a pot-boiler. Anticipating what the audience expected from a best-seller, he wrote *Sanctuary* (1931) in an almost conventional style, and packed it with lurid content, including a car wreck, forceful confinement, sadism, impotence, rape, vicarious sexual gratification, wanton murder, brothels, lynching, perjury and hanging. Creating only for himself in a haughty disregard for his audience and the remuneration for his labours? Hardly.

The second charge against popular literature, which singles out its alleged negative effects on high literary culture, falls into two types: 2a) popular fiction borrows much (in another version, only some) content from highbrow fiction, thereby debasing it; 2b) by offering powerful economic incentives, popular literature diverts talent away from highbrow literature and thus lowers the latter's overall quality. What could be the answer to these indictments? To begin, one could ask what is wrong with popular literature borrowing from highbrow fiction? It seems that such borrowings ought to be lauded rather than deplored, inasmuch as they introduce valuable aspects of high culture to readers who would otherwise remain outside its influence. In other words, instead of decrying the glass as half empty, one should rejoice in it being half-full, given that such cross-pollination diffuses the techniques and contents of high literature among its popular counterpart, ennobling the latter rather than debasing the former. Moreover, once again this critique is compromised by selective bias. Borrowing and imitation has always been a two-way street, and many writers of highbrow fiction have been

known to freely imitate their popular cousins. It was not for nothing that an anonymous reviewer of the Memphis *Evening Appeal* called *Sanctuary* a "devastating, inhuman monstrosity of a book that leaves one with the impression of having been vomited bodily from the sensual cruelty of its pages" (March 26, 1931 edition). The novel caused this kind of stir precisely to the extent that it galvanized the public with its sensationalist and trashy content. Besides, if popular literature borrows more from highbrow fiction -- by no means a proven fact -- it may be because its audience is larger and requires more literary production. As I mentioned before, authors who want to reach a wider audience frequently resort to borrowing from popular genres, as Art Spiegelman did in his Book Critic's Circle Award and Pulitzer winning nonfictional comics, *Maus* and *Maus II*. In any case, mutual borrowing and interpenetration have been going on for long enough that, if the charge of debasement was indeed true, highbrow literature would not exist today any more -- it would be by now thoroughly debased. Clearly, this particular critique is trapped by its own logic: either the charge of debasement is wrong, or serious fiction written by serious writers and dissected by serious critics is by now nothing but debased popular literature anyway: *quod erat demonstrandum*.

The charge that popular literature lures away talented writers (2b above) is correct to the extent that we overlook the fact that popular writers try their hand at more ambitious projects (or in any case, designs), lured by the cultural prestige attached to highbrow fiction. A good example may be Disch's *Neighboring Lives*, a Victorian era drama penned by a writer celebrated for his science fiction and horror novels. Besides, highbrow writers who might score an occasional bestseller, need not be automatically less inclined to write serious fiction afterwards. After the success of *The Merchants of Yonkers* (better known as a 1964 smash-hit musical, *Hello Dolly*), Thornton Wilder embarked on another of his ambitious literary endeavours, the epic *The Eighth Day* (for Wilder, see Parris <<http://www.shellworld.net/~emily/thornton.html> >). More important, it is not at all clear that, if we were to abolish popular fiction, highbrow writers would immediately rush in to take its place. Not all critically acclaimed creators can write successfully for popular audiences, as the repeated failure of serious novelists (e.g., Fitzgerald) in Hollywood has amply demonstrated. Last of all, popular success may provide ambitious artists with the means to pursue more esoteric projects which might never be written if they had to seek regular employment in order to put food on their tables. The financial precariousness of the literary profession is a byword, and it is no secret that most good authors, from Shakespeare down, had other resources to pull them through.

