

The Sociology of Literature

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I Introduction: Sociology and Literature

I

For the literary critic literature is seen as a largely self-enclosed, self-sustaining enterprise. Works of literature must be approached primarily in terms of their own inner structure, imagery, metaphor, rhythm, delineation of character, dynamics of plot, and so on. Only occasionally is the external society allowed to intrude and then merely descriptively, as a necessary background. The modern literary critic, absorbed as he is in wholly textual criticism, in the intrinsic qualities of literature, would almost certainly be hostile to any claim that his subject could be illuminated by an approach which would be largely extrinsic. To suggest that sociology (defining it for the moment as one example of the extrinsic approach) would not merely cast light on certain literary problems, but that without it there could not be a complete understanding of literature – such a view would be rejected, and with feeling. After all, as the literary critic would doubtless point out, the study of literature and the study of society imply wholly different methods and orientations. What possible bridge can there be between the worlds of imagination and science?

These objections should not deter the prospective literary sociologist. At the most basic level, that of content, sociology and literature share a similar *conspicuetus*. Sociology is essentially the scientific, objective study of man in society, the study of social institutions and of social processes; it seeks to answer the question of how society is possible, how it works, why it persists. Through a rigorous examination of the social institutions, religious, economic, political, and familial, which together constitute what is called social structure, a picture emerges, not

always clearly, of the ways in which man adapts to and is conditioned by particular societies; of the mechanisms of 'socialization', the process of cultural learning, whereby individuals are allocated to and accept their respective roles in the social structure.* This aspect of sociology is related to the concept of social stability, of continuity within different societies, the ways in which individuals come to accept the major social institutions as both necessary and right. But, of course, sociology is concerned also with the processes whereby society changes, gradually, or cataclysmically as in revolution, from one type of society to another – from feudalism to capitalism for example – and the effects which these changes have on social structure. Social processes also refer to small-scale internal change: the means, for example, whereby social and political authority are 'legitimized', that is, come to be accepted as right by the majority of the population; the ways in which conflict between classes, between groups, or simply between individuals is either successfully or unsuccessfully regulated by social institutions, allowing some form of consensus to be achieved.

As with sociology, literature too is pre-eminently concerned with man's social world, his adaptation to it, and his desire to change it. Thus the novel, as the major literary genre of industrial society, can be seen as a faithful attempt to re-create the social world of man's relation with his family, with politics, with the State; it delineates too his roles within the family and other institutions, the conflicts and tensions between groups and social classes. In the purely documentary sense, one can see the novel as dealing with much the same social, economic, and political textures as sociology. But of course it achieves more than this; as art, literature transcends mere description and objective scientific analysis, penetrating the surfaces of social life, showing the ways in which men and women experience

* The psychological approach to literature rarely employs these sociological concepts, being more concerned to relate literary creativity to specific psychological conditions. It is frequently reductionist in that the literary text is seen as merely a reflection of the author's psychological history, as a peculiar *individual* phenomenon. This is not to deny that certain events in the socialization of writers, such as Dickens's experience of the blacking factory, will express themselves in a writer's work, through his choice of characters, plots, use of symbols, metaphor, etc., but this in no sense supplants explanation and understanding of literature in terms of social structure and, as we suggest later, of values.

society as feeling. 'Without the full literary witness,' writes Richard Hoggart, 'the student of society will be blind to the fullness of a society.'*

Although, then, it would seem that literature and sociology are not wholly distinct disciplines but, on the contrary, complement each other in our understanding of society, historically they have tended to remain apart. Early sociologists, such as Comte and Spencer in the nineteenth century and Durkheim and Weber in the twentieth, while making the occasional reference to imaginative literature, on the whole subordinated it to the study of social structure. The sociological study of literature is thus a fairly late arrival, for although there are today well developed sociologies of religion, education, politics, social change, even of such an imprecise area as ideology, there is virtually no established corpus of knowledge called the sociology of literature. It is also unfortunate that the small amount of knowledge and research which does exist is on the whole exceedingly dubious in quality, lacking in scientific rigour, banal in the quality of its sociological 'insights', and frequently consisting of the crudest correlations between literary texts and social history.†

