Editors’ Introduction: Mirrors, Frames, and Demons: Reflections on the Sociology of Literature

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Paradoxes

The sociology of literature, in the first of many paradoxes, elicits negations before assertions. It is not an established field or academic discipline. The concept as such lacks both intellectual and institutional clarity. Yet none of these limitations affects the vitality and rigor of the larger enterprise. We use the sociology of literature here to refer to the cluster of intellectual ventures that originate in one overriding conviction: the conviction that literature and society necessarily explain each other. Scholars and critics of all kinds congregate under this outsize umbrella only to differ greatly in their sense of what they do and what the sociology of literature does. They subscribe to a wide range of theories and methods. Many would not accept the sociology of literature as an appropriate label for their own work; others would refuse it to their colleagues. Nevertheless, every advocate agrees that a sociological practice is essential to literature. For the sociology of literature does not constitute just one more approach to literature. Because it insists upon a sociology of literary knowledge and literary practice within the study of literature, the sociology of literature raises questions basic to all intellectual inquiry.

The sociology of literature begins in diversity. The way that it combines the ancient traditions of art with the modern practices of social science makes the very term something of an oxymoron. There is not one sociology of literature, there are many sociological practices of literature, each of which operates within a particular intellectual tradition and specific in-
They ran about all over with the mirror.
stitutional context. These practices cross basic divisions within the contemporary intellectual field, especially within the university. Inherently interdisciplinary, the sociology of literature is subject to constant reformulation as scholars re-evaluate their disciplines. In consequence, disciplinary boundaries seem less rigid, less logical, and, hence, less authoritative than ever before. Even so—and this is another paradox of the sociology of literature—any sociological conception of literature is best situated in terms of an original discipline and its institutional setting. However frequently individual scholars cross over disciplinary lines, the fundamental divisions retain their force.

The most basic boundary line divides literary studies and social science, each of which confronts literature on a separate terrain. The fundamental opposition between the two determines work in the sociology of literature more than might be supposed for such avowedly interdisciplinary work. Conflict extends to every level, from means and ends to theory and method, to the questions each field asks, and to the answers each proposes. Where social scientists use literature to reveal, exemplify, or interpret social process, literary critics regard the literary work as an end in itself. Literary studies focus on the aesthetic, even though few interpreters bother to define what they intend by the concept. Then too, critical judgment in literary studies entails participation in the production, diffusion, and legitimation of literary canons and of the institutions that support and are supported by those canons. This process of evaluation, in turn, encourages a series of distinctive conflagrations. Social valorization of the art object tends to interact with and confirm the mystique of art. The literary judge—whether critic, teacher, scholar, or creative writer—identifies, often fervently, with the work of literature. No social science instills comparable psychic investment in the literary object.

The very terms by which literary studies and sociology name their objects of study disclose the enormous gulf between the two. Literary critics look at works, texts, writers, and readers. They speculate about the creation, reception, and interpretation of literature. Social scientists, on the other hand, discuss books and literary institutions and dwell upon the production, distribution, and consumption of cultural products. In an American department of sociology, for example, the sociology of literature generally

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focuses on organizations and markets, centralized and decentralized publishing, networks of editors and booksellers, copyright laws and censorship norms, strategies of diffusion, and the reading habits of particular social groups. The specific nature of the art object—what makes a text "literature"—is seldom at issue.

A second tension sets theory against empirical work. In some settings this fundamental split coincides with actual divisions between disciplines, but more often it cuts across those divisions. Sociology, at least the American variants thereof, tends toward empirical work primarily because sociologists like to ask questions that are amenable to quantification. At the same time, although the term is rarely employed, the work of many literary historians and critics also qualifies as empirical. Interpretations of texts do not meet the criterion of testability that distinguishes the empirical work of social science, but the groundwork of traditional literary interpretation raises a comparable prospect. Standard critical tasks create verifiable data through biographical investigation, publishing history, textual variants, concordances, and the like. Indeed, the constraint empirical work has exercised on literary studies can be gauged in the reactions of contemporary literary theories, some of which have attacked just this empirical side of the once customary labors of the literary scholar. The whole issue is then complicated by the fact that empirical literary scholarship and contemporary literary theories alike disavow or, at the very least, studiously ignore the social context of literature: both, in fact, challenge the sociology of literature.

