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Introduction

Several years ago when Priscilla (Clark) Ferguson, Philippe Desan, and I were discussing a special issue of Critical Inquiry that we were editing on "The Sociology of Literature," I grumpily maintained that the sociology of literature was not really a field at all. Considering our mission, this was a rather awkward stance to be taking. What I should have said, precisely, was that the sociology of literature was more like a field of flowers than a field of battle. It had produced impressive theoretical assertions, brilliant but isolated insights, and rich veins of research findings, but it was not organized around key questions or debates the way a proper field ought to be. Now I find myself again, like someone trapped in virtual reality, compelled to describe the characteristics of this nonfield. To do so I shall switch metaphors from the geographical to the biological. The sociology of literature is like an amoeba: it lacks a firm structure, but has flowed along in certain directions nevertheless. In the following essay I try to describe its flow over the past decade, and suggest some future moves.

Points of departure

Cultural studies made substantial advances during the 1970s and early 1980s. These advances included: the opening of Marxian theory into a more dialectical understanding of the relations between base and superstructure (Williams 1980); a reconceptualization of popular culture that dropped the discredited mass-culture model in favor of one allowing for greater agency on the part of the users and manipulators of symbols (Hall et al. 1980, Hebdige 1979); a sophisticated account of the uses of cultural capital to create or shore up economic capital (Bourdieu 1984, DiMaggio 1982); and a firm establishment of the point that cultural products are produced as the results of collective action (Becker 1982) and by organizational systems operating within markets and under various types of state controls (Hirsch 1972, Peterson 1973).

During the past decade a consolidation and extension of these gains has combined with Bourdieu's insights regarding how wars of social status are fought on cultural fields and with cultural weapons. This combination has profoundly influenced the sociology of literature. For example, DiMaggio (1987) argues that the system of artistic

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classification found in a social system, in particular the genres used and understood by cultural consumers, should be understood as “ritual classification”, the outcome of formal social structural characteristics. Thus, a social system having high amounts of status diversity and complex role structures will tend to produce high degrees of generic differentiation; in such areas of great status diversity and complex role structures, however, the boundaries of ritual classifications among genres tend to be weak (students of postmodernism would point out that this characterizes contemporary culture in general). Looking at “cultural systems as totalities,” DiMaggio brings in production processes as well. Ritual classification processes respond to consumer demand ‒ consumers demand the conversational cultural capital with which to pursue their social objectives. These processes are mediated by characteristics of production systems ‒ commercial, professional, and administrative ‒ through which art is produced and distributed. Thinking along similar lines, Dubois & Durand (1989) suggest that, instead of looking for the connections between social classes and literature, it makes sense to think in terms of “textual classes”: genres classified both internally and among each other according to the “real, assumed, or constructed classifications of the different reading publics” (p. 142). Dueling genres replace struggling people on the battlefield, with the relationship between a textual class and (i) literary institutions, or (ii) general socioeconomic structure to be empirically investigated.

Notice that both of these examples begin with the consumer of cultural products, specifically in the case of literature, the reader. Thus they represent the connection recently being drawn between the cultural capital theories and reader-response criticism.

The reader as hero

The most significant new direction taken by work in the sociology of literature in the past decade has been the reconceptualization of readers as creative agents rather than passive recipients of what authors write. Sociologists have embraced European “reception aesthetics” as a way to understand the construction of literary meaning. Proponents of reception aesthetics argued that the reader never comes to a text as a blank slate but instead places it against what Jauss (1982) termed a “horizon of expectations.” While Jauss’s conception of this horizon was primarily literary, social scientists have readily applied it to the different understandings and expectations that different groups or categories of readers bring to a single text. Authors will try to steer

the process ‒ every text has an "implied reader" (Iser 1974) ‒ but cannot control it.

Reception aesthetics succeeded in transforming the research agenda in the sociology of literature, in part because it interacted with another theoretical development that was taking place among students of popular culture, one which accorded significant meaning-making ability to people themselves. Where mass culture theorists and hegemony arguments conceptualized the recipients of mass-produced cultural products as rather hapless, newer voices contended that people were more like bricoleurs, making meanings out of whatever was available to them. Moreover, these meanings often subverted the power relations presented in the content of the cultural object. This view was politically attractive because it respected previously despised genres ‒ romance novels (Modleski 1982), television game shows (Fiske 1989), low riders and other symbols of working class assertiveness (Gottdiener 1985) ‒ consumed by groups lacking social privilege and cultural capital; in these genres it found the sources of a certain wily resistance.

