

What Can Literature Do? What Does Literature Know? Sociocriticism, Politics, and the Text

Review Article: *Le Politique du texte, enjeux sociocritiques: pour Claude Duchet* (edited by Jacques Neefs and Marie-Claire Ropars. Paris: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1992).

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Le problème pour la sociocritique serait alors celui d'une spécificité du travail fictionnel (poétique) par rapport aux énoncés qui traverse le texte. (Claude Duchet *Sociocritique* 7)

In this article I will review some of the postulations and positions of authors who work in the field of *sociocritique* / *sociocriticism*,¹ as represented in a new book, edited by Jacques Neefs and Marie-Claire Ropars, called *La Politique du texte, enjeux sociocritiques: pour Claude Duchet* through a study of the initial question posed by Marc Angenot in the first chapter: "Que peut la littérature?" Although this approach will unjustly play down the importance of some of the contributions to this impressive volume, it will nonetheless allow for fruitful discussion about the sociocritical approach, which is largely unknown to the English-speaking world except by reference to Edmond Cros' journal *Sociocriticism* (out of the University of Pittsburgh) and his relatively well-known book called *Theory and Practice of Sociocriticism* (originally published by CERS Montpellier in 1983 as *Théorie et pratique sociocritiques*, and translated into English by Jerome Schwartz for the University of Minnesota Press, 1988). Despite the value of Cros' approach, and the notable importance of the Ulla and Jürgen Link's foreword to the English translation, Cros' work is by no means representative of the broad range of sociocritical study or even the theoretical apparatus which underpins it. Sociocriticism, or *sociocritique*, owes its origins and its development to Claude Duchet (who is never cited in Cros' book!) and to the group of colleagues and disciples who have been trained and/or influenced by him over the many years in which he has worked (his first publication was in 1946, and his first use of "socio-critique" in one of his titles occurred in 1971 with the publication of "Pour une socio-critique ou variations sur un incipit," in *Littérature* 1, 1971). Duchet also edited, in 1979, another text called *Sociocritique* (Éditions Fernand Nathan), comprised of the proceedings of a conference organized by NYU and Université de Paris-VIII. The list of people inspired by this early volume on *sociocritique* (and other work by Duchet) is impressive if the production of *La politique du texte*, which is a kind of recompense to Duchet (it comes complete with an exhaustive list of Claude Duchet's publications and a bibliography of works on *sociocritique*), is any indication. I count, on the list printed on page 279, 168 persons and institutions involved with the project, including the likes of Marc Angenot, Jacques Dubois (who, along with Jacques Leenhardt and Henri Meschonnic published texts in both the present volume and the 1979 study of *sociocritique*), Gérard Genette, Philippe Hamon, Henri Mitterand, Régine Robin, and so forth. Most of the names on this list would not be familiar to an English-speaking audience, despite the fact that the issues Duchet and his followers / colleagues are working on are contemporary and urgent. This, if you will, is another of my interests for the purposes of this article, to review Duchet *et al.*'s work and to relate it to theoretical issues of concern to an English speaking audience (and by doing so trying to live up to a tradition, described by Ulla and Jürgen link in *Theory and Practice of Sociocriticism*, in which Montreal (and citizens thereof) act(s) as "probably the most important reception channel between the francophone world and the United States," vii).

“Que peut la littérature?” “What can literature do?” “What is the status of literary knowledge?” Before turning to Angenot's reply to these questions I'll set a provocative challenge from Noam Chomsky, the well-known linguist and increasingly prominent political activist, whose views of literature (and indeed of the social sciences) are sometimes surprising and provocative. Why Chomsky? Because I feel that his political work, his approach to texts, and his commitment to social amelioration based upon a vision of freedom, equality and rationality, is a welcome and much-needed antidote to contemporary political theory and social science research, just as research in *sociocritique*, with its insistence upon studies of social and textual relations, offers a much-needed politically-useful theory of (literary) texts in an era of intellectual self-indulgence. And in my opinion, a study of the differences and similarities in two approaches to literary knowledge as apparently divergent as Chomsky's and Neefs/Ropars *et al*'s, offers space for the aggrandizement of both.

