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Social Discourse Analysis: Outlines of a Research Project¹

Before getting into a discussion on the present state of affairs in literary history and sociocriticism, and suggesting a few ideas about what is to be done (in my opinion) today in literary studies, I shall describe the problematics of a research project that does not deal with literary studies as such, but rather immerses, as it were, literary production into the whole of *social discourse*. For the last few years,² I have been working within a heuristic paradigm where the notions of intertextuality and interdiscursiveness contribute to the elaboration of a broad theory of social discourse. This project is based on a number of ideas and notions coming from different horizons, and the reader will recognize a number of intellectual debts I owe to Antonio Gramsci, Mikhail Bakhtin, Raymond Williams, and Michel Foucault as well as to thinkers somewhat less known to English-speaking audiences such as the Argentinian-born semiotician Luis Prieto, the novelist, philosopher, and historian of Fascism, Jean-Pierre Faye, the most prominent French figure in cultural sociology today, Pierre Bourdieu, whose major work, *Distinction*, has just been translated, and many others.³ In order to get into some issues of sociocriticism, I need therefore to expose the general framework of this research into social discourse, restricting myself to a display of general assumptions and hypotheses.

This research project, entitled "Eighteen Eighty-Nine: A State of Social Discourse," is based on the analysis of an extensive sampling of the whole of printed materials produced in French in the year 1889, dealing therefore with a synchronic cut encompassing not only books and booklets but also newspapers, periodicals, posters, and all kinds of pamphlets, leaflets, and other ephemerals. To give an idea of the size of that sampling, let me say that it encompasses some 1,200 books and booklets (comprising for instance some 250 works of fiction, from dime-novels to avant-garde texts), 150 daily newspapers with sounding on key-dates, and some 400 other periodicals, from the upper-class "literary and political" journals to Christian weeklies for rural classes. My point is to try to immerse discursive fields that are traditionally investigated separately—such as literature, philosophy, or scientific writings—within the totality of what is written, printed, and dissem-

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inated in a given society from these crossroad spaces of journalism, public opinion, and publicist works, up to the ethereal forms of aesthetic research, philosophical speculation, and going down to the bottoms of pornography, cabaret tunes, and burlesque monologues and jokes, without omitting those apparently dissident productions of marginal groups, spiritualists, adepts of the Religion of Positivism, nor the counter-discourses of Socialism, Anarchism, or (the word “feminism” was not yet coined in French) the Movement for Women’s Emancipation.

The reader will realize that such an endeavor is not simply aimed at producing an analytical description, sector by sector, of ideologies, themes, and genres that prevailed at the end of the nineteenth century—although such a description might already have some sort of historical interest. My approach implies the building of a theoretical paradigm, a paradigm that the analysis and interpretation of the material under scrutiny are supposed to both illustrate and justify.

What Do I Mean By Social Discourse (SD)?

Everything that is said or written in a given state of society, everything that is printed or talked about and represented today through electronic media. Everything that narrates or argues, if one contends that narration and argumentation are the two basic kinds of discursiveness. SD cannot be approached as an empirical “everything,” but rather as a constructed object, that is, the extrapolation of those discursive rules and topics that *underlie* the endless rumor of social discourses without ever being themselves objectified. These underlying rules (about which I shall say more later) comprise a thematic repertory, an implicit cognitive system (or perhaps several cognitive systems in competition), and a regulated topology, a division of labor in the discursive realm. These are the basic components of what engenders the sayable, the writable, institutionalized discourses of all kinds, the discursive acceptability at a given historical moment in a given society. My objective is to try to connect the literary, scientific, philosophical, political fields, and so forth, and without neglecting stakes, constraints, and traditions of these individual fields, to extrapolate transdiscursive rules, discover vectors of exchange, and set up a global topology of the prevailing *sayable*, accounting therefore for using “Social Discourse” in the singular, and not social discourses as a simple coexistence and juxtaposition of genres, disciplines, and local cognitive strategies.

This approach may not seem that different from what everybody has been doing, for a century or more, under different name-tags, such as: History of Ideas, *Wissenssoziologie*, Cultural Studies, *Kritische Theorie*, epistemology, etc. This concept of SD may also appear to be nothing but a belated substitute for what Marxists have identified alternatively as “culture” or “ideology” (in the sense of such expressions as “bour-

geois ideology”), and to be engaging Michel Foucault’s *episteme*, Antonio Gramsci’s *hegemony*, etc. This is, in a way, true, and even obvious. I am trying to get into this basic holistic approach with a different attitude and with relatively new conceptual tools, thereby attempting to get rid of a number of uncritical presuppositions, mechanistic analyses, elitist biases, and conventional blindspots that jam this heterogeneous field of research.

