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Nous sommes définis par les lignes que nous décidons de traverser ou d'accepter comme frontières

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Truth and Falsity in Postmodernism (3)

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From a scientific point of view, scientific method and scientific modes of explanation lack the dialectical depth achieved by literary expression. The psychologically complex origins and mechanisms of bad faith, for example, are more effectively evoked or suggested than explained using socio-psychological analysis or jargon. In his novel, *La Nausée*, Sartre had Roquentin, the dishonest and guilt-ridden history researcher, decide to abandon his historical research and write a novel. It was the only way to recover a kind of sincerity, to heal his bad faith. It was a kind of existential therapy. William Faulkner, as it is well known, heavily influenced Sartre. And there is perhaps no better example of the genesis of bad faith than the character of Jason in *The Sound and the Fury*. No social-science explanation of racism or sadism can bring us closer to the "truth" of such phenomena than the situational logic revealed in Faulkner's novel, which is far less didactic and superficial than most other attempts to reveal the inner workings of the guilty conscience, such as Albert Camus' *La Chute*.

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In many ways, bad faith is more interesting and important than truth as an object of study because of its essential ambiguity. It is not a question of truth versus falsehood, or good versus evil, but rather of the vacillation between diametrically different states of being, a vacillation that Sartre (in *L'Être et le néant*) called "an inner disintegration in the heart of being". Sartre was a "modernist", but his phenomenology was based on the ambiguity, the virtual indeterminacy that the notion of bad faith represented.

This ambiguity applies equally to the notion of idealism. If lying and bad faith can be differentiated by degrees of unconsciousness, so can truthfulness and naiveté. The pursuit of truth may be equally understood as involving a narrowing of ethical range and a preserving of individual self-interest. Here also is a realm of relativity that does not lend itself to scientific analysis, but the antinomies of which can be suggested within a literary text. This is the theme, for example, of Sinclair Lewis' *Arrowsmith*. Martin Arrowsmith's dedication to scientific research is portrayed as the pursuit of an ideal, which necessarily produces socio-cognitive dissonance and ethical tensions. A "truth seeker" and a "lie hunter", Arrowsmith's single-mindedness is both product and generator of a naïve rejection of social convention and the calculated pursuance of self-interest. But in order to preserve his moral integrity, Arrowsmith must justify the immediate ill effects, both personal and social, of his research. In brief, Arrowsmith was forced into a kind of hypocrisy in order to remain idealistic.

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The difference between hypocritical idealists and idealistic hypocrites (leaving aside liars) is essential but impossible to reduce to any formula. If Martin Arrowsmith was the former, Elmer Gantry was the latter, but there is room for others who are simply "conventional" in varying ways and degrees. An analysis of the possible "variables" would require a consideration of factors such as political conjuncture, historical epoch, social class, geographical location and family circumstances. Indeed, Sinclair Lewis was particularly industrious in researching background to his novels — going on location, drawing upon personal experiences, interviewing individuals who became sources of literary

inspiration, studying relevant fields of knowledge.

There are, therefore, significant similarities between literary analysis, social science and the writing of fiction and poetry. And yet the differences remain unmistakable. Comparisons could be made, for example, between Alberto Moravia's *The Conformist* and Theodor Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality*. Both are studies of the genesis of weakness of character and of cowardice as a personality trait, and of he problematic relationship between idealism and dogma, between egoism and mysticism. It is clear, however, that the almost clinical analysis of Adorno and his associates pales before the horror depicted in Moravia's novel. Such novels are, in effect, implementations of abstract social understanding. They are the concretization of dynamic conceptions and, as such, present examples of the social construction of behavior and personality in ways, which impel the imagination towards reconciliation of theory and real situations.

The necessity of literary imagination to the communication of social knowledge has never been lost on the more nuanced social theorists. In this regard, we have the witness of Karl Marx himself, who wrote that he learned most of what he understood about social classes from Balzac. The implications of Marx's confession are tremendous. Marx, likely the most influential social thinker ever, who claimed to have discovered the objective mechanisms which govern social evolution — the class struggle in particular with all of its complex ramifications — was primordially informed by the personal observations of a novelist, and a cynical and very conservative one at that.

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The difference between literature, both prose and poetry, and social science is one thing. That between literature and literary criticism is equally important. Moreover, social science and literary criticism share many of the same methods and intellectual biases. Any claim that literary criticism goes beyond social science can be justified only by stating that the circumscribed field of research — the specific literary text — is far more limited in extent. In general, both literary criticism and social science lack the subtlety and depth of the literary text.

