

Why the Sociological Turn of the Study of Literature is Not Innovative in Itself

Traditionally, the object of the study of literature comprises the interpretation and evaluation of literary texts. The attribution of meaning to "great works" is undertaken over and over again. In its current forms, the study of literature strongly resembles Bible Studies, not only in its ties with hermeneutics, but also in its focus on a limited set of texts which are deemed to contain valuable insights, to epitomize perfection, to embody a cultural tradition which they also shape. For these reasons, "great works" are thought to be of prime importance to each new generation.

Since its inception as an academic discipline, the study of literature has been compared to other forms of research. Questions have been raised about its methods, its results, and its stages of development. In the 1970s, there has been a debate in which literary scholars have tried to determine whether the study of literature provides descriptions of literary texts, whether interpretations might be conceived of as hypotheses which can be tested, whether the term of "theory" in literary studies means the same as in other disciplines. The outcome of this debate has led to the conclusion that the study of literature differs radically from all forms of empirical research. As has been argued, literary studies are entirely bound to conceptions of literature, i.e., normative ideas of the conditions a text has to meet in order to be regarded as a form of literature. The acceptance of norms as a basis for research and as a guiding principle for judging research results excludes that these results can be discussed in a meta-language and that they can be judged by applying explicit test procedures.¹

The persistence of conceptions of literature as frameworks for literary studies is extremely strong. This justifies profound skepticism toward the claim that any new approach to literature represents a substantial or even radical innovation. The turn toward psychoanalysis, linguistics, sociology, postmodernism, deconstruction, feminism, etc., continues the status quo as long as a specific conception of what the study of literature should be serves as a normative starting point that, as such, is immune to testing.

Although the term "literary field" signals an orientation toward the social

1 For a discussion on the scientific status of the study of literature, see, for example, Verdaasdonk and van Rees.

context of literature, and although the term originates from empirical research, this alone does not warrant that the mere use of "literary field" is exempt from any tie with conceptions of literature.

The term has been coined by Pierre Bourdieu in 1979. It refers to a group of institutions or other agents operating within the domain of literature. The collective action of this group is held to produce the characteristics and qualities which affect the status of certain entities (authors, critics, works of art, etc.) as more or less valuable. Any implication one might draw from this notion demands that one specifies which aspects of collective action have impact on the attribution of value. In specifying such aspects, one has to rely on theories or models of behavior within which variables exemplifying aspects of collective behavior and of value can be operationalized and measured. Such theories or models have to be sufficiently general in order to be applicable to a wide variety of similar processes occurring in the same domain or in other domains. The use of these models should lead to identical or very similar results.

Bourdieu has employed the notion of "literary field" in an analysis of *L'Éducation sentimentale* (1992). His aim is to demonstrate that the novel owes its status of masterpiece — its extraordinary literary value — to the fact that it contains a profound knowledge of the mechanisms regulating the "literary field" in which Flaubert and his contemporaries operated. Bourdieu produces a large number of observations which should buttress his thesis. He points out that in the novel the love of art is represented as being essentially disinterested in nature, which corresponds to a major principle of the literary field. Namely, that overtly mercantile aspirations are detrimental to one's credibility (1992, 45, 49). The novel's characters have opposite social identities epitomizing the field of power and that of art, as well as all interactions between the two (57). The protagonist, in his lack of seriousness, in his social volatility, mirrors Flaubert's own situation as an author in a newly emerged literary field (118).

In this study, the term of "literary field" is used in a non-empirical fashion. Bourdieu assumes that the value of *L'Éducation sentimentale* is outstanding, i.e., that it is different from all other works produced by Flaubert's contemporaries: "What constitutes Flaubert's radical originality and what gives his work an incomparable value is that it entertains a relationship — albeit a negative one — with the entire literary field. It functions in it and, at the same time, it takes into account all of its contradictions, difficulties and problems" (145). Flaubert is supposed to have a superior knowledge of the literary field and superior skills in applying this knowledge in the construction of his novel. However, in singling out Flaubert (and *L'Éducation sentimentale*) Bourdieu eludes the question as to whether his approach is general. Certainly, he signals similar stands on the position of literature in works by Flaubert's contemporaries. But he holds that these authors were less knowledgeable about the literary field than Flaubert. A major problem then — and unsolvable in my view — is how to demonstrate that

the work of Flaubert's contemporaries exemplifies inferior knowledge of the literary field, or no knowledge at all.