Chomsky the linguist seldom, if ever, speaks of literature (for obvious reasons, considering his approach to language theory); and, again not surprisingly, Chomsky the political activist and social thinker also has little or nothing to say about literary texts. Yet there is reason to study Chomsky's overall approach to discourse as represented in both of his domains of interest for two reasons. First, his reasoning concerning the production of texts *per se* is sometimes close to that of Angenot's; and second, his comments are of particular interest in the context of a collection of articles related to discourse analysis because Chomsky, like Angenot (who co-founded the Inter-University Centre for Discourse Analysis and Text Sociocriticism), has done close textual readings that fall (loosely) into the domain of discourse analysis, and he, like Angenot, has done extensive study of various realms of discursive practice, notably propaganda. And finally, there is a (tenuous) red thread here; Chomsky's mentor was Zelig Harris who Angenot describes, in *Glossaire pratique de la critique contemporaine* (Montréal: Hurtubise HMH, 1979), as one of the founders of discourse analysis research, through reference to Harris's 1963 monograph called *Discourse Analysis*.²

There are slim pickings of Chomsky on literature, despite the massive corpus of Chomsky texts and the potentially-related titles, such as *Language and Responsibility*, *Language and Politics*, and *Problems of Language and Freedom*.³ There is, however, a valuable interview for our purposes in *The Chomsky Reader*, which will serve as the basis for my preliminary remarks concerning the role of the literary text in an analysis, and an interview with Mitsou Ronat in *Language and Responsibility* which will serve as the basis for my discussions about dialogues *concerning* literature (literary theory). James Peck, the editor of *The Chomsky Reader*, and the interviewer for the opening discussion concerning Chomsky's personal background and *cheminement*, begins with a somewhat cryptic but important question:

You've rarely written much on the kinds of experiences that led to your politics, even though, it seems to me, they may have been deeply formed and influenced by your background.... For example, I am struck by how seldom you mention literature, culture, culture in the sense of a struggle to find alternative forms of life through artistic means; rarely a novel that has influenced you. Why is this so? Were there some works that did influence you? (3)

Chomsky replies by stating that he rarely “writes about these matters” because they “don't seem particularly pertinent to the topics I am addressing.” Literature affects him inasmuch as certain

notions “resonate” when he reads, but overall his “feelings and attitudes were largely formed prior to reading literature.” “In fact,” says Chomsky, “I’ve been always resistant consciously to allowing literature to influence my beliefs and attitudes with regard to society and history.” In sum, therefore, literary renditions of social or political situations do not offer privileged *information* concerning the actual events or the power structure with which Chomsky is concerned. However, he does admit that literature can offer a far deeper insight into another realm of knowledge, the study of what James Peck in this interview calls “the full human person.” In fact, according to Chomsky, literature provides more insightful information about the full human person than does any mode of scientific inquiry. This is a notable exception to Chomsky’s adamant belief in the power and value of pure sciences over social sciences, and is in accord with Mikhail Mikhailovitch Bakhtin’s belief that dialogism, which is most adequately expressed in the dialogic novel, is the only means to adequately represent what he calls “the whole human being.” However, Chomsky is nonetheless reticent about drawing “any tight connections” between literature and knowledge because he can’t really say whether literature has ever “changed [his] attitudes and understanding in any striking or crucial way:”

[I]f I want to understand, let’s say, the nature of China and its revolution, I ought to be cautious about literary renditions. Look, there’s no question that as a child, when I read about China, this influenced my attitudes – *Rickshaw Boy*, for example. That had a powerful effect when I read it. It was so long ago I don’t remember a thing about it, except the impact.... Literature can heighten your imagination and insight and understanding, but it surely doesn’t provide the evidence that you need to draw conclusions and substantiate conclusions. (4)

