

ENTERING LITERATURE

International symposium, ENS de Lyon, March 27-29, 2025

General argument

“How I became a writer”: writers frequently give retrospective accounts of their professional journeys, shaped by lofty ambitions and the challenges faced in gaining recognition. The profession of a writer appears to remain relatively unformalized all around the world, and marked by a temporal gap between vocation and consecration (Heinich, 1999). “Entering literature” is thus the subject of biographical reassessments, in which authors seek to locate the points of entry into the literary vocation, prior to any recognition. These can range from published autobiographical accounts to fluid forms of storytelling across various discursive fields — diaries, letters, media interviews or interviews with researchers. It is usually the literary vocation rather than the institutional recognition that is highlighted in these narratives to emphasize the exceptional nature of individual literary journeys marked by talent and determination. The depiction of the writer as an “uncreated creator” (Bourdieu, 1992, 312) pursuing an “original project” (Sartre, quoted by Bourdieu, 1992, 308) portrays vocation as a sort of predestination driven solely by the individual will, ignoring social trajectories and real positions in the literary field. However, as many researchers have shown, the central role of sites of collective training and socialization in facilitating the entry into literature, which serve as spaces of professionalization, whether formally established or not (Olszewska 2005, Brandel 2023). These collective spaces seem to be increasingly important today, as evidenced by the development of creative writing courses, especially across the North.

Self-narration carries a certain self-evidence linked to the growing public visibility of the writing profession, where authors are now invited to perform on the stage much more often than before (Meizoz, 2016). While these practices exist in other fields of activity, they hold particular strength in literature, where they align with practices of self-narration that constitute legitimate forms of literature which can serve as pathways to literary activity (Le Port, 2021). These literary forms seem to exist at opposite ends of the contemporary literary field: ranging from restricted to mass production, and from professionals to “amateurs”.

We seek to explore literary forms of self-narration that recount the experiences of becoming a writer. While essential in shaping authorial postures, these accounts are often at odds with the actual conditions of writing. In the attempt to understand how these accounts intersect with experiences of literary exposure, authorial postures, and literary genres, we examine a broad range of situations and pay attention to cultural variability.

Attending to these first-person narratives of entering literature thus enables us to consider subjective self-perceptions (Heinich, 2000) alongside external designations from different legitimizing bodies, such as critics, academics, and institutions. What are the forms and sites of these self-narratives? What kind of meanings, postures and professional identities do they construct? For whom are they intended, and how do they serve effective professional integration? These questions will be the focus of a cross-disciplinary investigation spanning literary studies, sociology and the anthropology of literature, concentrating on the production of texts and the material conditions of entering the literary “profession”. Three main themes will be explored.

I. Places of learning, training and recognition

Where does one become a writer? Contrary to the image of a solitary genius, many writers begin in public or semi-public places: writing workshops, writers' clubs, universities, and also new forms of literary salons.

However, the massive spread of these practices and their various labels (such as creative writing, sometimes translated as "écriture créative" in French) conceals a wide variety of realities of unequal legitimizing weight: writing workshops in public libraries, bookstores, publishing houses or universities.

Possible lines of inquiry:

- Informal spaces of sociability and showcasing unpublished works (open mics, writers' clubs), and the phenomena of co-optation on various scales (open calls, membership in professional associations, etc.);
- Established venues for learning the literary craft and/or obtaining a "creative writing" diploma, including creative writing course presentation, program, and choice of lecturers);
- Online venues of literary socialization, such as digital writing platforms, sites of recognition and visibility;
- The distinction between these different venues and their impact on careers.

II. Postures & self-narratives

Today's emphasis on storytelling is partly a response to market demands, as literature increasingly turns into a cultural industry. Yet self-narrative accounts — such as the typical story of "how I became a writer" found in biographies and interviews) retains their appeal across different literary milieus. Despite this, journeys into literary recognition are far from being merely vocational.