When we talk about “bourgeois ideology” (at the end of the past century, let us say) we seem to imply that we *know* what we are talking about, when we are in fact just using a loose, falsely synthetic notion, void of any clear content. Most of the time one implies that “bourgeois ideology” was made out of a relatively static and structured set of ideas, images, and notions that would have been dominant or hegemonic at a given period of time. One may include in this so-called bourgeois ideology a number of ingredients such as: Victorian attitudes towards sex; the rise of the “public sphere” and mass journalism; individualism; social Darwinism conceived of as a world view for the dominant classes; different forms of racism and jingoism coupled with imperialist and colonial expansion; or positivism as the specific ideology of the scientific field. All these intuitively synthetic notions do not seem to fit very clearly together. “Bourgeois ideology” ends up looking like the famous joke about the four blind men who tried to describe an elephant, one touching its trunk, the other one its legs, another one its tail, etc.

A culture, an *SD*, is in fact never made out of a set of statically dominant ideas, representations, systems of belief, “ideologies.” It is comprised of *regulated antagonisms* between conflicting images, concepts, cognitive discrepancies, and incompatibilities that are still relatively stabilized without ever reaching a state of equilibrium. Social discourse is made out of a set of *idéologèmes* in tension with each other, of “sociograms” (Claude Duchet) thematizing on divergent vectors and conflicting social representations. It is through and beyond these tensions, conflicts, and compartmentalizations, beyond the cacophonous rumor of social languages, that something like a hegemony will be discovered producing precedents and arbitrations between conflicting discourses, concealing topical axioms and basic principles of social verisimilitude, universal taboos, and censorship that mark the boundaries of the “thinkable.” One should not dissociate from this hegemony the normative imposition of the legitimate language, which is always saturated with tropes and idioms, phrasologies, and bombastic structures of feeling. It should perhaps be added that so-called ideologies never go in isolation even if the historian tends to isolate them (i.e., anticlerical ideology, anti-Semitic ideology, protofascism, republicanism, and so forth) for the purpose of analysis. Within this broader compendium, one of the functions of literature is to provide pairings,

linkages, and couplings of *idéologèmes*. For instance in late nineteenth-century Europe, sets of semi-concealed images of homosexuality were coupled with literary Orientalism in the works of Oscar Wilde, Pierre Loti, and the younger Gide, to name but a few. But in more general terms, it may be contended that “ideological sex,” for instance, is never thematized alone, in journalism or in literature, but is always present coupled with other semi-repressed notions or images.

Methodological Aspects

A research project dealing with SD as a whole cannot but be called interdisciplinary, in the most pregnant sense of this word. It aims at de-compartmentalizing and integrating all sorts of analytical procedures and traditions developed to account for different sectors of discourses, such as: press “content analysis” and political “discourse analysis”; pragmatics and the theory of natural logic; presupposition; literary semiotics; narratology; rhetoric; epistemology; the sociology of knowledge; hermeneutics; cultural studies; “archeology of knowledge” à la Foucault; and so forth. I do not claim to master all these traditions and conceptual tools. I am even ready to admit that the kind of endeavor I am describing is closer methodologically speaking to a “bricolage” or a “tinkering” (Lévi-Strauss), than to any kind of consistent and scientifically validated body of concepts. In some cases, like this one, any requirement for unmitigated scientificity conceals an intellectual submissiveness and cowardice. Rigorous, computerized discourse analysis based on a selection of discrete lexicological or morphological units certainly gives a stronger sense of rigor and verifiability, but, unfortunately, this only leads to the discovery of tautologically obvious rephrasings. A holistic description and interpretation of the whole mesh of social discourses is a more risky and hazardous endeavor because you have to interpret, to relate seemingly heterogeneous phenomena, to determine what you will deem meaningful and to what degree it is so. You do that at your own risk and you cannot expect to cover your choices and proceedings with any all-inclusive insurance of scientificity. You have to develop a systematic “bulimia” in front of your gigantic sampling and resort to any reasonable means to try to make sense of it all.

Ideology = Social Discourse

Within the perspective of SD analysis, I could not think any longer of opposing “science” or “literature” to their supposedly mystifying counterpart that would be termed “ideology.” Ideology is everywhere. All language is ideological and, to paraphrase Bakhtin’s ideas developed in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, the realm of ideology coincides

with that of signs; they are mutually corresponding. All discourses and languages are ideological, which means that whatever may be registered and identified in them bears the marks of ways of knowing and representing the known world that are neither a matter of course nor necessarily universal, but that conceal specific social values, express more or less indirectly social interests, and occupy a given position in the economy of discourses of a given time. Whatever is said and communicated in a given society functions on a cumulated capital of codes, models, and preconstructed formulas. In any society, the body of discourses engenders a sum total of the sayable beyond which one cannot catch, if not anachronistically, the “not yet said.”

There is no reason to believe that slogans such as “La France aux Français” or “Place au prolétariat conscient et organisé” are *more* ideological than “La Marquise sortit à cinq heures” or “Le vent tourbillonnant qui rabat les volets/Là-bas tord la forêt comme une chevelure.” However, these utterances are formally, culturally, and socially quite different; they do not emanate from the same social field, they do not appeal to the same addressee, they do not irradiate the same kind of social magic. Still, their sociality cannot usefully get subsumed under the catchword “ideology.”