Literature from this standpoint does not necessarily reflect either the overall social discourse of a given society or particular elements thereof, but rather is one of any number of means through which one can gain knowledge. It is difficult (if not impossible due to variations depending upon the person) to assess whether the attitudes developed by the reader with regards to a particular subject preceded the reading of literary texts (thus allowing certain notions to “resonate”), or whether the literary texts themselves helped form the attitudes (as Chomsky suggests in his discussion of the role that literary texts played for him when he was a child). But the actual relationship between literary knowledge and empirical facts is clearly problematic for Chomsky, to the point where he “consciously” blocks out any effects that literary texts might have for his analysis of particular situations. But as we’ll see, this blockage of literary knowledge happens on the level of methodology, and it does not imply that literary discourse has no role to play in describing the contextual reality within which it is situated or read. In fact, it could be said of Chomsky’s view that one can learn from literature just as one can learn from life. How this occurs (in both cases) is unclear; how one learns from life and how one learns from literature are processes that, at our level of sophistication, cannot be easily described or evaluated. So, as Chomsky claims, literature has been important for him, but he is not prepared to describe (what he considers to be) the indescribable, -- the actual effect that literature has had upon his (or anybody else’s) thinking.

Practitioners of sociocriticism, and I’ll take as an example here the work of Marc Angenot, address different concerns for their study of dialogue in or about literary texts; however by bringing first Angenot’s, and then other theoreticians, work to bear on issues posed by the Peck / Chomsky interview helps clarify the relationship between literary discourse and the broad compendium of

social discourses uttered at a particular historical moment. In the first article of the recent book *La politique du texte*, Angenot begins by posing several questions regarding the status of literary knowledge: “What does literature do?” “What does literature know?” and, “What does literature know that distinguishes it from other discursive practices?” These questions offer us the first glimpse at the workings of sociocritique, since Angenot notes that a fundamental question for sociocritical analysis is “que sait-elle [la littérature] qui ne se saurait pas ailleurs, dans les champs discursifs publics ou ésotériques?” (10). Angenot seems to articulate Chomsky's position on this question when he suggests that “que sait la littérature?” never refers to “connaissance propre et du premier degré;” thus, he writes, “la question se précise...de la façon suivante: que sait la littérature sur les manières dont les autres secteurs discursifs “connaissent” le monde et légitiment leurs connaissances?” The ways in which it affects or describes other discursive realms (Angenot) and attitudes (Chomsky) is by virtue of its qualities as literature; thus Angenot also asks about the relationship between the *form* in literature (one of its distinguishing qualities) and the work that it accomplishes within the overall social discourse. A study of this relationship, which is never raised (except by inference) by Chomsky (i.e. “it was so long ago I don't remember a thing about it [Rickshaw Boy], except the *impact*,” my emphasis) underlines, in Angenot's view, the specificity of sociocriticism and the contribution that Claude Duchet has made to the field of literary studies. In this regard Angenot emphasizes such Duchetian notions as the *mise en texte* of an aspect of social discourse in the novel, and the *sociogenèse du texte*, which relates to the work that a text effects upon its context, its absorption therein, and its distinctiveness as polyphonic discursive collage within the broader practice of social discourse.

Sociocriticism, as a research project, helps to specify the nature of the “impact” (Chomsky) that literature has upon the reader by pointing out its paradoxical roles, as on the one hand that which proliferates (variously constituted fragments of) social discourse (by virtue of its intertextual nature), and on the other (or by extension), that which challenges the broader compendium of social discourse through its ability to juxtapose and articulate contradictory, uncomplimentary, or unrelated fragments of a (presumed) whole (“carnivalization”), either in the present or in some undetermined future (“une potentialité,” which leads to a kind of “open-endedness”). What these roles have in common with one another, and what they have in common with Chomsky's notions of “resonance” and of an indeterminate “impact” effected upon the (situated) inquisitive reader, is that they actively occur in the real world, as a kind of work that is effected through dialogic interaction. In this sense, knowledge of a “deuxième degré” is similar to knowledge that resonates; both act upon the experience of a socially situated interactant. I have bracketed Bakhtinian notions throughout this paragraph -- “situatedness,” “intertextuality,” “chronotopic,” “carnivalization” “open-endedness” and “dialogic” -- to draw attention to the strong Bakhtinian undercurrent in sociocritique and by extension to use Bakhtin as a tentative point of contact between sometimes disparate issues.