At the present time it is possible to characterize two broad approaches to a sociology of literature. The most popular perspective adopts the documentary aspect of literature, arguing that it provides a mirror to the age. This mirror image approach has a long and distinguished history: the French philosopher Louis de Bonald (1754–1840) was one of the first writers to argue that through a careful reading of any nation's literature 'one could tell what this people had been', while Stendhal, in a celebrated passage in *Le Rouge et le Noir*, wrote of the novel as a 'mirror journeying down the high road', sometimes reflecting 'the azure blue of heaven, sometimes the mire in the puddles'.

On this view literature is a direct reflection of various facets of social structure, family relationships, class conflict, and possibly divorce trends and population composition.‡ As one of the

* R. Hoggart, 'Literature and Society', in *A Guide to the Social Sciences*, ed. N. Mackenzie, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966.

† For this conception of a literary sociology, see G. Watson, *The Study of Literature*, London, Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1969, ch. 10, 'Sociology'.

‡ Cf. M. C. Albrecht, 'The Relationship of Literature and Society', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 159, pp. 425–36.

more distinguished writers in the sociology of literature has well expressed it: 'It is the task of the sociologist of literature to relate the experience of the writer's imaginary characters and situations to the historical climate from which they derive. He has to transform the private equation of themes and stylistic means into social equations.'²*

This 'transforming' of the private world of literature to specific social meanings, the extrinsic approach to literature, has frequently come under severe criticism. It is argued against it, for example, that the method tends to use literature solely as a quarry of information to be sociologically 'ransacked'; that literature is being 'turned over from the outside' by those lacking the necessary critical apparatus for understanding and evaluation.[†] Implicit too in this method is the danger that the literary sociologist might not have sufficient skill to unravel the historical details of particular periods. After all, since the literary document has to be analysed in terms of the world it supposedly represents, then 'only a person who has knowledge of the structure of a society from other sources than purely literary ones is able to find out if, and how far, certain social types and their behaviour are reproduced in a novel in an adequate or inadequate manner'.[‡] But the real problem arises over the question of what literature actually reflects. If the novel, for example, is the mirror of an age, then this raises the question of whether or not purely literary devices may distort this portrayal; too often in the past an artistic fidelity to historical and social truth has been assumed, with wholly disastrous interpretative consequences.[§] There is, too, the question of generalization: to what extent are the fictional characters and situations typical of a specific historical period? Can any useful sociological generalizations be drawn - for example, from the novels of Charles Dickens and Mrs Gaskell - on such social issues as

* L. Lowenthal, *Literature and the Image of Man*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1957, p. x.

[†] Hoggart, op. cit.; F. R. Leavis, 'Sociology and Literature', in *The Common Pursuit*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1952.

[‡] E. K. Bramsted, *Aristocracy and the Middle Classes in Germany, Social Types in German Literature, 1830-1900*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1964, p. 4.

[§] Thus Taine (see chapter 2 below), in his study of English literature (1864), forgot that in the Elizabethan theatre feminine roles were played by boys and thus argued for the essential masculinity of Elizabethan heroes and types.

nineteenth-century management-labour relations, the role of trade unions or working-class consciousness? What useful sociological material is there in the Victorian novelist's conception of the English working class, which is not far more accurately conveyed from a close reading of contemporary journals, factory reports, government inquiries, crude health, and mortality statistics? And these latter sources are free to a very great extent from the Victorian novelists' middle-class perspectives and ideology.