It is possible that the most informed, and thus creative, social science is that which takes as its fundamental elements the crystallizations of subjective perception and reflection found in literature (or, should we say, "fiction"). This is what the best work in the social sciences does. And it is this understanding, which lies behind the principle of "intersubjectivity", which is to the social sciences what "indeterminacy", is to physics, and what "intertextuality" is to literary criticism.

The limitations of literary criticism are clear in relation to both literature and the social sciences. Firstly, literary critics can only comment on the hidden, implied or inadvertent "meaning(s)" ("subtexts") of a work of the literary imagination (a "text"). Secondly, literary criticism is bounded by the text in a way in which history and the other social sciences are not. The social sciences, if they are to be practiced competently, require knowledge of general context and a mastery of often-contradictory conjunctural factors and evolutionary dynamics far surpassing the relatively restricted field of vision represented by focus upon a single literary text. Even if the best literary criticism represents a similar breadth and depth of analysis, and if work in history and the social sciences is often as narrow and uninformed as the worst literary criticism, it remains that the nature of literary criticism is more limited in scope and conception.

How to understand, then, the extraordinary situation of the past decade and a half in which literary criticism has tended to dominate scholarly debate and "discourse"? A partial answer to the question may lie in a global political situation tending to marginalize those explanations of social process with programmatic implications, particularly those on the political "left". Structural changes at a variety of levels have challenged certain less-than-nuanced conceptual orientations, especially those associated with the so-called socialist states. In addition, the critical

perspective informed by different varieties of Marxian phenomenology has been also placed on the defensive by the implosion of "socialist" bureaucracies, by the repression of popular movements in "less-developed" regions, by the ageing of the first postwar generation of intellectuals in the industrial-capitalist countries of Western Europe and North America, and by the emergence of a new ideological consensus in these latter countries tending to demobilize and demoralize social protest movements.

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Poststructuralist criticism in this context is an intellectual trend participating in a radically conservative shift of elite perception and opinion. That this trend should be advanced within the universities by those engaged professionally in literary criticism is understandable. Given the nature of their subject matter, the disciplines of history and the social sciences were particularly shaken by the protest movements of the 1960s and 70s. In addition, they proved less flexible in absorbing the highly abstract formulations characteristic of poststructuralist thought and in adapting to the new political atmosphere. What is remarkable in poststructuralist literary criticism is its substitution of the Nietzschean technique of poetic denunciation for scientific category and method. Just as Nietzsche reviled the utilitarian aims and scientific pretensions of the late nineteenth century, poststructuralists are ultimately concerned to criticize "utopian" social perceptions as well as the ideas, scientific concepts and methods associated with them. In the end, it is not so much "deconstruction" which unites object and method for poststructuralists, but rather denigration, demolition and destruction.

Can the notion of truth be retained in spite of what Karl Mannheim called the "relationality" implicit in the dialectic between values and interests? Does "false consciousness" necessarily limit our consciousness of what is false in social science, and elsewhere? It is only possible to advance the most modest propositions. Firstly, the expression "false consciousness", formulated by Karl Marx a century and a half ago (but well explained by Plato's allegory of the cave!), is perhaps an overly mechanical idea conditioned by nineteenth-century assumptions. This is so especially because it is difficult to defend the notion of "true consciousness". Secondly, and regardless of the limitation of Marx's formulation, "consciousness of what is false in social science" should always be one of the objects of social research. This is the conviction that lies behind the idea of intersubjectivity. In other words, it is only to the extent that we become aware of our own subjectivity that we achieve a degree of objectivity. And it is for this reason that all our investigations and reflections fall somewhere between social values and individual interests. Mannheim expressed this clearly:

The modern investigator…will no longer be inclined to raise the question as to which of the contending parties has the truth on its side, but rather he [sic] will direct his attention to discovering the approximate truth as it emerges in the course of historical development out of the complex social process. The modern investigator can answer, if he is accused of evading the problem of what is truth, that the indirect approach to truth through social history will in the end be more fruitful than a direct logical attack. Even though he does not discover 'truth itself,' he will discover the cultural setting and many hitherto unknown 'circumstances', which are relevant to the discovery of truth. As a matter of fact, if we believe that we already have the truth, we will lose interest in obtaining those very insights, which might lead us to an approximate understanding of the situation. It is precisely our uncertainty, which brings us a good deal closer to reality than was possible in former periods, which had faith in the absolute. (Mannheim, p. 84)

To deny that "truth" exists would be to reject any type of scientific investigation. To maintain that one possesses the truth is to risk the substitution of metaphysics for science. Scientific investigation and debate necessarily involve, therefore, interrogation designed to approach truth to the greatest possible degree. But this "relationalism" does not eliminate moral and ethical considerations from the debate. On the contrary, the attempt to improve human existence, by exposing lies, bad faith, domination and invidious distinction, should be the very essence of both science and politics.

Post-scriptum :

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