Angenot thus insists that there are no immanent qualities to literature; and yet he does bracket off literature from other discursive practices in the society. Chomsky too, who insists that knowledge claims in social sciences must be grounded in similar verifiable criteria as that which is set forth for pure sciences, is nonetheless ready to speak of literary texts as being able, in ways that no scientific knowledge is, to describe or contribute to human experience. Thus Chomsky, who in my experience generally speaks of concepts such as “attitude,” “impact,” “effect,” and “insight” in ways that avoid murky intellectual obfuscation of the kind that is unfortunately common in discussion of literary texts, does employ said terms without full explanation in his (brief) description of literature. But whereas Chomsky claims to consciously resist allowing literature to affect his beliefs and attitudes with regards to history and society and does not go beyond statements

suggesting that literature has a legitimate but undefinable claim to knowledge, Angenot insists upon the need to elaborate “une théorie et une critique historique du discours social,” which would permit us to study the literary text in a properly socialized setting, while underlining its paradoxical role as both disseminator and subverter. This indeed leads us to a divergence between these two thinkers, just as it led to a divergence between Foucault and Chomsky during their debate on “human nature” (televised on national television in Amsterdam and later transcribed for publication in a book about human nature called *Troubled Waters*). Chomsky refuses to acknowledge the role that, say, rules of social interaction (Angenot) or épistémé (Foucault), play in either of his two research domains (his purely *scientific* study of linguistics and his “muckraking” studies of media and power relations in contemporary American society) because he has never found any convincing evidence, beyond intuition, that these rules exist. The elements of the “immense rumeur” that are of interest to Angenot, “ses règles,” “ses topiques,” “ses rôles,” “sa rhétorique,” “sa doxa,” “ses langages,” “ses migrations thématiques,” and so forth, are present in language for Chomsky, but they act ostensibly as (inaccessible) screens to our understanding of the facts that are obscured therein. Thus Chomsky seeks to sift through the “immense rumeur” for objective truth or empirical facts with an understanding that most of what is said has no value for the search for facts that can lead us to conclusions useful for research purposes, while Angenot (like Foucault before him) sets forth the compendium of social discourse as an interrelated whole and suggests that the kinds of scientific knowledge sought within a particular context is to some degree coloured by the questions posed by the overall social discourse and the discursive rules that underlie it. For Angenot, literary texts reveal active discursive tendencies that could in some ways colour or even define what is deemed to be the realm of science, while for Chomsky literature's relation thereto is, at best, unknowable.

This is not extraneous for those who seek to sift through texts in search of objective data. Certain texts, for Angenot, are declared to be literary according to an active paradigm of social constraints and circumstances; “autrement dit, l'effet *littérature* ne peut être jugé et mesuré que par rapport au système socio-discursif global dans lequel il s'engendre” (12). Substituting the word “littérature” for “science” would I think be at least partially in accord with Angenot's vision (that is, I think that $1+1=2$ would remain scientific and for most purposes objective knowledge for Angenot, whereas other “scientific claims” might not), whereas said substitution would undoubtedly be rejected by Chomsky. One of Angenot's objectives is to de-fetishize literature, to place it into a properly social realm; Chomsky, on the other hand, allows a special privilege to literature but (presumably) feels that said contextualization would not enhance, and in fact would probably take away from, the value of the literary text. On the other hand, Chomsky does, as I've said, claim special status for scientific work which, although not identical to fetishization, could create similar ideological problems under certain circumstances by virtue of, say, its being exempted from discussions concerning ideological repercussions.