The conception of the mirror, then, must be treated with great care in the sociological analysis of literature. Above all else, of course, it ignores the writer himself, his awareness and intention. Great writers do not set out simply to depict the social world in largely descriptive terms; it might be suggested that the writer by definition has a more critical task, of setting his characters in motion within artificially contrived situations to seek their own private 'destiny', to discover values and meaning in the social world. For society is more than an ensemble of social institutions that make up social structure: it contains both norms, the standards of behaviour which individuals come to accept as right ways of acting and judging, as well as values which are consciously formulated and which people strive to realize socially. Literature clearly reflects norms, attitudes to sex by the working class and middle class, for example; it reflects, too, values in the sense of the writer's own intention, and it might be suggested that it is on the level of values where literature is seen to reinforce and illuminate purely sociological material. This is particularly noticeable in literature which chooses itself as subject. Thus although both Balzac in *Lost Illusions* and George Gissing in *New Grub Street* (1891) provide a fairly accurate picture of the increasing commercialization of literature during the nineteenth century, the novelists' real aim lies more properly within the realm of values. The essential theme of both novels is the conflict between the genuine literary consciousness of poet and novelist on the one hand and the practical, wholly calculative and mercenary dictates of the industrialized literary market on the other - the tension between literature as art and literature as trade. Both Balzac and Gissing are using specific historical features of the nineteenth century as the background for their main theme: the devaluation of values, the sacrifice of

the artist on the altar of profit. It could be argued, then, that the 'true' meaning of great literature and the social groups involved in its production lies precisely in the quest and the struggle of both for 'authentic values', the values of a genuine human community in which human needs, aspirations, and desires are mediated through social interaction. If this is so, and it will be defended later in the book, then the task of the sociologist is not simply to discover historical and social reflection (or refraction) in works of literature, but to articulate the nature of the values embedded within particular literary works, what Raymond Williams has called 'the structure of feeling'.* Thus Lowenthal has suggested that the main purpose of any viable sociology of literature must be to discover the 'core of meaning' which one finds at the heart of different works of literature and which expresses many aspects of thought and feeling on subjects as varied as social class, work, love, religion, nature, and art. In his own work Lowenthal shows how Cervantes' hero Don Quixote can be understood sociologically as a structure of sentiments and behaviour indicative of 'extreme personal insecurity' which ranges from fears of starvation and loss of social status to philosophical uncertainty. Such sentiments, he argues, can be seen as a direct result of the rapid increase in social mobility which followed the decline of Spanish feudalism with its stress on fixed social position, and the development of a much more fluid and open commercial society in which social status depended more on achievement than on ascription. Don Quixote is thus seen as an essentially isolated individual dominated by an apprehensive rather than optimistic view of the world.† For Lowenthal, this kind of analysis will succeed in revealing the 'central problems with which man has been concerned at various times, permitting us to develop an image of a given society in terms of the individuals who composed it'. We learn both of the nature of society and the ways individuals experienced it, through the fictional characters who see and record 'not only the reality around them, but their hopes, wishes, dreams and fantasies . . .'. The social meanings of this inner life of characters, Lowenthal concludes, are related to problems of social change. Thus literature, as a reflection of

* R. Williams, *Culture and Society*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1958.

† Lowenthal, *op. cit.*

values and of feeling, points both to the degree of change occurring in different societies as well as to the manner in which individuals become socialized into the social structure and their response to this experience. Literature, because it delineates man's anxieties, hopes, and aspirations, is perhaps one of the most effective sociological barometers of the human response to social forces. It has to be said, however, that while literature will reflect social values and feelings in the way that Lowenthal has argued, it is highly probable that as society grows more complex in its modes of socialization, change, and social structure, it will become increasingly difficult to analyse literature solely in terms of reflection. In the eighteenth century it was still possible for Fielding in *Tom Jones* to portray a whole society, a totality, in terms of its values and feelings through his rich gallery of characters; as, indeed, had Homer living in a more homogeneous and smaller society. But with the beginnings of industrialization and the development of a complex social structure involving a multiplicity of class and status positions, together with the growth of mass communications and the so-called mass society, 'no one could possibly attempt anything along the same lines . . . if only because no single individual can have personal knowledge of more than a minute fraction of it'.* If the novel, whose rise parallels the emergence of industrial society, reflects social structure, then it has done so in portraying the problems of *society in general* in terms of a restricted milieu which functions as a social microcosm: Balzac's nobles, bourgeoisie, and artists, Proust's decaying aristocracy, Aldous Huxley's upper-class intellectuals, reflect the particular historical crisis of society in general.

