Can there be an Unbiased Sociology of Literature?

SOME COMMENTS ON THE NEED FOR A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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IT HAS BECOME something of a commonplace that the sociology of literature like the sociology of art more generally, is one of the least developed areas of modern sociology.1 The blame for this is often, as it were, put on "literature" itself. It is too subtle a subject, it is claimed, too elusive and uncertain for proper definitive sociological study. Bradbury, for example, contrasts the literary or "internally sympathetic" with the sociological or "externally objective form of cultural analysis" and suggests that these two "can never be totally compatible" (1971: xviii), and Toffler has to initiate his discussion in the Albrecht collection by first decisively rejecting the common view of the arts as "so subjective and relativistic as to be beyond objective measurement" (Albrecht et al. 1970: 536). The neglect is also sometimes asserted to be "sociology's" fault: sociology is accused of being too arid, "secular" and unimaginative to deal adequately with (as César Graña puts it) "the articulate monuments of that culture" which it claims to study (1971: 65). It is also now increasingly agreed that this neglect of the sociology of literature is a pity, and that it is time the tide was turned in favour of more sociological work on literature (and on art more generally).

It is easy to detect some real basis of truth in this cluster of assumptions—and also rather pleasant to be able to present one's chosen field of study as one hitherto neglected but now beginning to attract increasing interest. But is this the whole truth about the sociology of literature? In the present article I want

to suggest that there are certain aspects of this set of assumptions that should be questioned.

Should one, in the first place, look somewhat more closely at the reasons for the relative neglect of the sociology of literature? Sociology after all has not by now such a short or unvariegated history and it has managed to encompass the study of most aspects of social life. Why, then, this doubt about literature?

It is not as if works of literature are ineffable: they have been analysed and theorised over for centuries. Indeed many would claim there are too many words and theories about literature. This is a constant complaint by those who would like what could be termed a sociological approach to literature—from Madame de Stael’s famous comments in her Introduction, to the less well-known but equally pertinent remarks of another earlyish writer to attempt a comparative study of “poetry as a social institution”:

“Consider the great cloud of witnesses who can be summoned from any library to prove that of all printed silliness nothing reaches quite so silly a pitch as twaddle about the bards... Books beyond the power of any modern reader to compass have been written on the poetic impulse; while all the books which treat the poetic product as an element of public life could be carried in one's pocket...”

It is not theory, Gummere concludes, that is lacking but a study of “the facts of poetry” (1901: 7). The puzzle is why, seventy years later exactly the same sorts of complaints can still be made.

Here Escarpit’s cool-headed analysis seems to provide a more hopeful clue than any amount of contemplation of the essential “complexity of experience involved in any important, fully realized work of art” as Bradbury has it (1971: xxiv), or fashionable chidings of positivist sociology. Escarpit ascribes the bypassing of literature by the science of sociology quite simply to the fact that literature has been protected by an “attitude of deference” and has thus established itself as a “taboo” subject for research (1971: 5, 96).

This idea of an implicitly prohibited subject for investigation within a particular culture should be familiar to sociologists. One has seen it both in areas (the distribution, say, of goods and opportunities within the educational system) which have yielded to the researchers as well as in fields like the study of law which are now beginning to be subjected to empirical investigation. With literature, the hidden defensive walls are perhaps even greater. In the contemporary Western world at least, literature involves a social institution with apparently its own recognised specialist practitioners. These are “the writers”, whose role seems to attract at least outward recognition and even slightly awesome admiration—an attitude that comes through, for instance, in some of Bradbury’s would-be objective comments on “the writer”. “Writers” are all the more taboo to investigation because of the still influential Romantic tradition of the artist as the great, inspired and mysterious individual, not susceptible in

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1 In the sense of evolutionist, which must be regarded as one kind of comparative approach. (For further elaboration see Finnegan 1973a; Payne 1973: 14–15).