From this standpoint it is interesting to re-examine Duchet's view -- “on ne peut véritablement penser l'histoire qu'à travers l'imaginaire” -- and Angenot's repudiation of fetishization of literature -- “la littérature ne connaît pas le monde mieux que ne parviennent à le faire les autres discours, elle connaît seulement, ou plutôt elle *montre* que les discours qui prétendent le connaître et les humains qui humblement ou glorieusement s'y efforcent ne le connaissent vraiment pas” (19) -- since they both suggest the modesty of our understanding and the limitation of any single vision (including a scientific one). We need other persons to “fill in” for us, according to Bakhtin, for their regard upon us allows for a more complete vision than a single (monologic) perspective. Part of the process of “filling in” is undertaken by those who comment upon or attempt to contextualize literary language and texts; but when Chomsky discusses this kind of research (socio-linguistics and literary

criticism) in *Language and Responsibility*, he once again resists the possibility that dialogue about literature has any particular claim to explanatory principles.

A discipline is defined in terms of its objects and its results. Sociology is the study of society. As to its results, it seems that there are few things one can say about that, at least at a fairly general level. One finds observations, intuitions, impressions, some valid generalizations perhaps. All very valuable, no doubt, but not at the level of explanatory principles. Literary criticism also has things to say, but it does not have explanatory principles. Of course ever since the ancient Greeks people have been trying to find general principles on which to base literary criticism, but while I'm far from an authority in this field, I'm under the impression that no one has yet succeeded in establishing such principles.... That is not a criticism. It is a characterization, which seems to me to be correct. Sociolinguistics is, I suppose, a discipline that seeks to apply principles of sociology to the study of language; but I suspect that it can draw little from sociology, and I wonder whether it is likely to contribute much to it.

Ronau replies that “in general one links a social class to a set of linguistic forms in a manner that is almost bi-unique.” Chomsky replies:

You can also collect butterflies and make many observations. If you like butterflies, that's fine; but such work must not be confounded with research, which is concerned to discover explanatory principles of some depth and fails if it does not do so. (57)

The first point here is that Chomsky is deriding literary criticism here, and not literature. His remarks concerning literature suggest that we cannot know the kinds of effects that literature has upon us (in any general sense at least), but his comments concerning literary theory, or for that matter political science, sociology, or sociolinguistics, are more caustic because they, unlike literature itself, wish to lay claim to a body of knowledge and explanatory principles. Here I think is the basis of Chomsky's argument; literary theory cannot “know” anything in terms of explanatory principles, and to look for such principles through the application of literary theory would be an error. Some literary theorists, and I might add sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists and so forth, cringe at Chomsky's derogatory descriptions of their work. They could, and often do, take comfort in the belief that all knowledge domains, including pure science's claim to a monopoly on explanatory principles, are culturally and socially contingent; Chomsky, for reasons I have already noted, would not agree with this position. For Chomsky, literature does indeed *know* something, about life, about the whole human person; but theoreticians working in the social sciences who make reference to literary texts for their research (literary critics) only have a claim to knowledge useful for explanatory principles when their research stands up to the scrutiny that scientific research undergoes as a matter of course.

The way in which researchers articulate the socialized nature of knowledge is developed by

some of the articles in this volume; and for the balance of this article I shall bring other definitions of sociocritique to bear upon issues raised by the present discussion, while providing summary descriptions of some of the articles that complement or contradict perspectives articulated thus far. One small point; it is difficult, or even unfair, to compare a whole school of thinking about texts from a socialized approach with the small number of comments that Chomsky has made on the subject, and in fact this is not my objective. What I am suggesting is that Chomsky's remarks concerning literature and literary criticism do represent a point of view which, even when represented by a few remarks, nonetheless stand as a useful criticism of, and (occasionally) a complement to the sociocritical project.