The second approach to a literary sociology moves away from the emphasis on the work of literature itself to the production side, and especially to the social situation of the writer. A leading authority in this field, the French sociologist Robert Escarpit, has tended to concentrate exclusively on this aspect.† Patronage and the costs of production replace the literary text as the centre of discussion. Thus the writer's relationship with his patron,

* I. Watt, 'Literature and Society', in *The Arts in Society*, ed. R. N. Wilson, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1964.

† R. Escarpit, *Sociologie de la Littérature*, Paris, 1958. Cf. R. Williams, *The Long Revolution*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1961, part 2.

often oblique and unsavoury, is traced in some detail, from the patronage of the medieval courts to that of the eighteenth-century aristocracy. With the rise of cheap publishing and a mass market the patronage system gives way to the autocracy of the publisher and booksellers. The growth, too, of a specifically middle-class audience in the late eighteenth century helped to shift the writer's position from one of dependence to one of profession. This gradual democratization of culture, as the German sociologist Karl Mannheim has called it, is especially significant for the rise of the novel, a pre-eminently middle-class literary genre, and the emergence of modern 'sensibility' or modern psychology. The cultural triumph of the middle classes can be seen as foreshadowing mass culture and the virtual commercialization of literature. The writer's position in a mass society is extremely important as a contrast to his earlier social situation, and clearly likely to affect his creative potential in many ways; the links between this historical background and the development of literature constitute a key area in any literary sociology. It involves a major problem, namely the precise linkage between the text and its background – how do literary production and consumption affect the form and the content of particular literary works? It must be noted, however, that although this approach is essential for any thorough understanding of literature, as crucial support for textual analysis, great care has to be exercised in order to avoid the extremely crude forms of reductionism, so obviously inherent in it. The work of literature must never become a mere epiphenomenon of its surrounding environment.

A persistent theme of this particular sociological approach is the emphasis on the increasing alienation of the writer from his society and the consequent impact on literary style and content. This social fragmentation has frequently been traced to the decline of patronage in the late eighteenth century and the writer's emergence as a member of a 'free floating intelligentsia'.* In pre-industrial society, it is argued, a relative harmony existed between the author and his audience; in Periclean Athens, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were more or less inte-

* This is a well-worn cliché of modern sociology. It can be traced to John Stuart Mill, but its more recent use derives from Karl Mannheim. See especially his *Ideology and Utopia* (1936).

grated into society and not regarded as members of a separate class. In Augustan Rome, on the other hand, the glorification of the regime by Horace and Virgil can be seen as a direct result of the system of patronage.* With the decline of Rome and Athens courtly patronage became the writer's main support, for example, in Renaissance Italy and in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France; patronage of the court was then frequently followed by that of the rich, with needy authors vying with each other for food and money.† Patronage and the limited audience of pre-industrial and early commercial society clearly conditioned the writer's response: there existed between the author and his audience a congruence of values, of mutual understanding. But with the rise of a specifically middle-class reading public, lending libraries, and cheap publishing, writers were forced more and more to depend on the system of royalties for their living: literature, as already observed, turned into a trade. For the genuine creative writer the late nineteenth and early years of the twentieth century completed his alienation from society and strengthened his identification with largely intellectual groups. The point which divides the period when it was still possible for the writer to identify with the middle class and express its values through literature, pre-eminently social and rational, from the period of doubt and uncertainty with its emphasis on the psychological and subjectivist state, has often been cited as the year of revolutions – 1848 – when Europe was convulsed with conflict. After this date, in most Western European countries the middle class had either attained political power or were in the process of doing so. The creative writer, with his critical function turned in now on the class from which he usually derived both his paternity and income, becomes 'problematic'.‡

These, then, are two of the major orientations to the sociological study of literature, the one buttressing the other in terms

* It has been suggested that pastoral poetry reflects the 'taste for a fashionable kind of escape which arose in the latter days of Greece and Rome among certain urban and leisured audiences' (Watt, op. cit.).