The idea that literary works can be graded according to the degree of knowledge they contain of the conditions of their production is highly speculative. Therefore, one may rightfully doubt whether Bourdieu's approach is general. One is also entitled to take not too seriously his caveat that his study does not aim at lauding what is unique (145). Moreover, Bourdieu assumes that the value of a text can be assessed by demonstrating that it obeys and reflects certain laws, i.e., those of the literary field. This viewpoint is incompatible with the idea that value is the product of the collective and concerted action of all parties involved in the literary field. Here, Bourdieu takes value to be an intrinsic characteristic of the literary text. His approach is strongly normative, in that it remains bound to a conception of literature stating that a text qualifies as a masterpiece if it reflects the awareness of the conditions under which it is produced. Certainly, such a conception of literature sounds much more sociological than a conception of literature which demands that truly great literature shows an acute awareness of man's existential struggle — but both are equally normative and equally arbitrary.

The question of whether terms like "literary field" (or any other similar notion) bring fresh and new perspectives for research can only be answered in the affirmative if they function within a framework where empirical research questions are raised. More specifically, the answers to these questions require a theory of behavior specifying hypotheses about the relationships between variables, suggesting ways of operationalizing (measuring) variables, and allowing explicit procedures for testing proposed solutions. From this it follows that research results are essentially relative in nature. One question is whether a result is correct or incorrect; an entirely different question, and a much more intricate one, may be which of the many possible solutions to a problem is better, i.e., more precise, more comprehensive, more stable, etc. To judge research results, one should be in a position to compare them with other results in terms of the hypotheses about the phenomena to be analyzed as well as the methods of operationalization, measurement, and testing by which these results have been achieved.

The contributions by Kees van Rees, Alain Viala, and Rudi Laermans all focus on the notion of "literary field." Following Bourdieu, Van Rees considers the literary field as the dynamic interplay of specialized institutions and other parties producing the value of works of art. The amount of attention spent by reviewers on an author's first and subsequent novels is taken as an indicator of the value his or her works have in the eyes of literary critics. Factors influencing the amount of attention critics are willing to pay to an author's newly published books are 1) the size of the publishing house that brings them on the market; 2) the nature of the periodicals in which the reviews appear — papers with nationwide distribution affect reviewers' attention much more strongly than local or

regional papers; and 3) the amount of attention which an author's previous books received. When a previous publication had few reviews, this does not bode well for the amount of attention the author's subsequent book will get.

The dependent variable is "amount of critical attention for each book published by an author"; the independent variables are the value judgments about each title and the size of the publishing house. All of these variables are operationalized and put into a model which allows to estimate changes in the amount of attention subsequent book publications receive. Clearly, other operationalizations and other, more comprehensive, models are possible. Van Rees's approach entails that a comparison of the results obtained by different modelings of relevant data should enable us to choose the (for the time being) "best" model. This process will gradually enhance our insight into an important aspect of the literary field, i.e., the selection of books to be reviewed as an indication of the value experts attach to an author's literary work.

Although Viala criticizes Bourdieu's analysis of *L'Éducation sentimentale* for its attempt to establish a structural homology between the novel and society, he accepts that reading is a proper way of detecting the conditions under which a text is produced. Viala argues that the search for "structural homology" — the structure of the literary field mirrors social structures, and the text mirrors both of them — imposes a separation between text and society. This implies the belief that a text is an autonomous entity. Against Bourdieu, Viala holds that literature is a discourse and that literary texts are random fixations of this discourse. Since discourse contains speakers and hearers, it exemplifies social positions and roles. The cooperation (belief) of readers is necessary to give a text its momentary (and largely illusory) status of an autonomous entity. Discourse also monitors this cooperation. For this reason, Viala holds that there is a structural identity between fiction and the literary field. He makes a plea for a history of literary theories. According to him, the vast and varied body of ideas on the nature of literature gives insight into the different aspects of society to which literature has been linked before the literary field emerged as a specific sector of society. At the same time, the historical study of literary theories can make us aware that the autonomy of the literary text is a recent conception. Here Viala assumes that literary theories give reliable information about the nature of the values exemplified by literature. This assumption is not supported by evidence, on the contrary, there is massive evidence against it (see Verdaasdonk; Van Rees).

Laermans confronts Bourdieu's view of the literary field with Luhmann's systems theoretic approach and opts in favor of the latter. Here the critique is epistemological in nature. Following Luhmann, Laermans adopts a constructivist point of view, according to which observations are always theory-laden and theory-guided. Theories are not models giving a correct representation of reality; they order reality in many different ways and fulfill specific tasks — the preservation of the organism that is coping with reality, the modification of

situations, etc. Studies of the literary field should describe the distinctions made by all parties concerned. These distinctions will vary strongly. Laermans points out that Bourdieu's approach favors specific distinctions — in terms of "power" — between "established" art and "avant-garde" art. In Laermans's view, this is begging the question, in that certain distinctions are *a priori* thought to occur always and to have more impact than others. This, he argues, is a reduction of the complexity of the literary field. It imposes a false homogeneity on processes which in reality are extremely varied.