Feminist studies of women readers and women's genres brought reception aesthetics and the new popular culture together most fruitfully. Women readers of formulaic romance novels, for example, whom academics formerly regarded as passive vessels into which mass culture poured its most mindless drivel, were reconfigured as agents, cultural actors making decisions and insisting on their rights, including the right to have time for their favorite form of relaxation (Radway 1984). The romances themselves were found to contain proto-feminist messages involving the revenge of the heroine on her male oppressors (Modleski 1982), the nurturing male (Radway 1984), and the successful and independent African woman (Griswold 1989). In a reflexive study that manages to make a virtue of the hermeneutic circle, De Vault (1990) uses a more complex work of fiction to demonstrate how interpretation ‒ specifically, the interpretations of a Nadine Gordimer novel by initial reviewers, by scholars, and by DeVault herself ‒ is collective and gendered.

Not just gender, of course, but also class, occupational status, nationality, and life experience influence how readers read, and a number of sociologists have explored the nature of this influence. Howard & Allen (1990), seeking to delineate how men and women differed in their interpretation of two short stories, found that life experience overshadowed the modest gender differences; readers who were older, married, and parents, for example, had more sympathetic reactions to complex characters than did young, single readers regardless of sex. To the degree that gender does not make a

difference in reader response, this may be due to the fact that little girls and boys continue to be introduced to reading via male-oriented children's books. Grauerholz & Pescosolido (1989) have shown how persistently sex stereotyping inculcates the youthful reader into a rather patriarchal horizon of literary expectations.

Long (forthcoming), who has been studying middle-class reading groups in Houston, finds that these readers collectively construct a set of aesthetic criteria, which they then use for literary evaluation. These criteria are virtually untouched by trends in literary theory; for example, reading-group readers want "realistic" stories with "believable" characters with whom they can identify. In addition, they readily construct their own genres based on what they see in contemporary literature, one group's "women-in-pain" novels being a memorable example. "How quaint," scoffs the literary critic, but major gatekeepers in the business of literary production, for example Book-of-the-Month Club editors (Radway 1989), scramble to understand such processes of the local constructions of meaning and value.

Because it involves inferences about meaning, setting reader-response criticism to sociological tasks runs the risk of a subjectivism not generally acceptable. While the interface between sociology and psychology is not made explicit in most such studies, sociologists have, in effect, been assuming a certain psychology of reading. According to this view, when we read literature, the text generates a series of mental associations, sometimes called "remindings," by which we relate the literary content to our own life experience (Dollerup 1991, Halász 1991). "For each individual, comprehension is an associative and therefore memory-enriched process ... [it] depends on two factors: for how long attention is given to the sentence, and how effectively it cues the listener's own memory structures" (Nell 1988, p. 79). Such remindings may, like Rorschach blots, offer clues to individual psychology, but it is the pattern of readings ‒ how certain groups are inclined to find certain meanings, and why ‒ that interests sociologists (Griswold 1986, 1987b, Larsen et al 1991).

Schmidt (1982, 1991) has developed a theoretical model that is likely to become increasingly influential as his work becomes better known to an English-speaking audience. Between a text and a reader Schmidt posits a "communicate," that point at which the decoding takes place. Decoding proceeds according to a set of conventions. The polyvalence convention allows the text to be decoded along several different lines, to have different meanings, either sequentially or simultaneously; in contrast, the monovalent convention looks for a single, correct meaning. Similarly, the aesthetic

convention allows for ambiguity and does not demand truth as a criterion, as the fact convention does. This model offers greater precision in understanding reading response. For example, readers having identical sociological characteristics, but who apply different conventions to their reading, might come up with different communicates from the same texts (De Zepetnek 1992).

Reading sacred texts demonstrates this clearly. Ammerman (1987) has studied conservative Christians whose socioeconomic profiles were identical to those of the middle-class community they lived in, yet whose practices, which they maintained were based on the Bible, were very different. Such differences have traditionally been described as having a “literal” versus nonliteral approach to scripture; it might be more useful to think in terms of the application of aesthetic versus fact conventions. The questions would then be, do “Bible Believers” apply fact and monovalent conventions to other forms of literature as well? If not, what types of institutional triggers determine the conventions to be invoked? Schmidt’s model allows for the convergence of a psychological approach, the microlevel of reading most compatible with reader response criticism, with a macroinstitutional level of analysis.