“*In eo movemur et sumus*”: Hegemony

At any given moment, in any given society, the social discourse’s fundamental role is to serve as the compulsory medium of communication, intelligibility, and rationality. All of the prescribed topics of social interaction are formulated and diffused in the social discourse: it produces beliefs and carries potent charms; it legitimates and publicizes certain views, tastes, opinions, and themes while repressing others into the chimerical or the extravagant; it mediates between sociolects; and it homogenizes the “heteroglossia” (Bakhtin) of class societies. In the SD you find in coexistence all the *soft* forms of social domination of classes, sexes, privileges, and statutory powers.

Even if canonic discourses are differentiated by a division of labor, their thematic, rhetorical, social efficacy and status is not simply made out of a juxtaposition of autonomous semiotic systems, evolving out of their own logic or under the influence of purely local aims and stakes. This is why I speak of a generalized inter-discursiveness, described variously as the *Zeitgeist* (for the traditional history of ideas), the “dominant ideology” (for mechanistic versions of historical materialism), the cultural hegemony, the transdiscursive epistémé, the dominant (emerging and recessive) “structures of feeling,” that is, any global concept that pretends to account for a moment of symbolic production as displaying some sort of “organic unity” or at least regulated and co-intelligible antagonisms. It should be stressed that this

attempt at extrapolating the prevailing elements of the omnipresent and omnipotent hegemony does not prevent the researcher from noticing therein a range of contradictions, dysfunctions, local imbalances, surreptitious changes in polarization and supremacies, and gaps that homeostatic forces continuously try to seal off.

What Is To Be Found in a Discursive Hegemony?

1. A set of *topoi* (in the sense of Aristotle), a number of basic propositions, irreducible *idéologèmes* of verisimilitude and credibility, repressed to such a concealed level of presupposition as to give full vent to ideological antagonisms, debates, disagreements, and polemics that are made possible by a host of implicit, commonly-shared axioms. For instance, during the Dreyfus affair, one may have thought that the Dreyfusards and Anti-Dreyfusards had nothing in common, whereas in order to disagree malignantly on “everything” they needed to share one basic presupposition: One should not betray one’s motherland. At the beginning of the present century, a number of defeatists and radical internationalists on the extreme left of socialism started saying that the Proletarian has no “home country,” patriotism is a bad joke, etc. These revolutionaries did not assume any longer the concealed *topos*, without which there would not have been any “Dreyfus affair.”

2. At any moment, and in spite of different ideologies in competition, there exists a *diffuse thematic paradigm* that may undergo innumerable avatars but nevertheless provides the basic features of a dominant worldview. Such a thematic paradigm is not necessarily embodied in a specific philosophy or doctrine of the time; it may be more elusive, existing both everywhere and nowhere. Fashionable ideologies of the moment provide successive versions or variants of this period; in *fin de siècle* France for example, obsessed with decadence and degeneration, harassed and tormented by multiple anxieties, there exists the thematic domination of something I call “the Paradigm of Deterritorialization,” which is a paradigm that more or less functions as an endless series of oppositions between isotopes whose terms are correlated in the following way:

The Prince’s Body	parliamentarism
Race	degeneration
Burial	cremation
Rooted peasant	uprooted urban worker
Prosody	free verse
Good-stock Frenchman	Wandering Jew
Marriage	celibacy, prostitution
Natural food	ersatz, adulterated foods
Butter	margarine, etc.

3. Rather than identifying themes and topical derivations, what I am now looking for is a dominant cognitive structure that may be in competition with other cognitive paradigms. This is the kind of problem that has been dealt with by Tim Reiss in his *Discourse of Modernism* (with his concept of analytico-referential truth and its emergence during the classical age),⁴ Joseph Gabel (applying to modern bureaucratic societies his concept of “restricted rationality” and “schizophrenia”),⁵ and Jürgen Habermas (with his notion of non-critical “instrumental reason” in *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason & the Rationalization of Society*).⁶ I was also led to elaborate a set of hypotheses about the dominant gnoseology of the late nineteenth century, which I’m tempted to define as the “generalized novelistic mode.” I am not thereby suggesting that the journalist, the scientist, the attorney general in his indictments *imitate* the novelist, but that the high genre of literary fiction was simply a specific avatar of a more general bourgeois gnoseology. This gnoseology is built on narrative sequences regulated by *implicit* maxims of verisimilitude, deprived of over-determination, where the reading operates generalizing inductions that are teleologically validated *in* the narrative. The reader projects on the “ideological screen” the original codes that are still never objectified in the narrative itself. This kind of narrative cognition actualizes two major ideological constructs: that of a certain conventional “realism” and that of an iconization of the socius amounting to produce a cast of “typical” characters. Against Lukàcs’s aesthetics, I would argue that the “typical,” as a cognitive means, represents a rather poor and non-critical degree of cognition against which the emerging social sciences (E. Durkheim) will have to conquer more estranged and less commonsensical ways of analyzing the social, i.e., they will have to “depersonalize” for instance these semi-expressive and semi-abstracted entities that social types are.

