SOCIOCRITICISM Level: Bachelor of Arts

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OUTLINE

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PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Objective:

This course of which the title is “sociocriticism” is nothing but an initiation aiming at providing the fundamental features of this theoretical approach to students. This implies that a much more elaborate understanding of this course calls for additional readings with a view to mastering the ins and outs of this theoretical approach.

Semantic Clarifications:

For the sake of clarity, it is of interest to lay the emphasis on a barrage of terms that are frequently used in connection with the field of theory.

Theory:

It should be understood as a hypothesis whereby a fact or a given reality is examined. Thus one may speak of a literary theory, that is to say an approach used in the analysis of a literary work.

Sociocriticism:

This term can be divided into two words. The prefix”socio” which refers to society abd “criticism” which alludes to performing a judgment on a given reality. Taking these two words into consideration, one can argue that “sociocriticism” is an approach that helps the literary critic learn more about society. In the words of Ruth Amossy “ Sociocriticism is instrumental in revealing what the texts teach us about society”. Pierre Popovic contends that “Sociocriticism always says smothering about the world” while Claude Duchet posits that “the literary text expresses the social”

Sociocritic:

This substantive refers to he who uses Sociocriticism as his theoretical approach

Sociocritical:

This adjective is used to qualify the approach used by advocates of Sociocriticism

Literary criticism:

That body of literature dealing with an analysis, a reading of a work such as a novel, play or a poem

Basic Assumptions:

Contrary o the tents of the immanent approach, Sociocriticism holds that the reader must be interested in “the social in the text” (Duchet). Indeed the words used by the writer are taken from a given environment. This is what Marc Angenot calls”the words of the tribe,” namely the linguistic signs of a given society. For his part, Pierre Popovic puts forward the phrase of “social semiosis,” construed as the way a society is represented through language. Likewise, the syntagm “social imaginary” is to be understood in the same line of thinking.

THE SOCIOLOGY OF LITERATURE

Here literature is viewed as asocial fact being produced in a given society. This chapter can be grasped at two levels:

1. Literature claims its people (writers, critics, readers….) writing, reading, evaluating…..the literary object.
2. Literature deals with the social problems of a given reality

Here the main idea is to discuss the proponents of the traditional sociology of literature. For them, extratextual elements and informative concerns are the main issues in a literary work.

Robert Escarpit: He advocates that literature be examined in conjunction with the reception, production, locus……

Content analysis: Here the literary work is seen as a historical document telling more on a given reality. Henry Zalamansky argues:

“Every author responds to a concern of his time: by examining the content of contemporary works, we shall see how the problems of our time are approached and what solutions they receive.” In this case, the writer is likened to a journalist or simply a man writing history. Indeed the focus is much more sociological than literary as the specificity of the literary text is cast aside.

LUCIEN GOLDMANN’S GENETIC STRUCTURALISM

Born in July 1913 and passed away in Oct 1970.

Originally from Romania, Goldmann is a French sociologist. His approach to the literary work will break new ground when it comes to the sociology of literature. The approach inaugurated by Goldmann is all too different insofar as it deals with the text, namely the meaning of the literary work. This is the rationale behind the statement of Edmond Cros when he argues: “with respect to the traditional sociology of literature, genetic structuralism seems to represent a radically new approach to literature”. The purpose of this chapter is therefore to lay down the foundations of Goldmann’s approach.

Background:

* Goldmann and Structuralism

He goes against this theoretical approach and one of its significant principle that holds that what is important is the decryption of the structures of the literary work. One of this contender is the French structuralist (Roland Barthes) who opines that what is important is the mere description of the techniques (structures) of a given work.

* Goldmann and Marxism

Marxism holds that there is always a relationship between the socio-economic conditions of the writer and the literary work produced. This is conceptualized through the base and the superstructure. As a Marxist, Goldmann is interested in the structures of the literary work at one time in history: while the concerns of the structuralists can be summarized through the “how,” that of the Marxists is “why.”

The writer is depicting poverty because he himself is poor, as he speaks for his class group owing to class-consciousness defined by Pramod Nayar as “the awareness of the members of a class that they have a common situation and interests.”

* Goldmann’s elaboration

He contends that the writer is first and foremost a transindividual subject defined as:

“ When John and Peter lift a heavy object there are neither two actions nor two autonomous consciousnesses for which each partner would perform the function, respectively, of object for the other, but one single action whose subject is John and Peter.” This implies, in his view, that the writer is the spokesperson of a social group, known also as the collective subject. By so doing, the literary work will deal with the world vision of transindividual subjects. The world vision being the totality of aspirations, feelings, and ideas that unites the members of a group and opposes them to other groups.

For him, a literary work is only understood as a socio-historical phenomenon, that is to say in genetic perspective, hence the phrase”genetic structuralism.” He also contends that the signifying structure, meaning the principle of construction, of the literary text must be understood in relation to conceptual systems, whether philosophical or religious. This is done taking into consideration the two following steps:

1. Understanding: It involves an immanent reading of the wok itself
2. Explaining: reading the work under consideration with reference to a broader frame, an extratextual one

THE BIRTH OF AN APPROACH

Sociocriticism is believed to have been born in 1971 by the French theorist Claude Duchet. It must be made plain that this approach is different from the sociology of literature or to be precise the traditional sociology of literature. Indeed the former sets out to examine the literary text, the latter deals with extratextual considerations and is sometimes silent over aesthetic aspects.