In “Sociocritique et argumentation: L'exemple du discours sur le *déracinement culturel* dans la nouvelle droite,” Ruth Amossy applies sociocriticism to the discursive tendencies of a political movement in contemporary France. Her description of sociocriticism is in accord with that already described, emphasizing the ways in which sociocriticism (when applied to literary texts, which is its principal concern) privileges the transgression, the production of meaning through discourse, the innovation, and the internal tensions or “mystification” (30) thereby elucidated. By attempting to describe the relevance of sociocriticism for non-literary texts, she is attempting to both expand the field of sociocritical study, while at the same time raising questions concerning the distinction between literary and non-literary texts. By reading a chapter from *Les Idées à l'endroit* by Alain de Benoist (Hallier, 1979) “comme un texte littéraire,” she suggests that this non-fictional text contains elements of discursive practice best seen through the prism of sociocritical understanding. Thus in this article she takes on the issue of how the rendering of ideas in text leads to the production of formal elements that cannot be described with reference to content alone:

Sera donc prise en charge, pour être vérifiée, l'hypothèse d'une socialité qui se dit dans le travail interdiscursif, dans le recoupement ou la dialogisation des savoirs, dans les réseaux textuels, dans l'investissement imaginaire et mythique, dans les glissements de sens et les silences, autant sinon plus que dans les contenus explicites. (31)

This in effect turns the question of “what does literature know?” into: “What does a rendering literary do to the non-literary?” The question has admittedly been posed (though perhaps less thoroughly) through reference to other-than-sociocritical analyses. The answer of course allows the researcher to demonstrate that ideas are conveyed through formal, as well as semantic means, and that a scientific mode of presentation (whether valid or not) provides a (potentially alarming) semblance of rationality to a text. Chomsky has repeatedly asserted that claims to scientificity can be verified; but, and this seems to me to be an extremely important point, the persuasive power of such a text for an (uninitiated) reader cannot be nonetheless discounted. A related issue is raised in Elisheva Rosen's “Le récit d'enfance” when she insists upon the *construction* of the genre (in this case *récit d'enfance*), and the delimitation and circumscription of texts contained therein, as being a part of the creative act that must be accounted for prior to a purely content-oriented analysis; or, in the context of our earlier discussion concerning Chomsky's conscious decision to resist being affected by a literary rendition of historical events, one of the decisions that we are forced to confront is how a particular text can be written, and how it will be read. In this regard, I recall Duchet's words in *Sociocritique*:

Le texte historise et socialise ce dont il parle, ce qu'il parle *différemment*; sa

cohérence esthétique (sa différence) est tributaire de conditions contingentes du scriptible comme du lisible. D'autre part, il ne vit que par ce qu'il produit, de lectures, d'effets, de réécritures. Il n'est pas à cet égard d'une autre nature que ces objets divers, ponctuels et sériels, matériels et symboliques, dont l'Histoire fait et refait incessamment son propre texte. (8)

Régine Robin's "Pour une socio-poétique de l'imaginaire social," like Duchet's 1979 text "Positions et perspectives," is a kind of mise-à-jour, demystification and demarcation of sociocriticism, and a discussion concerning the role of the "imaginaire" (a word that reappears with notable frequency in Duchet's writings) for sociocritique. Duchet began his 1979 text by stating that, in light of the multiplicity of research undertaken in the name of *sociocritique* or *sociocriticism*, "il serait présomptueux de vouloir présenter ici un ensemble doctrinal" (3); and Robin begins by stating that during a period of cultural amnesia, "il serait bon de commencer par rappeler les origines de la sociocritique ou plus exactement les origines du questionnement sociocritique." In short, there is a kind of sociocritical approach to sociocritique / sociocriticism that is remarkable in both articles.