I am not simply saying that the classical novel was a bourgeois genre, but rather that this “romanesque” and its typical-inductive ways of knowing that do not allow for any critical transcendence was the basic gnoseology of bourgeois SD in general. Whenever one reads a case study in a medical journal, or an indictment from the prosecution, it tends to become a “realistic” narrative, with its presuppositional verisimilitude and its construction of “types”: the cagey peasant, the degenerate young man of good family, etc.

4. Discursive phobias. In any society certain beings and certain groups are rejected and pointed at with disgust and distrust. There are common stereotypical ways to deal with these excluded entities. Racism, jingoism, xenophobia, sexism, and above all this unnamed discrimination, i.e., the hatred and disgust for the dominated, add up to build a synergic compound of kindred ideologies. In late nineteenth-century

doxa, what they say about peasants, Negroes, women, alcoholics, criminals, and other savages has lots of features and cognitive strategies in common.

5. The Literary Language. Hegemony cannot be dissociated from the imposition of the canonic forms of high language. This dominant language is not to be reduced to a set of abstract rules and norms. It comprises ceremonial knowledge, idioms, formal phraseologies, and elegant tropes that legitimate “literary” language and “unify and centralize the literary ideological way of thinking” (Bakhtin).

6. Another aspect of hegemony is a negative counterpart of the first five: what we perceive as universal taboos and censorships that mark out the limits of the sayable and the thinkable. Discursive hegemony does not only provide canonic forms of expression and compelling themes; it also represses certain “things” into the *un*thinkable, the absurd, the chimerical.

If you work within a retroactive position of 90 years or so (three generations), you are immediately struck by the fact that a number of contentions, of ideas that are today banal or at least probable if not evident to all, were at the time literally unthinkable for even the most “advanced” minds. Faced with certain problems, our immediate ancestors seem to display a collective blindness, wrapping themselves in worn-out sophisms in a way that strikes us as ridiculous, a sentiment that should be criticized, since it provides us an undue and naïve sense of superiority. How is it that the strongest minds of the last century were so blind, unable to push any reasoning to what seems to us its unavoidable logical conclusions? One should keep in mind that if it is quite easy to point at the “limits of consciousness” of our immediate ancestors, it is not so easy for us to estrange ourselves from our present hegemony, to examine with a sober glance the inconsistencies of Jacques Derrida’s aestheticized nihilism, the neoliberalism of political demagogueries, or the blindspots and the return of the ideological repressed in certain feminisms or radical politics.

Division of Labor, Discursive Topology

Up to now, I have been talking of transdiscursive tendencies, of unifying factors. Now let me take the opposite point of view by summarily examining the allotment of roles on the discursive stage and the division of discursive labor. One of those factors of differentiation that was institutionalized during the nineteenth century was the emergence of three discursive ghettos determined by their target addressees: 1) The production for children and teenagers that was getting autonomized after the mid-century; 2) “Literature” for the urban plebes, from the popular novel to café-concert tunes; 3) “Literature”

for the ladies, from fashion magazines to sentimental romances. These discursive ghettos are but one aspect of the new division of labor. One should obviously mention the galloping expansion of novel forms of journalism, the sphere of public opinion and current news, the emergence or secession of new scientific disciplines: criminology, experimental psychology, hypnotherapy, etc.

This division of discursive labor may also be approached in the logic of market and commodities. Discourses circulate, their value is regulated by supply and demand, they are marketed and exchanged. All discursive topologies are subject to a specific economy with its market engineering, supply and demand, planned obsolescence of ideological goods, inventories, and clearance sales. A whole new economy with its fashions, infatuations, inflations, and crashes, conflicts with the preservation principle and the need to control the limits and outskirts of the thinkable. Hence the frequency of that classical compromise: the “foreseeable newness,” or the art of making new out of old.

Not Only Texts

To study SD requires taking into consideration not only texts (or semiotic artifacts) but also the aptitudes and talents, tastes and interests towards certain discursive complexes, i.e., the audiences created by specific discursive types, such as the sentimental novel, or the highly sophisticated chronicles of the *Revue des deux Mondes*, anticlerical or anti-Semitic propaganda, broad jokes and smutty stories, or the ethereal and abstruse prose of symbolist novels.