The engagement of micropractices with macrostructures of social systems, such as institutions distributing power, is being shown to affect not just meaning making, but literary participation in general. Rogers (1991), applying a phenomenological approach, draws attention to the variety of ways the literature world (in which “expression and communication become ends in themselves,” p. 8) interacts with the everyday worlds of both authors and readers. For example, she notes how both writers and readers have claimed that isolation (Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*) is a requisite for literary production and reception. Such isolation from the activities of daily life ‒ the abandonment of the everyday world for the literary world ‒ is more difficult for grown women to attain than for men (women are too busy with housework and child care, while men can legitimately demand isolation from the household); it is also more difficult for boys to attain than for girls (sex roles permit girls to be quiet and passive, while boys are encouraged to engage in more strenuous activities). Therefore, and despite the fact that youthful reading is virtually a prerequisite for a writer’s development, Rogers’ research suggests why adult women are well trained as readers, but relatively under-represented as writers, while the reverse is true for men.

Webs of production and thought

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The second development of the past decade has been a surge in the study of how members of the literary system, at the point of production or consumption, organize themselves. In the 1970s the sociological study of culture was permanently changed by the establishment of the production-of-culture approach, which emphasized the organizational and marketing exigencies to which any cultural product is subject. Taking the “culture industry” not in the Frankfurt School sense of hegemonic producer of pablum for the masses but as a fact of cultural life in complex societies, sociologists like Peterson and Hirsch drew attention to the channels and conduits, the obstacles and filters, the middlemen and gatekeepers and boundary spanners, the wholesalers and retailers and media and critics, that connected creative artists with, or separated them from, their publics. While such an approach to culture was not altogether new (cf. White & White 1965, Escarpit 1971), work in the seventies made it inescapable. Analyzing collective production of culture may have reached its apogee in Becker’s *Art Worlds* (1982), though Becker emphasizes interaction among human agents more than the purely industrial approaches did.

As applied to literature, this production-of-culture approach has gone in four directions during the past decade. First, it has been incorporated into more traditional studies of the relationship between literary content and the social world from which it springs. For example, Long’s (1985) study of best-selling American novels over the 30 years following World War II shows that the best sellers’ attitude toward life organized around careers in large corporations shifted from one of enthusiastic affirmation to questioning, rejection, and finally nihilism. This might appear a straight reflection argument, but Long, who herself worked in publishing, adds a production-of-culture analysis to enrich her argument. She points out that in the early postwar era, publishing houses understood that the market for fiction was a general, middle class one. By the end of the 1950s and increasingly during the following decades, television supplanted reading as the mass entertainer; reading novels was more and more a pastime of the highly educated, the academics and professionals, who maintained a more jaundiced view of corporate capitalism than the organization men and women themselves had. Publishers moved to satisfy this readership. So the change in bestsellers may have been as much in response to a shifting market as to a more general decline in belief in the American dream.

A “strong program” of this combination of societal reflection and production-of-culture approaches coincides with recent work in cultural sociology which suggests that during times of social upheaval, ideological production by self-aware cultural innovators will

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increase (Swidler 1986, Wuthnow 1987). Kiser and Drass (Kiser 1985, Kiser & Drass 1987, Drass & Kiser 1988) show that the publication of utopian novels goes up during times of economic crisis in the world system. The outstanding example is the burst of utopian novels in the late nineteenth century, most notably Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. Kiser (1985) relates this burst to the transition from free market to monopoly capitalism. Bellamy and other utopian writers did not just passively reflect economic changes; they were from the middle-class stratum, which had more cultural than economic capital and was most affected by these changes, and they were writing for a readership that was similarly worried about dispossession.

The second type of production-of-culture extension has been toward examining publishing and other institutions in terms of their capacity to exclude or promote. Both feminist thinking and the deconstructionist attention to the artificiality of "the canon" have drawn attention to the selectivity of publishers and media gatekeepers. Tuchman (1989) studied how Victorian women writers were "edged out" of their dominant authorship position by at least one nineteenth-century publisher, once men had caught on to how profitable writing fiction could be. She offers an absorbing case study of invasion and exclusion (see also Rogers 1991, especially ch. 9; for a telling example of promotion, in this case the promotion of Derrida by and among American literary critics, see Lamont 1987). Grauerholz & Pescosolido (1989) show how literary as well as social context influences what gets published, specifically the presentation of females in children's books. In the early twentieth century, there was a vogue for "groups" at the center of children's books (although the authors do not cite it, *The Wizard of Oz* and its many successors are a prime example); collective protagonists generally involved both males and females. By the 1920s and 1930s, groups had receded and folk or hero stories, typically featuring a single male protagonist, were common. Thus, and contrary to the authors' expectation, children's books written during the early part of the century were actually more egalitarian in terms of gender representation than those of mid-century. Not that they were ever all that egalitarian. Over the century, the ratio of male to female central characters in children's books has been 3:1. The recent trend toward a somewhat more equal presentation has been counterbalanced by the relentless masculinity of animal characters, which appears to be increasing; over the century, male animals have outnumbered female animals as central characters by an astonishing 6:1 ratio.