The predisposition to theoretical discussion or to empirical analysis is of great moment for the definition of the sociology of literature. Wary of what they disdain as so much theoretical verbiage, American scholars of literature and society, whether social scientists or literary critics, have tended to produce largely empirical studies—case studies of particular literary institutions (publishers, booksellers, academies, journals), discussions of given literary figures and their work ("Social phenomena in the work of X . . ."); "Literature and Society in Z . . ."). In general, an American sociology of literature has deliberately adopted an empirical approach.

In Europe, on the contrary, the sociology of literature encompasses a broader range of humanistic undertakings. This greater resonance in European intellectual circles owes much to the prevailing theoretical climate. In contrast to the American inclination to fix intellectual activity within a specific academic discipline and with respect to a given subject, European scholars are far more likely to seek a theoretical locus for their work. Because it allows, encourages, and requires crossing of disciplinary boundaries, theory facilitates the interdisciplinary perspective that is essential to any sociological view of literature. Or rather, theory subsumes such boundaries and the intellectual divisions they represent. Inevitably, the closer research remains to empirical work, the stronger the influence
of any given subject and the more difficult it becomes to see beyond the material at hand. Traditional literary history just like much social science is bound to case studies as predominantly theoretical work can never be. These epistemological differences between American and European intellectual practices reveal the disjunctions and the strains in the many sociological practices of literature on each side of the Atlantic. It is not surprising that the sociology of literature has a greater following in Europe where intellectuals like Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Raymond Williams move easily between disciplines and use their work to address issues of broad intellectual and social significance.

The institutional organization of intellectual life accentuates certain of these predispositions and minimizes others. The preponderant American empiricism promotes what seems to be an innate skepticism about “foreign” theoretical perspectives that seem to remove the critic from literature, whether it is regarded as a text by literary critics or as a social product by social scientists. The evident respect for disciplinary boundaries visible in American universities means that many academics think of “interdisciplinary” as a code word for indiscriminant borrowing and a fundamental disregard for crucial disciplinary distinctions. Perhaps, in some perverse sense, interdisciplinary work needs the partitions erected by departments. In any case, despite the recent proliferation of interdisciplinary committees in American universities, departments mostly prevail. To get ahead in the university, the academic—student or professor—must find a niche. Finding a niche means finding a specialization, and that still, in the United States, means a departmental affiliation.

By contrast, the very different organization of European universities stimulates movement between disciplines. The small number of chairs in any discipline and in most European universities accords the individual professor considerable latitude in defining and redefining a field. Barthes, in effect, institutionalized his particular conception of semiotics by calling the position to which he was elected at the Collège de France a Chair of Semiology. Researchers, and to a lesser degree students, choose a professor (who may well also direct a research center) with as much care as they select a discipline. Here, disciplinary labels often mislead, which is why for European scholars it is imperative to know whose brand of history a historian actually practices, whose sociology, whose sociology of literature.

In both Europe and the United States, though for different reasons, the sociology of literature occupies a marginal position within the academy. That position is likely to remain peripheral. Inevitably, the interdisciplinary nature of the sociology of literature must struggle against the disciplinary organization of universities and the ideological rigidities of schools of thought. The lack of consensus over ends and means, the absence of agreement over central concepts erect an even greater obstacle to institutionalization. Without some elements of common understanding the sociology of literature will never possess significant institutional space—
the space filled by university departments and research centers, by courses, majors, degrees, and appointments within existing departments, or by a professional support network, the journals, colloquia, and associations that assure the exchange of information and ideas essential to any organized intellectual enterprise. To develop as a field in American universities, the sociology of literature would need to follow the path followed by American studies beginning in the 1930s, by comparative literature in the 1950s and 1960s, and by fields as different as semiotics and women’s studies in the 1970s and 1980s. In Europe, it would need to find support in chairs within the university system. In both places the sociology of literature would need to define a set of shared problems and methods; it would have to fix a research agenda. But resolutions of its contradictions would entail sacrificing the diversity that makes the sociology of literature so exciting an adventure. The final paradox is that sociologists of literature might not want to pay that price.