By virtue of its very aims and designs, SD analysis rejects offhand any immanent approach to “texts” and therefore gets rid of the whole formalist terrorism. We cannot deal with texts and genres alone, not even with their sole intertextual genesis. One has to try to perceive their acceptability, their efficiency, their charms, and how textual objects select their chosen addressees. Such a critique therefore encompasses the analysis of individual inclinations and propensities toward such and such genre, theme, doctrine, or slogan, that is, the aptitudes to produce certain discourses and the receptive tastes and discursive competence required to enjoy them, were they Mallarmé or Zola, anti-Semitic pamphlets or republican propaganda.

One has to theoretically account for the basic intuition of any researcher who operates within a historical retrospection. The literal meaning of the texts under scrutiny does not escape her/him, but their charms have curiously evaporated: newspaper jokes no longer make you laugh, the grand pathetic scenes of successful dramas leave you cold, the high declamations of thinkers and doctrinaires seem sophisticated and specious rather than persuasive. You can still perceive the argumentative structure, but you aren’t moved or convinced. Passages

of novels that were supposed to give an impression of strong realism now disclose their ideological texture, their tricks and expedients. In other words, one or two generations later, the SD as a whole no longer *works*. Its doxological, aesthetic, or ethical efficiencies are by and large dissipated, it has become a flat liquor and a stale nutriment. Today's reader of 1889 newspapers and books reacts like a bad-tempered mind that is no longer moved by what is pathetic, no longer tickled or excited by what was frisky and libertine, no longer even amused by what, ninety years ago, was sending whole audiences into stitches. One sees very well that it is not *in* the texts as such that such a strange loss of communicative effectiveness may be explained.

The Social Production of Individuals

Another warning: When we talk about SD analysis, we don't imply that one should take into consideration only collective phenomena, *anonymous* themes and slogans, *common* denominators, and *public* opinions. SD includes the social production of individualities, originality, competence, talent, specialization. SD is by and large the social production of so-called "literary *creation*." It is not only made out of collective fetishisms and dominant doctrines but also regulated forms of dissidence, "schismatic" opinions, and distinguished structures of feeling, not only the *doxa* but also those paradoxes that remain under its influence. This amounts to saying that discourses are not made by writers and publicists but rather that writers and publicists are shaped in their identity and role on the social stage by the discourses they hold. Individuals with their talents, their dispositions are not to be seen as contingent phenomena under a collective hegemony. They are specifically produced in the same fashion that elsewhere SD produces platitudes, commonplaces, clichés, and vulgarisms.

In any culture one finds leading parts and minor roles which together give this impression of harmony found in the cast of a good play. Some are specialized in the production of a specific ideological message; others occupy well remunerated positions as traditional "lines" of the ideological stage: the great man and the wit, the arbiter elegantiarum, the grumpy benefactor, the voice of wisdom, the pervert, the fashion contractor, the cicerone of programmed escapism, and innumerable more modest tinkers.

Present Stage of Research

Part of this 1889 project includes two monographs, one dealing with anti-Semitism (or rather the global dispersion of utterances about Jews) entitled *Ce que l'on dit des juifs en 1889*, and the other with sex and social discourse entitled *Le cru et le faisandé*.⁷ Why sex, aside from

what may seem exciting or frisky in this theme? Sex is *par excellence* something that is being thematized at the same time in all sorts of discourses whose societal function, thematic flow, and inner system are quite different. Between the axiogenic decrees of medical science and the libertine complacency of the fashionable Parisian press obsessed by harlots, demi-mondaines, and adultery, at first sight no unifying principle or common features seem to be identifiable. My problem was to account for this diversity, to render it co-intelligible. You have the positivist medicalization of sex, with its therapies to cure the pederast, the masturbator, the adult pervert, and the hysterical female. You also have criminology, i.e., the Italian school of Lombroso that invents the notion of the “born prostitute,” an atavistic survival of the primitive female in a society evolving towards progress. Newspapers are discovering the strategies of sensationalism and start using sexual disorders and crimes as a means of providing stochastic shocks to the reader. In the literary realm, sex is everywhere but is thematized in radically different settings, ranging from two-penny pornography and “gauloiserie” to the supposedly innovative audacities of avant-garde naturalism and modernism. Here again we are invited to scour a space of cultural distinction, from the ineptitudes of trivial smut to the supposedly profound meditations on a society that is going to the dogs, with its unquenched and hysterical modern female characters and its degenerate *fin-de-siècle* perverts. This research has also led me to work on diverse methodological issues including: notions of intertextuality and interdiscursiveness; the “Struggle for Life” as a typical example of an *idéologème* with its migration through the sociodiscursive network; the production of *true* narratives in journalism and other kinds of public discourses with a case study of the Mayerling Affair (30 January 1889) and its interpretations in France; an extensive survey of a generic cluster deemed the sentimental romance; as well as thematic work on patriotic fetishism, Jingoism, xenophobia, and the production of the canonic “literary” French through the interplay of all discursive sectors.