Publishers aren't the only gatekeepers, of course; government bodies and laws, either through the carrot of support or the stick of censorship, accomplish exclusion and

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channeling as well (Dubin 1992, Beisel 1990). While this effect is well known, it is not always straightforward. Berezin (1991), for example, asks a dog-that-didn't-bark question: why did Italian Fascist theatre not produce plays having explicit Fascist content? Although Mussolini stressed the role of theatre as ideological weapon, in fact most plays performed during the 1922-1940 period were apolitical, love stories and other light entertainment. Berezin argues that states can control the content of cultural products and/or their production. If the regime controls both, it is totalitarianism; if neither, pluralism; if just content, cultural protectionism; if just production, state paternalism. State paternalism characterized cultural policy in Fascist Italy. The Fascists developed an organizational bureaucracy (which was huge because they had to employ a large number of baccalaureates—intellectual laborers) that marginalized writers and emphasized production in terms of sheer numbers while more or less ignoring content. There was little explicit censorship; the focus was on "doing theater" rather than "writing plays," and the more the better. Berezin contrasts this with the more explicitly totalitarian theatrical policies of Nazi Germany and Stalinist USSR and suggests that these latter had clearer ideologies to begin with ‒ Fascist ideology was torn between bureaucratic rationality and romantic revolutionism ‒ so they were better able to define and control the specifics of content.

Third, Clark (1987) has pointed out that literary institutions, the systems of production and distribution associated with the production-of-culture school, should be distinguished from literary culture. A literary culture is "a constellation [...] of mutually sustaining institutions, ideologies, symbols, and codes" (p. 8) that is enacted through a wide variety of social practices and that mediates between literature and society. A specific literary culture is the product of historical and geographical circumstances. In the case of France, a high degree of political and sociocultural centralization along with a lingering memory of aristocratic patronage that market-weary writers cherish has produced a literary culture distinguished by the public honor of writers; this literary culture shows up in everything from a proliferation of streets named after authors to advertisements suggesting an analogy between the satisfactions of winning a literary prize and of wearing a certain brand of underwear. In such a culture the "public writer" flourishes; such writers are intellectual heroes like Victor Hugo or Sartre whose political and literary personas are fused. Political leaders and the general public acknowledge the public writer's role even if they neither read the writer's books nor agree with his or her politics. Clark tells of how President de Gaulle, when rejecting a political petition of Sartre's, nevertheless deferentially addressed him as "Cher Maître." China is another literary culture that assumes a "near synonymy of literature,

morality, and politics" (Link 1983, p. 5; see also Link 1984, Link et al 1989), which is the reason why the government is at such pains to control its writers through various "winds" that indicate the currently correct lines. The relative impotence of the general public in China makes no "Cher Maître" gestures necessary. In contrast, writers in many African states have a great deal of freedom, not because they are supported by a strong literary culture but because of its very absence; as Nigerian novelists are wont to say, "the generals don't read" (Amuta 1986, Griswold 1992).

Fourth, various forms of network analysis and clustering techniques have been used to map systems of literary production and reference. For some time, network analysis has been essential for understanding publishers as gatekeepers and readers as information processors. Coser et al (1982) emphasize the role networks play in the book business, and Powell (1985) follows up with an intensive study of academic publishing. Science fiction constitutes a different literary system from academic publishing (or does it?), but Bainbridge (1986) demonstrates that the world of the science fiction buff is similarly highly structured and dense with connections.

Network thinking is mapping literary culture itself. Using data from a survey of writers in a (formerly West) German city, Anheier & Gerhards apply clustering techniques to illuminate some of the characteristics of the German literary culture. In one analysis (1991a) they looked at writers who acknowledged being influenced by other writers versus those who denied such influence. What literary critic Harold Bloom has termed the "anxiety of influence" was expressed in denial, but the anxious writers tended to be the younger, less educated, and marginal to the literary system; more established writers readily acknowledged and located their work with respect to other writers. A second paper from this research uses block modelling to argue that myths about writers bear a close affinity to the social structure of the literary system (Anheier 1991b). At the center of the system is an elite in itself but not for itself, "not a group, but a set of individuals who tend to occupy unique structural positions" (p. 823; emphasis in the original). This "amorphous" elite is prominent and acknowledged by non-elite writers, who themselves constitute more coherent groups, but it is neither cohesive nor in structurally equivalent relations to the non-elite. This combination of an amorphous elite and peripheral groups corresponds to the myths of the (elite) writer as lonely genius and of the (non-elite) writer as poor poet or misunderstood genius.