Does the often retrospective narratives of vocation or stories of literary conversion reveal any disjunctions between lived experiences and adopted postures? Entering literature is marked by both self-designation as a writer and external recognition provided by literary gatekeepers, such as recognized writers, professors, and critics. How, then, can the tension between self-perception and objective position within the literary field be resolved through the means of self-narratives and evolving postures?

Possible lines of inquiry:

- Self-recognition and norms: what codes and norms emerge when we listen to accounts of literary becoming? What scripts are used to structure these accounts?
- And, above all, to what extent do they actually allow writers to gain recognition from peers, the book industry or cultural institutions? At the other end of the spectrum, can storytelling lead to self-consecration, and in what contexts?
- Staging the self: what adjustments or reversals in posture can be observed in narratives of the self, such as the ones recorded in a work of fiction, an autobiography, a personal diary, preserved in personal or editorial archives or captured on various media, both published and unpublished?
- Staging a literary failure: when vocation doesn't lead to recognition, and learning the craft of writing doesn't open doors to the literary world, what adjustments in posture might this engender in autobiographical accounts?

III. Forms, genres, media

Are there “initial forms of literature”, or “genres of literary formation”? What literary forms can serve as gateways to literature? Is it possible, and if so, how, to enter literature through more peripheral forms?

This inquiry will not solely focus on “first novels”, but will explore the full spectrum of forms that mark the journey of becoming a writer, focusing on the figure of the author and his or her writing.

The question of forms, genres and media also invites an investigation into specific patterns and necessary stages in contemporary literature: what are the current expectations for narrative and, what types of deviation are accepted within this framework? Asking this question in an era of literature beyond the book implies reintegration of these productions into a media landscape that spans from amateur “in-house” practices to ephemeral publication and digital self-publishing.

Possible lines of inquiry:

- Are there specific genres that qualify as pathways to literature (such as novel, fiction, or auto fiction)? Are these genres consistent across all literary spaces, or can we identify common patterns on a global scale? Are there, on the other hand, genres that are considered minor or supplementary to creative activity, as literature for children and young adults has been in France, for example? Do these genres provide access to major forms, or are they regarded as secondary, even for acknowledged writers?
- Can self-narration serve as a gateway into literature? Under what conditions does a self-narrative facilitate becoming a writer? What status do these works and their authors — such as political figures, activists, journalists, academics, and translators — receive?
- Is it possible to enter literature without relying on the traditional format of the book or the conventional book industry? This includes exploring new practices of self-publishing, performance, inscriptions — and other forms of literatures “beyond the book”. Can self-publishing and other forms of cultural self-production that are considered “parallel” or “unbound” (Dubois 2005, 147-149; Saint-Amand, 2016) be a launchpad to more institutionalized forms of literary recognition?

Cross-cutting issues

This international conference will examine three main regions from a comparative perspective: Central and Eastern Europe, the Arab world, and the French-speaking world. We also welcome contributions that consider cases where individuals enter literature through transnational paths. This perspective is particularly valuable as it reveals how changing contexts through migratory experiences can sometimes reclassify literary and editorial practices as amateur, as well as reveal the difficulties writers face in appropriating spaces and adjusting their styles, postures, and literary habitus to new contexts.

Indeed, particular attention will be given to culturally varied situations: to what extent the programs of “creative writing” are important in different geographical areas, for example? What can we learn about its adoption from North America, and how does this shape perceptions of their effectiveness? We will also invite contributions focusing on cultural and publishing institutions of each area, in order to understand the codes and expectations that aspiring writers face.

While our primary concern is the contemporary developments (post-1945), we will also delve into historical contexts to trace the evolution of practices such as self-publishing, the development of clubs and other collectives, and other phenomena relevant to conditions surrounding entry into literary worlds.

Proposals for papers and a short bio-bibliography should be sent by **November 30, 2024** to entrenchlitterature@gmail.com, with a reply by mid-December.

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