Sociocriticism in France

After these considerations on SD, let me now get into literary sociocriticism. The reader will have understood that the logic of my present work is not to push literature to the foreground and relegate social discourse onto a position of background rumor. My object is to deal first and foremost with social discourse without having to defend or take as a point of departure any preconceived idea about the function of literature or the essence of literariness. I believe that this so-called “essence” is a sheer variable, determined by the structure of social discourse and beyond it by power relations and the institutional

structure of given societies. There is not much in common between literature's function and the nature of what remains of high literature in this country and the part innovative fictional production may play in countries like Cuba, Nigeria, or Haiti today.

The word "sociocritique" was coined by Claude Duchet some 15 years ago, mainly to get rid of "literary sociology" and to distinguish a sociology of literature (which is a sector of cultural sociology) from a textual criticism, a semiotics of literary production, axiomatically conceived as social and historical in its methods and aims. What was at stake then was to acknowledge and overcome a double blindness: first, the inability of structural semiotics and the Formalist tradition to recognize "la socialité" (the social character of literature) and second, the complementary inability of Marxist theories of literature (cf. Lukàcs) to cope with the material, concrete character of linguistic signs and exchange. In that sense, the "sociocritics" were taking up concerns and critiques that had been central to Tynianov in his famous essay "On Literary Evolution" (1929), to Mikhail Bakhtin and his circle in their polemical work *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* and to Jan Mukarovskì.⁸ There are chances that neither Tynianov, Bakhtin, nor Mukarovskì were known at all by any of these French critics in the early seventies and that they were unknowingly taking up scholarly disputes that scan the history of literary studies in the present century. There is a wide agreement among Francophone sociocritics about this basic attitude, which is not simply to *juxtapose* formal description and "Marxist" interpretation, but to work out a sociohistorical semiotics that accounts for both the production and reception of literary texts, a critical semiotics that would recognize at once how literary judgments and values are shaped by the "cultural arbitrariness" and the "market of symbolic goods" in non-egalitarian societies while still trying to evaluate the (occasionally) critical function that literary texts may fulfill.

French "sociocritiques" are a small, scattered group of individuals who do not occupy a dominant position in the Academy. A journal like *Littérature*, although eclectic, seems to provide a tribune for some of them. Claude Duchet, Henri Mittérand, and Jacques Leenhardt work in Paris. Edmond Cros published *Imprévue* in Montpellier and became the editor of *Sociocriticism* at the University of Pittsburgh. Pierre V. Zima, whose theoretical work appeared half in German and half in French, teaches at the University of Klagenfurt, Austria. Charles Grivel occupies a chair of Romanistik in Mannheim. Jacques Dubois works at the University of Liège in Belgium. They all entertain relatively close relations with people working elsewhere in textual sociology, and the first four issues of *Sociocriticism* reflected this rather cosmopolitan or indeed international character of sociocritical research and discussion. On the other hand, I don't seem to find much ex-

change between “sociocritiques” and the British tradition of cultural studies. Raymond Williams’s thinking has never been discussed in the francophone realm, and works of the Birmingham group or *Media, Culture, and Society* are probably unknown to most in that realm. The picture here is more or less what is to be expected: some pioneering research, a potentially significant international network of exchange, a common hostility against neo-positivist and formalist fetishism, and also a certain entropy facing numerous theoretical and methodological difficulties. Still enough to entertain reasons for hope and the will to persevere and try to reach new horizons.

The Inscription of Social Discourse in Literary Texts

In this context I would like to take up some remarks and theses Régine Robin and I conveyed in our paper “L’Inscription du discours social” published in the first issue of *Sociocriticism*.⁹ They amplify a number of hypotheses formulated in the first part of this paper.

Contrary to what was proposed in the old “literary sociology” which, from Lukàcs to Goldmann, perpetually neglected or went round the text itself and the textual labor on language and discourses, let me lay down the principle that literature only deals with textual referents, that is, it refers or relates only to other discourses, even if the writer’s aim is to somehow lay hold of the extra-textual and to know and represent one of the truths of this world. The reference that texts make to practices and to the empirical world should be discussed, but only after we have understood that such references operate through the *mediation* of preexisting languages and discourses that know the world *differently* and even contradictorily. Hence the basic question is to find how literature as a symbolic practice operates within a complex topology, from oral exchange and conversation up to major established, official discourses. The writer is first of all someone who *listens*, from the position (s)he occupies in society, to the immense disseminated rumor of social discourse that comes to the ear of man-in-society as erratic fragments, images, utterances still bearing traces of issues and debates they were engaged in, bearing the stamp of migrations and changes they have undergone. These utterances that migrate in social exchange, recurring in conversation, bill-posting, newspapers, official eloquence, books of different kinds, are not only polysemic; they are also charm-carriers, carriers of societal efficacities, of maker’s names, of ideological imprints, that build up a confused memory of the *doxa*.