It seems to me that Viala and Laermans overestimate the rigidity of Bourdieu's views. Typically, they do not go into the procedures of operationalization and measurement which are needed to check Bourdieu's views. As argued by Van Rees, empirical investigations of the literary field lead to results which can be compared with those obtained by other models. Van Rees's topic of research can be taken as an example. Suppose there is consensus that "exercise of power" by literary critics is a major factor in determining the amount of attention critics spend on newly published books. Now, if one doubts, as Laermans does, that the exercise of power is a major factor in getting new forms of art acknowledged by experts, then one should devise a model accounting for changes in the attention reviewers pay to newly published books in which "exercise of power" is no longer an independent variable. Such a model should have greater explanatory power than current models containing the independent variable in question. But Laermans does not envisage this solution. He rejects the idea that a theory is able to give a correct representation of reality and also that theories can have different degrees of "correctness." As noted, Viala considers textual analysis as a viable means of investigating the relationship between a text and the conditions of its production. As such, his proposal will give rise to the very same problems created by Bourdieu's interpretation of *L'Éducation sentimentale*.

Both critics do not seem to consider questions of operationalization and measurement as being of prime importance. The price to be paid is that the social study of literature, as they conceive of it, will proceed in a way which leads to research results which are fundamentally different from those obtained in empirical investigations. This perpetuates the status of the study of literature as a discipline whose immunity to testing is its hallmark. Abstaining from measurement questions means that a discipline's progress (or lack thereof) is impossible to assess.

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ALAIN VIALA

Logiques du champ littéraire

"Le champ littéraire a trente ans," si l'on peut dire.... Par cette entame en forme de boutade, je voudrais seulement rappeler que c'est par un article paru en 1966 dans *Les Temps modernes* que Pierre Bourdieu a inauguré ce type d'analyse sur les champs culturels, intellectuels, et plus largement: sociaux (1966). Depuis, le mot de "champ" et le concept lui-même sont passés dans l'usage courant. Il est certain que cette banalisation a pour une part galvaudé la notion, et qu'en disant "champ" aujourd'hui, à propos de la littérature notamment, il arrive qu'on dise un peu n'importe quoi. Heureusement, la chose et le mot, le concept et son objet, sont aussi matières à controverses: ces controverses contribuent à en réviser et raviver la problématique, donc à raviver le concept.

En trente ans, ce concept a nourri nombre de travaux. Ceux de Pierre Bourdieu lui-même (cf. surtout 1992) et, pour citer quelques exemples concernant la littérature, ceux d'Ana Boschetti en Italie, de Joseph Jurt en Allemagne, de Denis Saint-Jacques au Canada, de Jacques Dubois en Belgique, en France, de Rémy Ponton, de Christophe Charle, de Gisèle Sapiro, et de votre serviteur. Le numéro du printemps 1996 des *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* montre que l'activité en ce domaine continue avec intensité, et il faudrait — mais il faut aussi faire bref — mentionner d'autres travaux en d'autres domaines de la sociologie, qui sont actifs et qui suscitent aussi des débats. Débats à propos du concept de champ, et débats à propos du concept d'habitus, autre volet du même raisonnement, j'y reviens dans un instant.

Ces quelques rappels suffisent à suggérer qu'on peut aujourd'hui tenter de faire le point, de parcourir l'espace de questions et travaux qui relèvent de cette démarche, s'interroger sur son efficacité heuristique, sur ses rapports avec l'herméneutique et sur la répartition ou la combinaison des tâches entre sociologie et "études littéraires." Ces questions peuvent, me semble-t-il, s'envisager dans une triple perspective. Tout d'abord, en relation avec la logique interne de cette théorie. Au fil des années et des travaux, en effet, la théorie s'est précisée et affinée ou consolidée. Mais il faut aussi réinscrire cette théorie dans l'espace des questions concernant la littérature et dans l'histoire de ces questions. En un mot, parcourir la question dans son extension, sa logique externe pour ainsi dire. Enfin, il s'impose de la situer dans l'histoire plus générale des théories de la littérature, selon sa logique théorique et historique. On me permettra de marquer ici d'un mot encore que toutes les théories sur la littérature ou de la