**Legacies**

The sociology of literature owes its current disarray at least in part to the conflicting traditions that are its intellectual heritage. Like sociology itself, the sociology of literature arose in the nineteenth century, a product of its many revolutions. Momentous changes in the intellectual landscape notwithstanding, a sociological perspective on literature faced obstacles that were numerous and significant. On the philosophical front, Kant’s separation of aesthetics from metaphysics and ethics removed literature and art to a world apart, beyond the contingencies of the material world. Closer to specifically literary concerns, the insistence of classical aesthetics upon the universality of art similarly removed literary works from the influence of any one milieu. Romanticism rebelled against classical aesthetics on many counts. Yet the romantic conception of genius effectively took the writer out of society by defining him (the stereotype was almost exclusively masculine) in terms of divine inspiration. Much as Kantian aesthetics abstracted art itself, a certain romanticism detached the artist from any relevant social context.

Other aspects of romanticism proved more favorable to a sociological perception of literature. Against the forces that denied the relevance of material factors, certain currents of thought supported a reconceptualization of the relationship between literature and society. Expressly relevant to the sociology of literature were Voltaire’s social history (The Age of Louis XIV, 1751), Johann Herder’s literary nationalism and the Sturm und Drang movement of the 1780s, and Germaine de Staël’s assignment of characteristic literary traditions to the vagaries of climate (On Literature, 1800). Out of these disparate elements romanticism fashioned a distinctive and inherently sociological perspective on literature which invoked par-
ticular cultural traditions to clarify the essential differences between literatures.

In the mid and late nineteenth century the sociology of literature gathered momentum from the combined forces of realism and the novels it inspired, from the positivism of Comte, and from science. The humanitarian and properly political concerns evident in the social novels of the mid nineteenth century and thereafter construed literature as the record, and even more the critique of the emergent bourgeois, capitalist society. The theory of realism on which these novels drew fortified their assumptions and legitimated their practice. With its stress on the particular, the quotidian, and the assumed equivalence of the sign and the referent, the realism identified with these novels offered exemplary grounds for the critical stance adopted by the novel toward this same society. And finally, the positivism bequeathed by Comte and amplified by a pervasive scientism encouraged a belief in progress and in the possibility of discrete analyses of social units. With enough care in definition, positivists maintained, anything could be analyzed—virtue and vice, as Taine once contended in a notorious comparison, as easily as sugar and vitriol. Science acknowledged no bounds; literature came under its dominion as fully and as logically as any material factor.

Romanticism, realism, and positivism each made a signal contribution to the rethinking of literary relations necessary to a truly sociological conception of literature. But the primary impetus to the sociology of literature came not from any of these but rather from Marx and his theory of knowledge and society. Marxist theory and Marxist critiques of society have been the driving force for the sociology of literature from the beginning. The concepts of ideology, alienation, and class consciousness are central to European sociological practices of literature, and those American literary critics who deem their work sociological tend to place themselves within the European theoretical tradition that comes out of Marx. If there is a dominant lineage in the sociology of literature, it derives from latter-day Marxist critics like Georg Lukács, Lucien Goldmann, and Louis Althusser, writers who have heavily influenced European scholarship and who are gradually becoming better known in the United States.

Marxist theory grounded literature not in a vague ethos of Zeitgeist or génie or in traditions that stretch back to antiquity, but in the social, political, and above all economic and ideological structures of contemporary society. The Marxian division of society into intellectual superstructure and economic base correlated literature and the writer with specific social milieux, with a unique economic system, and with the class relations and the ideologies sustained by that system. Marxism sees literature as it sees all knowledge as a reflection of the economic infrastructure of society. What is the exact nature of the associations between infrastructure and superstructure? Where is causal responsibility? How is influence passed on? Mediated through what individuals or institutions or ideas? Even
today these questions bedevil Marxist criticism of literature and the arts, but they remain the questions to ask.