In what comes to the writer’s ear, there are commonplaces, clichés, practical maxims that mark out the realm of mentalities; there are also more extensive paradigms, public opinions, disciplinary knowledge, political slogans, and, finally, large doctrinaire constructs, worldviews

and historiosophies. The writer does not apprehend these fragments, these bits and pieces of enthymemes, of phraseologies, as closed monads, but as semi-available elements that offer affinities—some obvious, some others “strange”—with other fragments of social representation. They are like the pieces of a gigantic puzzle whereby the specific features of one discursive element suggest connections and analogies to another. The writer, at least the realistic writer, is someone for whom the real, mediated by social discourse, offers itself as a scattered puzzle; but like any puzzle, it does so with the guarantee that certain work, conjectures, and manipulations will allow for the production of some kind of shape. Contrary to a commonplace of naturalism, the writer is not primarily one who *observes* the world, but someone whose keen ear discriminates better in the hubbub of discourses what deserves to be transcribed and worked out.

The ideologist endeavors to produce homogeneity, certainty, identity. He/She institutes her/himself as an ideological subject through a tinkering of pre-built elements. Madame Bovary has read in the convent gothic romances by Madame Cottin, Madame de Genlis, Ducray-Duminil, and in these chlorotic medieval heroines she recognizes herself, whereas Monsieur Homais, the pharmacist of Yonville, complacently proclaims himself a Voltairian, a Rousseauist, and enthusiast of Progress, a sworn enemy of clerical obscurantism. In both, some elements of social discourse seem to have precipitated, and in this chemical precipitate they re-cognized themselves. The writer is one who forbids himself to use the enigmatic constructs found in social discourse as a direct means of identification.

I therefore believe that literary texts (and others) should be approached and analyzed as *intertextual apparatuses* that select, absorb, transform, and re-diffuse certain images, maxims, and notions that migrate through the sociodiscursive network. In this respect, an “immanent” or “formal” reading of a text is not only partial or misleading, it is simply illusory. Texts make sense only within an intertextual network that they both evoke and antagonize. Against all “positive” commonsense, a text is constituted and marked as much by what it excludes as by what it includes. The discursive world that is excluded from the text cannot fail to be tacitly reinscribed by the reader familiar with that world. If one tries now to deal with the literary field globally, I would maintain once again that there is no point in approaching this cultural sector in isolation as if it were a self-sufficient universe. Not only should we proceed through the whole array of aesthetic distinctions within that field, from the “narrower circuit” of avant-gardes to middlebrow fiction, drama, and poetry, and down to so-called “popular” or mass paraliteratures; we should also seek the interdiscursive connections between the literary and the political. Scientific and journalistic discourses should be thoroughly investigated so

that the literary function will be identified in its historical relativity as a function of *the whole cultural economy*.

After all, literature is and has always been a very strange sociological phenomenon. Universal and transhistorical as it may be, it is also somewhat a-functional. That is, it will never become the dominant structure in a society, as religious discourse was for the Western Middle Ages, or the juridical, legal was for the classical age. I am therefore trying to define literariness by its negative function within the globality of SD. If literature is sometimes called upon to play a normative societal role it is only insofar as it is subordinated to other institutions, contributing to reinforce and legitimize the norms of good language, or vindicating the rights of the monarchy and its ruling class. Still, throughout modern times, literature has been a discourse without a mandate, determined topic, or object. Human paleontology produces systematically its object: prehistoric man; but in its shadow literature starts producing (at least since the 1860s) innumerable prehistoric romances that are subordinated to the production of knowledge while still providing (through fictionalization) an ironic accompaniment. In bourgeois societies, the literary function more or less corresponds to that of the court jester in the Renaissance, one who at the foot of the throne blurts out a quip or a sally, ambiguously discloses a few truths, scoffs at good manners, proprieties, and established prestige, parodies the languages of power and mixes them up, brings out their inadequacies. The court jester takes advantage of the forbearing tolerance of his Patron-Prince as long as he does not go too far. He keeps saying "It ain't necessarily so!" and they let him say it, because they know he is parasitic and irresponsible, because his subversiveness paradoxically confirms the legitimate doctrines, decrees, and teachings, and because he remains subordinated to the Prince's and his doxographers' word. Still, one day he may go too far . . . and end up encountering the headman's hatchet!

The reader will excuse the sketchy character of this text, which is meant to be more suggestive than systematic. I don't have the space to elaborate on these issues nor to illustrate them. What I wanted to do was to offer a number of principles and suggest avenues of inquiry that seem to me relevant to the development of sociocriticism.