An application of network analysis into the realm of cognition, involving the literary

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frame of reference used by book reviewers in the mainstream press, is found in Rosengren's work on the "climate" of literature in Sweden (1983). Using a reviewer's "mention" of a writer other than the author of the work under review as his unit of analysis, and utilizing his earlier work on Sweden's literary system in the late nineteenth century as a point of comparison with postwar decades, Rosengren attempts to differentiate longterm, possibly invariant, patterns (for example, the tendency of reviewers to mention writers a little older than themselves and to draw from a very narrow, recent pool of names instead of utilizing the full pool of literary references available) from short-term trends, some of which are so short-term as to be more properly seen as literary weather. His findings are remarkably intriguing. To give only a couple of examples, we learn that changes in the literary frame of reference were considerably less dramatic in the 1960s than in the 1880s; while the literary field was larger in the later period, and therefore the mentions more various, the rate of change was slower, and new schools—for example the French "new novel," or Marxist writers—have not had as much impact as one might have supposed. Although Rosengren doesn't specifically compare modernism to postmodernism, his data suggest that the latter may represent a less fundamental cultural change than the former. A second example: while the literary frame of reference has become more democratic since the 1960s, with popular genre writers mentioned alongside serious and even classical authors, it has not become more egalitarian in terms of sex. A subsystem seems to have emerged wherein women reviewers of books by women are more likely to mention other women authors, but men or women reviewers of male-authored books have not increased their mention of women authors, at least not through the mid-seventies. Indeed, Rosengren's data suggest that literary ghettoization is taking place in a number of areas beyond women writers. He sees the literary system as breaking down into a tripartite system; instead of the old high/popular distinction, his data suggest a high literary level, a middle-brow level, and a popular level of genre fiction heavily influenced by other forms of popular culture, especially music.

New moves

A review of recent work in a field (or nonfield) inevitably tempts one into speculating about future directions and perhaps trying to steer toward them. Developments in the past several years, both within the sociology of literature and within the social world, suggest a four-item agenda.

1. Recent ethnic and nationalist struggles prompt a new look at the relationship between literature and identity. Studies are needed of how macrostructures of language politics and regime transformation interact with microprocesses of reading and meaning construction, with institutions of education and literary production mediating. These studies will help us to understand what part literature plays in the ongoing process of identity construction and maintenance—a process for which people continue to be willing to die.

2. Connections should be made between the institutional and the reader-response modes of analysis. The work of the Tilburg group in the Netherlands is moving in this direction. These researchers are firmly in the institutional camp, studying such things as literary magazines (De Nooy 1991), book marketing (Verdaasdonk 1992), and literary critics (Janssen 1988, Van Rees 1987). But such institutions may be understood not simply as gatekeepers but as influences on the conventions through which, by the construction of communicates, reading comprehension takes place. Van Rees (1989) suggests this when he criticizes the model of literary criticism that says that the critic describes, interprets, and evaluates a work; the description itself, the use of concepts like "character" or "balance," is not objective but a convention legitimated by positions of cultural authority. Yet these descriptions help set the conventions though which other readers will approach the text and develop their own meanings. It is perhaps refreshing to know that a good many readers ignore what the cultural authorities have to say (Janssen & Leemans, 1988).

3. Sociologists should rediscover that forgotten soul, the author, who has been deconstructed into oblivion. It may seem a sign of theoretical naivete, but it is a sign of common sense as well, to remind ourselves that human agents create the literary objects under consideration (Griswold 1987a). If a literary object is "shared meaning embodied in form," then the creative agent may be someone other than the actual writer (for example, the guiding editor of a line of formulaic fiction ‒ whoever sets the form). That said, there is no reason why authors, with their intentions, experiences, sociological characteristics, and "horizons" of understanding, cannot be treated in parallel fashion to readers: as agents who interact with texts, working to encode meanings (which may or may not be decoded by any particular group of readers ‒ for all its sins, deconstruction has surely profited us by establishing the unreliable nature of texts).

4. The relationship between printed literature and other cultural forms and media,

especially in a context of cultural globalization, needs to be theorized and empirically examined. Practitioners of the sociological study of literature (and art) tend to confine their subject to an elite ghetto, perhaps because they fear it will be dissolved into just another form of communications. This seems a misplaced concern. For example, both work on literary cultures and on understanding the application of conventions in reading suggest that reading is, at least to some degree, different from information processing or passive entertainment. We should move toward a better understanding of these differences.

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