Certainly, the same questions bear upon the sociology of literature today. Because the problems raised by Marxist analyses apply virtually across the board, Marxism can be said to set the agenda even for those who most emphatically reject Marxist theories. The command of Marxism lies much less in its highly problematic and hotly contested theories of literature than in the force of the metaphor from which those theories derive. The mirror—literature as the "reflection" of society—has currency well beyond Marxism. In one way or another the reflection model supports practically all work in the sociology of literature. Indeed, the strenuous efforts of critics to circumvent the mirror attest to the seduction of the metaphor. Mikhail Bakhtin's "adequacy," Lukács' "totality," Goldmann's "homology" and "world vision," Terry Eagleton's "Literary Mode of Production" (LMP), Alain Viala's "prisms," Raymond Williams' attempt to elude the causal relationship between infrastructure and superstructure, and even Pierre Bourdieu's "field"—all attempt to invent a theoretical concept, and a metaphor, adequate to the task of relating literature to society.

The reflection model advanced by Marxist theory spoke all the more forcefully to nineteenth-century literary intellectuals because of its base in nineteenth-century literary practice. Realism relied on the mirror quite as much as Marxism. After all, well before Marx, Stendhal defined the novel as a "mirror carried along a road." Not for the last time a radical social theory went hand in glove with a decidedly conservative theory of literature. As the theory of realism legitimated novelistic practice, so Marxist theory and practice rested upon and ratified the mirror as a model for criticism and as a metaphor for the relationship of literature and society. This shared metaphor does much to clarify the attraction of realist fiction for sociological studies of literature. It was no doubt predictable that Marx and Engels and so many since should have considered the nineteenth-century realist novel the best possible mirror of society: it also mirrored Marxist theory.

Contemporary literary theories pose a radical challenge to this nexus of social theory and literary practice on which the sociology of literature has so long relied. In redefining literature these theories forced a re-conceptualization of all literary relations. The disaggregation of the sign effected by linguistic theory subverted the connection between text and referent. Semiotics exacerbated this fragmentation by subjecting the literary work to the same kinds of analyses as any other production of signs. No longer does creative genius have the final word. The promotion of the reader in contemporary criticism displaced the writer from the center of literary study. Interpretations that pay no heed whatsoever to the author undermine the authority of the writer. The literary work, too, forfeited its preeminence, and literature as a collective phenomenon relinquished its mystique.
Logically, the incorporation of literature into a general linguistic or semiotic order should favor the conjunction of literary theory and the sociology of literature. Other facets of contemporary theories, however, effectively block cooperation. The sociology of literature opens literature to society; literary theory turns works back on themselves, enclosing the text within the linguistic order. Reaching outside of that order requires reaching outside of the theory. Exploring the social order, on the other hand, sends research in many different directions at once, and the considerable time such exploration takes may be more than many are willing to spend in the face of vocational pressures to complete a degree, find a job, get tenure. Focusing on the text alone allows greater concentration of effort, and hence more obvious access to intellectual specializations. These strategic advantages certainly play a significant role in the favor enjoyed in past and present American academic circles by a variety of formalist approaches, from New Criticism to deconstructive theory. They join in a collective denial of the social and historical components of any text.

Those scholars who do invest the effort to move beyond the text will discover that the very formulation commonly employed—literature and society—fosters an opposition between texts and institutions, between literary studies and sociological practices—precisely those oppositions that the sociology of literature should surmount. The dichotomies become all the more powerful to the degree that they respect a “logical” division of intellectual labor. The antagonism, as durable as it is simplistic, offers further testimony to the power of the reflection metaphor. Theory and institution betray similar conceptions of social and intellectual organization. By working from the opposition between literature and society, the reflection model justifies disciplinary boundaries that similarly divide up knowledge about the world. These boundaries between literary studies and the social sciences, in return, support the reflection theory and its assumption of an absolute division between material reality and intellectual activity. The reciprocal relationship between theoretical model and institutional setting strengthens each. Although discussions of texts as well as institutions become ever more sophisticated, few studies effectively challenge the principle of division upon which this work depends or the model that it accredits. Although most critics strenuously reject the naive perception of literature and society implied by the reflection model, the mirror endures in practice even as it is denied in theory. If the reflection model has been discredited, it has not been replaced.