Charge three, popular literature's allegedly deleterious effect on the society, assumes a number of incarnations: 3a) popular literature is emotionally debilitating because it provides nothing but spurious gratifications and because it brutalizes readers by feeding them gratuitous sex and violence. This is the qualitative version of this critique; the quantitative version abandons the charge of wantonness and argues simply that mass fiction is inundated by sex and violence (in implicit contrast, presumably, to canonical literature); 3b) popular literature is intellectually debilitating because of its emphasis on escapist content which inhibits its readers' ability to cope with reality; 3c) popular literature is culturally debilitating because it prevents readers from partaking of more serious and difficult types of writing. These charges are predicated on the assumption that the behaviour postulated by the critics of popular literature actually exists, that the content of popular fiction actually contains models of such behaviour, and that there is a direct causal link between the two. These three assumptions are contradicted by all available data (the reader may begin with chapter nine in Gans's own *Urban Villagers* and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Philip Kreisel's pilot study of English-Canadian urban readership). Of particular interest here may be Achim Barsch's recent study of the status and reception -- in Germany -- of the typically German popular fiction phenomenon, the already mentioned 64-page pulp fiction booklet (*Hefroman*). There is little doubt that the findings Barsch reports squarely contradict almost all of the vices traditionally attributed to readers of popular fictions. Not only is there no "typical" reader of popular/commercial fiction, i.e., readership is distributed more or less evenly across the income, social and educational spectrum, but pulp fiction buffs are quite simply avid readers who, in addition to *Hefromans*, often consume vast quantities of highbrow fiction as well as nonfiction (for similar findings elsewhere, for example in Brazil, see Serra). They make complex and differentiating judgments about the contents of what they read and about the distance between fiction and their personal lives, and are emphatically not pathological escapist. Although an escape from everyday stresses and sorrows is an important reason for turning to popular/commercial

fiction, numerous multi-layered and sophisticated motivations were found to come into play in readers' contacts with the booklets. A relatively high incidence of repeated reading was another unexpected result of the study, linking the reading patterns of popular literature aficionados even closer to those of highbrow consumers.

In general, with regard to the charge that popular literature is emotionally debilitating (3a above), there is no empirical evidence that the majority of North Americans -- the majority who, like myself, regularly indulge in pulp fiction -- are indeed brutalized, animalized, atomized, escapist, narcotized, or incapable of dealing with reality. In fact, what scant data exists -- particularly from community and leisure studies (see Katz and Lazarsfeld) -- indicates that most people from the lower middle and middle middle class, i.e. the group most "at risk," are not isolated brutes living out escapist and violent fantasies, but rather active members of family, peer and social groups. This is not to deny that some popular novels betray the characteristics of which they are accused. My only point is that content attribution, the standard critical practice of inferring effects and attitudes from literary content, is a singularly unreliable and demonstrably fallible method. In fact, the very same method of content attribution would find a lot amiss with most of highbrow fiction. No one, however, pillories Updike for brutalizing the sensibilities of literature professors with tediously endless descriptions of anal sex in *Roger's Version*, or denounces Percy for describing systematic pedophilia in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, or critiques Malamud for making his protagonist copulate with a beast in *God's Grace*, or ... but I think the point has been made. In general, we should keep in mind that popular fiction, which mainly addresses itself to its widest consumer, the middle class, is frequently more conservative and puritanical than its highbrow relative because it strives to reflect and cater to the middle class social and sexual ethos.

People choose literary content to fit their individual and social preferences, rather than adapting their emotional and intellectual lives to what popular fictions describe (3b above). Most readers of popular fiction have a crassly pragmatic attitude to what they read: they do not generally pick up whatever lies on the best-sellers' rack, but instead select literature that satisfies their individual and group goals, needs and values. In addition, they are as a rule less attuned to the verbal and symbolic content of what they read, making them if anything less susceptible to the "trash" they consume. Indeed, if my own experience is typical in this respect, readers often use popular fiction for pleasure and diversion and would never dream of styling their lives after the patterns depicted in the books they read with such passion. There are few Mmes Bovarys in real life, and for the people who enjoy popular literature as a breather from everyday life, a dose of fantasy serves this purpose better than gritty realism. Popular fiction readers taken as a social group form a taste culture inasmuch as popular fiction expresses and reflects their aesthetic and social values (3c above). As such, their decision to participate in popular culture is at least in part a matter of *choice* and not mere cultural and ideological brainwashing (see, e.g., H-Net <<http://www.h-net.org/~pcaaca/>>). Those who are willing to pay for popular novels must find value and satisfaction in them; for them popular fiction performs an appreciable cultural role. Moreover, as Noël Carroll brilliantly argues in "The Nature of Mass Art," popular (or what he calls "junk") fiction evokes the same processes of emotional and intellectual (erotetic) involvement that high literature does, albeit using different themes and methods. Once again, this shows a high degree of cultural value in popular fiction and an appreciable degree of discrimination in its consumers. Recipients of popular literature, or more generally, mass culture, are not all passive trashbins, as the failure of some hyped-up H-wood money guzzlers (e.g., Costner's *Waterworld*) demonstrate.