Sociocriticism wants to emphasize the social significance of literary works. In the words of Pierre Zima it “brings to the fore the society in the text.” For Claude Duchet, sociocriticism deals with “the sociology of literariness.” In other words, the textual considerations of the literary text must be coupled with its sociality as the text bears a social dimension that needs emphasizing.

General Principles:

A sociocritical dreading worthy of its name must call attention to the following complementary requirements:

1. The text

Sociocriticism advocates a reorientation of the socio-historical perspective from the outside to the inside, meaning the text itself. Here the critic is interested in analyzing the text rather than focusing on extratextual considerations. For Duchet, “sociocriticism deals primarily with the text”

1. The Aesthetics

Attention must be drawn to the way the text is written. Contrary to the tenets of content analysis, here what is important is the textual dimension of the literary object, i.e. its writing. As Pierre Zima argues” the social meaning of a text is only perceived through the how, its writing.”

Similarly, contrary to the structuralists, the point is to underscore the social significance vested in the aesthetic dimension. That’s why Duchet speaks of the “the poetics of sociality,” meaning neither “poetics” alone, nor”sociality,” but a blending of both. The point is that textual structures are not neutral, they are expressive of social norms that must be stressed.

An instance of sociocritical reading:

In Zima’s outlook, sociocriticism should deal with the way the literary text reacts to socio-historical problems through language. In other words, the linguistic dimension of the text must be thoroughly scrutinized. This is done by focusing on the following points:

-The Syntax: construed as the way words are used in a sentence, the syntax sheds light on the social significance of the literary text

-The Semantics: the meaning of the different words by the literary text also reveals the social significance invested in a text

-The sociolinguistic situation: it draws attention to the fact that the language of a given society is bound to change depending on socio-historical considerations-\_intertextuality: defined as the presence of a text in another, the notion of intertextuality is used by Zima to read the literary text as absorption of several discourses, whether oral or written. In that case, society is seen as series of texts

\_sociolect: It boils down to the language of a group, recognized by its lexical repertoire

HETEROGENEITY IN HOMOGENEITY

The objective here is to call attention to the plurality of approaches when it comes to sociocriticism. Indeed, beyond its pivotal principle that deals with the social significance of the literary object, one must not overlook the fact that sociocriticism is open to different orientations. Our task therefore consists in laying bare this heterogeneity with a focus on such theorists as Claude Duchet, Pierre Zima and Edmond Cros. Specifically, a stress will be laid on:

 1. Denomination

 2. Methodological approaches

 3. Notional field

1. Denomination

As it is an unquestionable fact that the name given to a reality is far from being neutral, it is important to reflect on the different names used to refer to the sociocritical reading.

Pierre Zima uses the phrase ”the sociology of the text” as a way to draw a line of difference between his approach and above all the wide range of sociologies dealing with extratextual elements. One can name the sociology of literature (audience, critics, books, writers). In that sense, the focus is on the way, the how of the literary text, its writing.

For his part, Duchet entitled his seminal book, *Sociocritique (Sociocriticism)* purposefully. What is being raised here is that his approach, considering the absence of the definite article (the) (la), is one among others, far from being the one and only perspective. The implication is that several approaches are also welcome provided they deal with the social significance of the literary object, what he calls the “status of the social in the text, and not the social status of the text.”

In the field of literary theory, Cros’ perspective is referred to as E. Cros’ sociocriticism. Reflecting on the use of the genitive it is obvious that his stand is specific to him, as one would say Paul’s face as opposed to that of Pierre.

Different names are therefore used to designate this theoretical approach. This calls for the need to examine the methodological perspectives in force.

1. Methodological perspectives

Though these three theorists agree on the social significance of the literary object, one can notice a difference in the methods used to reach their goal.

Duchet is interested in the sociality of the text that can be grasped at 2 levels:

“sociality of the text” :referring to elements in the literary object recognizable in the outside world, referential elements

“sociality of the text”: dealing with the society of the text as an autonomous reality but saying something on society, bearing a social significance, raising a ”discourse on “

Zima is rather interested in the narrative and semantic structures of the literary object. The narrative structures are not examined in themselves. The objective of this examination is to uncover their functions, meaning the social significance they may have. Contrary to the structuralists, Zima is interested in portraying the significance of these narrative structures.

Semantic structures: the words and the meaning associated with them will be looked into so as to arrive at the social significance of the text. Such categories as the sociolect and the sociolinguistic situation can be examined.

Cros focuses on the modalities whereby History is incorporated into the literary object. Here the emphasis should be put on how social structures are transcribed into the literary object by insisting on the socio-historical considerations of the signifier.

1. Notional field

The concepts used are also different from one theorist to another. While Zima uses the terms” sociolinguistic situation” to designate the fact that words are bound to change depending on socio-historical grounds, Cros suggests “the discursive formation,” enunciated as “the regularity among objects, types of enunciation, the meaning, concepts, and thematic choices.” In other words, the meaning of a word changes according to the dominating discourse. For Duchet, the phrase used is “social discourse,” defined as “ a pre-existing truth brought to the fore by the novel.”

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