Perspectives

A metaphor that cannot be avoided deserves closer attention. If we examine the mirror more closely, we may find that the metaphor actually
serves the sociology of literature in unexpected ways. The marvelously revealing mirror in Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen" offers a case in point. In this tale a demon invents a unique mirror: it does not reflect, it systematically misreflects. Andersen's mirror shrinks and distorts every good and beautiful thing, and it magnifies everything evil or ugly. In this glass pleasant landscapes look like boiled spinach, normal people appear hideous, and kind thoughts become wicked grins.

The demon creator appears mildly amused by his invention, but his students, simple reflectionists all, take it very seriously:

All the pupils in the demon's school—for he kept a school—reported that a miracle had taken place: now for the first time, they said, it was possible to see what the world and mankind were really like. They ran about everywhere with the mirror, till at last there was not a country or a person which had not been seen in this distorting mirror.¹

Eventually the mirror breaks. Shards of glass fly through the world and lodge in people's eyes and hearts. These shards retain the peculiarities of the mirror, so that everyone sees the world through bent, distorted, and misshapen images.

Like the demon's fantastic mirror, literature presents structured misreflections, which magnify or diminish certain aspects of reality, twist some or leave others out altogether. The sociology of literature challenges these mirrors and their inventors, examines their misreflections, their causes and consequences. It shows how and why a particular text or genre or period or writer reflects in one way and not in another; it specifies the properties of the mirror that determine its (mis)reflections.

The mirror of "The Snow Queen" also boasts an ornate frame and three demons to carry it about the world. That frame and those demons too belong within the purview of the sociology of literature. Critics who focus on the reflections or misreflections of literature usually neglect the frame, that is, the institutional and intellectual context of reflection. Such critics are even less likely to consider the demons, that is, the agents of diffusion and canonization. In sum, the sociology of literature makes a point of what others overlook. It concentrates upon those who hold the mirror. Many studies explore the literary text or literary institutions or writers. A sociology of literature requires the integration of text, institution, and individual—mirror, frame, and demons.

If no intellectual practice exists apart from the subject of investigation or away from the framework within which that investigation is pursued, it is equally significant for the sociology of literature that no inquiry

occurs independently of the inquirer. These shards in the eye of the perceiver also figure conspicuously in the sociology of literature. By including the individual looking at the mirror, the shards in Andersen’s story take the metaphor to its logical and necessary conclusion. A mirror assumes an observer, who assesses the image, evaluates the reflection, and places both in perspective. The sociology of literature must take account of this primal act of interpretation. The singlemindedness of disciplinary training, of intellectual circles frequented and artistic traditions assimilated, of social horizons and, more simply, of hunches, biases, idiosyncracies—these are the shards that limit perception. Just as every mirror misreflects, so too, because of these shards, every observer misperceives. As all literature represents structured misreflections, so all interpretation and analysis build on structured misperceptions. When the reflection model incorporates the onlooker as well as the mirror and the frame, the metaphor becomes richer, more complex, and in the last analysis, absolutely essential to the sociology of literature. The necessary incorporation of the observer into the observation, the confrontation of the critic with the literary mirror, its frame and its demons, opens into a truer sociology of literary practices.

Every sociological practice of literature must determine the place where it stands, the position from which it will agree to interpret the world. The decided advantage of Marxism, an advantage that does much to explain its hold over the sociology of literature, has to do with the strong stand that it takes. Whatever its limitations, Marxism creates an unequivocal perspective for looking at the mirror. In looking beyond those limitations, students of literature and society would do well to remember that only through a clearly defined perspective can we hope to elucidate the inevitable variation in the sociology of literature and the disagreements among its proponents. The essays that follow, diverse, even contradictory, are bound by the simultaneous impossibility and necessity of looking beyond the mirror. This predicament at once defines the sociology of literature and explains the vitality of the enterprise and the commitment of its partisans.