Robin's text is particularly important in light of our present discussion for several reasons. First, she recalls and clarifies fundamental notions of sociocritique already named; second, she places sociocritique into a relation with pertinent theories of the novel and of discursive interchange -- Bakhtin, Goldmann, Macherey, Bourdieu, Lukács, and so forth. Third, she sets out to study the relationship between the text and its surroundings -- the *co-texte* and the *hors-texte*. But I am particularly interested here in a fourth point, her insistence upon the unique and privileged position of the novel within the traffic of ideas, images, forms, stereotypes, and discursive configurations, and her portrayal of the novel as a locus upon or through which the fluid memory and imagination, and that great "rumeur globale" of social discourse, become crystallized (part of a larger discussion of Duchet's *sociogramme*). The effect upon the imagination of this crystallization gives strong impetus for studying the social aspects of the novel and the role of the novel as purveyor and reservoir of images:

Un Gavroche, un Rastignac, un Frédéric Moreau, certaines scènes emblématiques... peuplent notre imaginaire aussi fortement que les gravures des manuels scolaires, que nos souvenirs personnels ou que des personnages, des scènes, des lieux historiques. Le roman a été une sorte de réservoir d'images, de phrases, de mots, de situations, de modèles narratifs, un foyer culturel très puissant (95).

Looking back to Chomsky, we find a notable degree of indifference with regards to the specifics of this reservoir of images; when Peck says to Chomsky: "you have rarely written much on the kinds of experiences that led to your politics, even though...they may have been deeply formed and influenced by your background" Chomsky replies that "I've not thought about it a great deal." When the question of the novel *Rickshaw Boy* comes up with respect to a discussion of China, Chomsky says that he doesn't "remember a thing about it, except the impact." When pushed on whether literature can sensitize someone "to areas of human experience otherwise not even asked about," Chomsky replies that "people certainly differ, as they should, in what kinds of things make their minds work" (4).

For Chomsky, there is no rich homogenous reservoir of intact memories which are or are not open-ended, because the reservoir itself is not filled with a homogeneous liquid that dissolves all

elements in the same way, and even if there was it would only be interesting inasmuch as it could help us understand how the mind “works,” a capacity which we are nowhere near finding out at this point in our evolution. For Robin, the reservoir is, by nature of its “socialité,” subject to changes across time whereby “le texte produit un sens nouveau, transforme le sens qu’il croit simplement inscrire, déplace le régime de sens, produit du nouveau à l’insu même de son auteur; tout le non-dit, l’impensé, l’informulé, le refoulé entraînent des dérapages, des ratés, des disjonctions, des contradictions, des blancs à partir desquels un sens nouveau émerge” (96, a notion similar to Bakhtin’s open-endedness). Far from being incompatible with Chomsky’s own reading of certain images from the past, Robin may in fact be offering an explanation for Chomsky’s statements, based upon reference to the moment in which these texts are recuperated for re-examination. “What can literature do?” can be expanded once again, this time to include: “What can knowing what literature can do tell us about who is doing it?” She is also trying to explain this phenomena of literature, and providing reasons why it might be set aside from other forms of discursive practice within the society.