† Bramstedt tells of one nineteenth-century German prince who was in the habit of dispensing a somewhat rustic patronage to his authors, namely produce from his farms, ducks, geese, eggs, etc., which the needy writer could sell or consume depending on his needs (Bramstedt, op. cit.).

‡ Cf. A. Hauser, *A Social History of Art*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961, vol. 4, ch. 1. See also below, chapter 3 (I).

of total understanding. But, as with many subjects, a pernicious division of labour has tended to separate them so that research either concentrates on the social context of writing or on the literary text and its social meanings. Those sociologists whose starting point is the text frequently regard the social prerequisites of writing as largely irrelevant for a literary sociology. Thus Lucien Goldmann has argued that in the case of great writers (and for him these are the only writers worthy of study) the purely sociological conditions of writing are surmounted and transcended so that the meanings within the texts are unrelated to the market conditions of authorship. He suggests that second-rate writers can be defined precisely as those who do not succeed in freeing themselves from the dictates of the social-economic context, so that sociological conditions penetrate their work, dominating its structure and content and giving it a purely temporal significance. Goldmann's point is contentious: most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors wrote for a specific audience, creating character and incident that would conform with its values, especially the attitudes towards sex. In both Dickens and Balzac the structure of the novels hinges on the requirements of serial publication, and Balzac's peculiarly dramatic elements (criminal characters, sudden and violent dénouements) are obviously connected to the development of French magazine-publishing in the 1830s and the 1840s. Goldmann's point is probably more apposite in the case of modern literature. Great writers no longer publish in serial form, this being mainly the prerogative of the second-rate and pulp writers. More significantly, it has now become exceedingly difficult to connect the audience, publisher, social group nexus with great literature in any meaningful way. Is it at all possible, for example, to connect sociologically Virginia Woolf's stream of consciousness writing technique with the general social conditions of authorship prevailing in the early twentieth century? Is it not rather a question, as Goldmann insists, of tracing through the linkages between the writer's social group affiliations and connecting both their structure and values with the literary texts? The publisher-author-audience relationship is thus, on this view at least, no longer sociologically determinate.

While the study of literature as a form of social reflection as well as its study in terms of the social context of authorship constitute the two major modes of study, they by no means exhaust the sociological approach. A third perspective, one demanding a high level of skills, attempts to trace the ways in which a work of literature is actually received by a particular society at a specific historical moment. Thus Guy de Maupassant's literary reception in England during the 1880s and the 1890s helped to effect the transition from an English literature penetrated by a naïve or oblique sexuality to one distinctly modern in outlook. In the novels of Thomas Hardy and George Moore, for example, sex is treated more directly than in the novels of Dickens and George Eliot, and this change serves to illustrate the conflict of values, in late Victorian England, between the traditional literary practitioners and the innovators.* Lowenthal has shown how in Germany between 1880 and 1920 the middle and upper classes successfully assimilated Dostoevsky into their own peculiar ideology. The dominant theme in German literary criticism, Lowenthal's main source, in this period was an emphasis on Dostoevsky's irrationalism, which Lowenthal suggests is connected with the rapid contemporary growth of big business and a fully capitalist society.† 'If giant economic and political structures were to be accepted by the people, the ideal of competition among men through the development of reason and will had to be replaced by a veneration of non-rational ideals removed from the forum of critical verification.' To the German critics Dostoevsky appeared as anti-intellectual, mystical, otherworldly, and implacably hostile to the ideas of socialism; his novels could be used as 'intellectual weapons against efforts to reorganize society' such as those proposed by German socialism. This reception of Dostoevsky, Lowenthal suggests, illustrates the profound crisis of consciousness which afflicted the German nation during these forty years and which was to

* B. Slote, *Literature and Society*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1964.