The Impossible "Literary" History

Literary history, which was codified at the end of the nineteenth century by G. Lanson in France, is nothing but an epicycle or an avatar of the very ideology of the literary field that throughout the century had been striving to gain autonomy and to see itself as autarchical and self-sufficient. This claim for aesthetic self-sufficiency, this myth of the immaculate conception of literature that goes from the symbolists to

the pan-textualism of *Tel Quel* is, no doubt, the *proton pseudos*, the basic lie of the literary institution. My aim is to get rid of any claim for the radical autonomy of the literary text, and to immerse it where it belongs—in its very discursive surroundings. In more general terms, I try to decompartmentalize all discourses in order to recapture the concept of totality. A synchronic analysis like the one I just described is obviously based on a different concept of synchronicity than that of structuralism or functionalist linguistics. A historical synchrony is not made of a homeostatic system of functional units that coexist in opposition to each other. It is a space of confrontation, imbalances, and heterogeneity. Late nineteenth-century “bourgeois ideology” may have been “individualistic,” but it was also the moment when nationalist, racist, and socialist ideologies emerged and took up their modern aspect. The 1890s may be the acme of scientific positivism with a host of agnostic physicians who claim they never found “the soul under their scalpel,” but it is also, as any book on “Dekadentismus” and symbolism will show, a moment when there is a sudden upsurge of religiosity and spiritualism. So you have to try to account for the coexistence and overall function of all these “themes” and ideological compounds that are interacting and that don’t statically confront each other.

My attitude, when dealing in this project with Anti-Semitism, was basically the same: a history of Anti-Semitism that would essentially be a genealogy of its doctrinaires from Toussenet and Tridon to Drumont, Chirac, etc., may *look* consistent and self-explanatory since you will find that a number of the same *idéologèmes* are handed over from one pamphleteer to another, each time being re-elaborated and re-orchestrated, as it were. Still, if you *immerse* Anti-Semitic propaganda into its contemporaneous sociodiscursive network, you get a *very* different picture that eliminates the blindspots engendered by the very artefactual construct of the doctrinaire’s genealogy. What you immediately get are a number of hints about the conditions of possibility, credibility, and acceptability of Anti-Semitism, and its thematic connections with other constructs. You start distinguishing, through your indiscriminate sampling, vectors of dispersal, of dissemination of utterances “about Jews” within the logic of semi-autonomous discursive fields, from the juvenile novel to the news-in-brief of dailies, from the ultra-montane Catholic sector to the different socialist and anarchist “sects” and their propaganda, from anthropology to medical science. Instead of confronting a cohort of somewhat obsessional “specialists” of anti-Jewish hatred, you obviously get a quite different image of the phenomena which ends up deconstructing the logic of doctrinaire anti-Semitism. The fragment is misleading without the totality.

When you deal with a literary text with any degree of historical retroactivity, the first thing you must be aware of is that you are dealing with a decontextualized object, a hieroglyphic monument whose

aesthetic charm may be due in large part to its degree of strangeness. Zola's *La Bête humaine* (1889, obviously!) is for today's reader such a monument: sufficiently decontextualized as to leave behind its historical contemporaneity. This involved not only the so-called "aesthetic pleasure" you experience but also a number of "ideological" vested interests that fortunately have become for us a "dead letter." By re-immersing Zola into its *Gleichzeitigkeit* you discover that Jacques Lantier is an ideological brother of Jack the Ripper (1888-89) interpreted through C. Lombroso's theory of the "born criminal" and reinterpreted in relation to a number of supposedly scientific constructs on atavistic regressions, aberrations of the genital instinct, theories of progress and devolution, etc., that were fashionable one century ago. By simply rereading any literary text isolated from the cacophonous rumors of contemporary social discourses you grant it all that it demands: to become a "pure" aesthetic entity. To parody Mallarmé, literature is meant to "donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu." If you suppress the tribe's language that the text more or less adroitly purified, purged, or filtered, what remains is a "thing of beauty" at its *optimal degree* of faked autonomy, i.e., not too antiquated as to require archeological efforts but still sufficiently disentangled from its ideological conditions of genesis, no longer tied down to those discourses and themes it absorbed and recycled in order to manifest itself as a "literary" object.

Editor's Notes

- 1 This text appeared as the first essay in the first issue of *Discours social/Social Discourse*, the journal Marc and I started at McGill University in 1988. The original essay was very discursive, akin to an oral presentation, and it bore the traces of Marc's wonderful but sometimes Gallie English. I have tried to streamline the text without taking away from its substance or charm by eliminating the highly personal tone and rhetorical redundancies.
- 2 That is, from the mid-1980s until the early 1990s, by which time most of the texts Angenot wrote on this subject had appeared, including the 1,200+ page book 1889: *Un état du discours social*.
- 3 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).
- 4 Tim Reiss, *The Discourse of Modernism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982).
- 5 Joseph Gabel, *Ideologies and the Corruption of Thought*, trans. Alan Sica (New York: Transaction Press, 1997).
- 6 Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason & the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).
- 7 Difficult to translate, but something like *The Crude and the Gamey*.
- 8 Mikhaïl Bakhtin and Pavel Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, trans. Albert Wehrle (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); and Jan Mukarovsky, *Studie estetiky* (Praha: Odeon, 1966).
- 9 Marc Angenot and Régine Robin, "L'inscription du discours social dans le texte littéraire," *Sociocriticism* 1.1 (1985): 53-82.