The only model that can accurately describe the functioning of the literary marketplace must be of cybernetic nature. Literary supply and demand are feedback-linked, and there are good reasons to believe that popular fiction, instead of luring gullible readers away from serious art, responds to the demands of the reading public, or at least to what the popular writers and their publishers perceive these demands to be. If my arguments are correct, i.e. if turning to popular literature is a matter of choice instead of a Pavlovian response, the charge that Even Hunter (better known under his pen name, Ed McBain is the only obstacle between an average reader and *Crime and Punishment* is simply not true (see Maria <<http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Den/7417/>>[inactive]). Besides, as previously mentioned, some elements of highbrow literature become accessible to mass readership through the mediation of popular fiction, giving the latter a constructive role to play in the broadly conceived

cultural education. Speaking of the latter, we should mention that some of popular literature's apparent vices, such as predilection for well-trying techniques and formulas, make it culturally valuable as a medium of literary tradition and continuity, as opposed to highbrow fiction whose avant garde constantly tries to break away from the mould. Contrary to common wisdom, it may actually be popular fiction that preserves and perpetuates the literary achievements of the past, on top of doing so not via a suspended animation of the canon, but through the popular vitality of mass readership. The fourth and last charge against popular literature takes two forms. On the one hand, it is argued that the mass presence and appeal of popular literature lowers the general cultural level of the reading public. Its other ill-effect on society is that it is said to pave the way for political, social and cultural dictatorship by creating a passive audience which can easily fall victim to totalitarianism -- essentially a variant on the charge (3b above). In a brief answer to both parts of this indictment, we should note that within the last fifty years, popular culture in America has gradually changed from that of lower middle class to middle middle class. So much for the debasing and lowering of the cultural standards of the society by popular literature which, needless to remind, flourished during the period in question. Since all previous arguments in defence of popular literature are an *en masse* refutation of the fourth charge, here I will only add that there is often a great deal of tendentiousness evident in comparisons of literary productions from the past and present. Critics who argue that popular literature leads to a decline in literary standards tend to contrast the highest achievements of the past with the mediocre of the present. Similarly, the argument that the literary culture would immediately improve if only pulp fiction was not in the way, does not convince. My personal experience from then-communist Poland, in which the government promoted an official highbrow fiction against the grassroots demand for domestic equivalents of American popular literature, persuades me that things are not as simple as some would have us believe. My favourite example is that of Andrzej Sonimski, the Polish writer and esteemed translator of Shakespeare, who decided to apply his ample talents to the detective novel, becoming a best-selling author under a pen name Joe Alex.

### Conclusion

Having examined some of the most persistent misconceptions about and critiques of popular literature, I must conclude that almost all of them are groundless. Contrary to most people's impressions, the available data indicates that popular fiction has had no appreciable harmful effect either on highbrow literature, on its intellectually refined consumers, or on the society as a whole. My orientation, socio-aesthetic for the most part, was predicated on a value judgement that popular literature reflects and gives voice to the cultural needs of many people. For these reasons we need to recognize and acknowledge that popular fiction performs a valuable socio-aesthetic role rather than constitutes a cultural menace. From the many arguments dispersed throughout this article it should be clear that we have little to gain by continuing to ignore it, except a further degree of critical isolation from and irrelevance in the society. The apparently unstoppable popularity and omnipresence of popular literature demand serious and sympathetic analysis, free of prejudice and unexamined impressions on the one hand, and of radical anti-canonical backlash on the other. Much of popular fiction can stand on its own feet next to many works hailed as lasting triumphs of Western literature. Much more deserves to be treated as the only thing it tries to be: gripping but ephemeral entertainment without aspirations to bowl over the literary establishment. Some of it is demonstrable shlock, which makes the task of educating the readers who persist in buying it all the more worthwhile. But to tell a good popular novel from a bad one, or a good popular novel from a bad classic, we need to approach contemporary literature -- in whatever form or genre it chooses to manifest itself -- with an unjaundiced eye and a critical apparatus of sufficient refinement.

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