Other articles in the volume expand upon and clarify a sociocritical approach to text and society. Jacques Neefs, in “L’Investigation romanesque, une poétique des socialités,” writes about the transformation of relations effected by the novel; in his sense, the novel knows about ambiguity, construction, transformation and transmission through language, and as such knows about discursive genres and the reality they attempt to portray. Neefs lays the emphasis here upon the rejuvenating qualities of the novel, optimistically suggesting that “quand toute forme de communauté semble perdue, la pensée et les oeuvres désignent une réalité encore à naître, dans la simple affirmation que la communauté continue, dans les signes qu’elle procure pour l’identification d’une parole, par les tentatives de configurations nouvelles qu’elle tend et offre pour que soit reconnu de l’intelligible” (187). Georges Benrekassa, in “L’oeuvre, sans idéologie,” takes issue with Adorno’s postulation from *Prisms*, that “l’oeuvre réussie n’est pas celle qui réconcilie les contradictions objectives dans une harmonie illusoire, mais plutôt celle qui exprime négativement l’idée d’harmonie en donnant forme aux contradictions, de façon pure et intransigeante, jusqu’au coeur de sa structure,” so that “le verdict d’idéologie pure et simple perd son sens” (189). By suggesting instead that any attempt at isolating ideology in a doxological code is inevitably overly-reductive (a criticism, it seems to me, of the *sociocritique* agenda), Benrekassa proposes to envision the text outside of ideology so as to (paradoxically) enrich the notion of ideology through reference to the complexity of the text. These two articles, like numerous others in this volume, relate by inference only to the subject of my earlier discussion, but nonetheless deserve considerable attention. Other examples include Jacques Dubois’ “L’institution du texte,” an analysis of the relationship between the study of the sociology of textual production and sociocriticism, which adds to other remarks concerning the role and the place of the text in society; Robert Morrissey’s “Le Gaulois errant d’Eugène Sue,” which postulates that sociocriticism finds a natural subject domain in studies of the relationship between culture and society, political practice and writing, and history and literature, as elucidated in the relationship between ethnicity and nationalism; Thomas Pavel’s “Thématique et politique,” which describes the revival in the United States of (highly subjective) thematic study of literary texts (the subject of a new book by Werner Sollors called *The Return of Thematic Criticism*, Harvard UP), and the relation thereof to political engagement. Henri Meschonnic completes the volume with further study of the relations between language, literature and society in “D’une poétique du rythme à une politique du rythme” and in doing so brings to bear the force of sociocritique, vis-à-vis the work of Chomsky and vis-à-vis cultural study in general:

La critique prend alors une valeur double. Elle est la mise en évidence d'une implication réciproque entre des éléments traditionnellement tenus pour séparés, autonomes. Elle est la mise en évidence du caractère radicalement historique des valeurs. Les deux ne sont qu'une même découverte et exploration du système que font une langue et sa littérature, une langue et sa société, mais aussi une poétique et une éthique, une poétique et le politique. (203)

Meschonnic provocatively underlines the paradox of poetics -- "comme critique, comme reconnaissance du rôle central de la théorie du langage, et comme critique du signe par la critique du rythme," (204-5) -- as a utopia, a utopia in the sense of its necessity, and of its unfeasibility in a world so structured.

Overall, the new addition to the field of sociocritique, *La Politique du texte*, is a valuable contribution to literary studies which, in my view, offers a long-awaited clarification of the entire field of literary studies. By emphasizing the thoroughly socialized nature of any text, the authors contribute to a properly communal nature of language and a concurrent de-fetishization of *Literature*, while nonetheless allowing literary texts to propose or offer the space for contemplating another set of reality principles; and by questioning the position and the sanctity of literary texts within this discursive community, these authors offer valuable insights into aspects of our reading of literary texts even if, as Chomsky points out, these texts do not have claim to a clearly-definable realm of knowledge useful for drawing conclusions or deriving explanatory principles.

Biographical Note

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Notes

1. There is discussion concerning the relationship between these two terms, despite the fact that they should simply be the French and English versions of the same practice, since one of them is studied in the context of the United States and the other in France. I will not take up this issue here; when I use "sociocriticism" I am translating "sociocritique."
2. This early definition was from a linguistic perspective; Harris was interested in the "pattern of occurrence (ie. a recurrence) of segments of discourse [ie. utterances, parts of sentences, words, parts of words which constitute a "whole constituent or a sequence of constituents; where a constituent, for language, is a segment of a sentence resulting from any grammatical analysis of the sentence"] relative to each other," and as such concentrated upon the structure in discourse which can be studied without reference to other information, such as the pattern or relations of meanings in the discourse (*Discourse* 7).
3. Noam Chomsky, *Language and Politics* (Montréal: Black Rose, 1988); *Language and Responsibility: Based on Conversations with Mitsou Ronat*, Trans. John Viertel (New York:

Pantheon, 1979); *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom* (New York: Vintage, 1972).