† Lowenthal's method of research was to read 'nearly all' the books, magazine articles, and major newspaper articles written on Dostoevsky during the forty years after 1880 (L. Lowenthal, *The Reception of Dostoevsky's Work in Germany, 1880-1920*, in Wilson, op. cit.).

culminate in the extreme irrationalism, anti-intellectualism, and anti-socialism of the Nazis.

Lowenthal's choice of Dostoevsky points to a problem we have not yet really touched upon: the choice of writer for study and analysis. It is interesting to note that on this point most sociologists of literature and literary critics are agreed: one studies great writers and their texts precisely because their greatness implies deep insights into the human and the social condition. Thus for Leo Lowenthal, the artist 'portrays what is more real than reality itself', while for Richard Hoggart, great literature penetrates more deeply into human experience because it has the capacity 'to see not only individual instances but deeper and more long-term movements below the surface detail' and the ability 'to unite dissimilars, to reveal a pattern out of a mass and a mess, like a magnet placed into iron filings'.* The great artist portrays 'the whole man in depth'.†

The problem of choice cannot be resolved here but it clearly involves the question of criteria; and the specific criterion seems here to be simply that of persistence, that great literature *survives*. If this is so it brings into doubt the nature of any sociology of mass culture, popular culture, and so on, which, on this view, does not have a message for posterity or contain deep insights into man's social and human condition. But if the basic purpose of sociology is to understand the nature and the workings of all societies and men's position within them, then popular culture must surely claim a reasonable status. If the argument of Lowenthal is accepted, that literature embraces the fundamental values and symbols which provide cohesion to the different groups within society, then popular culture could be used as a 'diagnostic tool' for analysing modern man, especially since it has become so widely produced and assimilated.‡

In the chapters which follow we shall attempt to provide evidence of the mutual needs of both sociology and literature, and to suggest that no student of human society can ignore the 'literary witness' and the literary consciousness.

* Hoggart, *op. cit.*

† Lowenthal, *Literature and the Image of Man*. Cf. F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1948.

‡ Lowenthal, *Literature, Popular Culture and Society*, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1961. See also B. Barber and D. M. White, *Mass Culture*, New York, Macmillan, 1957.

2 The Social Theories of Literature

Like many areas of sociology, the sociology of literature has a distinguished as well as uncertain history. It is fashionable nowadays to treat the history of any discipline, especially if it reaches back beyond the nineteenth century, as a somewhat irrelevant and unrewarding academic exercise, a mere display of erudition, unrelated to the immediate problems. Too often the history of ideas has tended to conform to this indictment, that it is no more than 'interesting', possibly even 'stimulating', but nevertheless a scholarly luxury. It is, of course, more than this: the study of the past as theory, as speculation, can tell us not only of the ways in which early predecessors struggled with the same kinds of problems that face the modern researcher but, more particularly, it can clarify the methods used: social science cannot possibly be understood solely in terms of what it does today, and any theory of literature and society can be shown to have a lineage which continues to exercise an influence on present work. We shall argue that the history of the sociology of literature has, at different times and in different writers, posed precisely the major questions of its subject, and that the various responses can be seen to be as much the result of ideology as of scientific immaturity.

I

The first really systematic treatment of the relationship between literature and society belongs to the French philosopher and critic, Hippolyte Taine (1828-93). He was not the first, of course, to grasp the social implications of the imaginative arts: Plato's conception of imitation implies a view of literature as a reflection of society. But prior to Taine the social analysis of literature was in the main sociologically thin in content, lacking