ON LITERARY PRACTICE

To select as the subject of a study of limited size a topic as
fundamental and, additionally, one so long discussed as has been
the case with literary practice greatly risks—and we are fully aware
of this—appearing to be an undertaking which is both presump-
tuous (how many studies, sometimes major ones, have been devot-
ed to this question during recent decades?) and doomed to failure
(is it serious to presume, in a few pages, to deal, even partially,
with so vast and so complex a subject?). However, one precise
reason causes us to think that it is time, today, to re-examine this
ancient problem in new terms. The field of French literary research
is at present characterized by a major institutional and ideological
fact, the massive reality of which certain particular or collective
efforts,[1] no matter how remarkable these might be, cannot cover
over. An airtight seal continues to separate, globally, traditional
literary research from recent studies produced by certain linguists
and speech historians in the domain of linguistic practices. Whence
this scientifically paradoxical consequence: studies dealing with
fundamentally similar objects—discursive practices—are presently

[1] We are thinking in particular, in the French sector, of efforts undertaken by
the reviews *Littérature* and *Poétique*.

23

being conducted in parallel, on the basis of theoretical premises which are radically opposed in most cases, with each one almost absolutely ignorant of the others. This situation, we believe, is exceedingly harmful to literary research. By making all interdisciplinary relation impossible as well as inhibiting certain questioning necessary within the realm of this research, it contributes to blocking progress in large measure. Need we point out that we nourish no naive hopes of overturning within the space of a few pages a situation whose roots, both institutional and ideological, are so deep? Nor does one distinguish oneself more by providing definitive answers for these basic problems which we propose discussing here, answers which one might even believe possible to guarantee as fully correct. We would only like to attempt to prove, by re-examining in new terms some fundamental problems of literary theory, the advantage which this theory might be able to find in certain data drawn from linguistics and the "analysis of discourse",[2] and inversely to propose certain theoretical readjustments which a specific reflection on literary practice seems to make necessary in the field of these two disciplines, particularly in that of the second. The pages which follow should, therefore, only be taken for what they are: an attempt, limited in its scope and problematic in its conclusions, to break down some barriers and to open a breach at certain critical points.

In this perspective we propose to deal with four principal series

---

[2] By the generic expression "analysis of discourse", I mean here the research and work issued from two horizons which are different but nevertheless convergent by their target and their results. In the first place the studies done by linguists on the corpus created by the various categories of discourse (political, legal, religious, etc.), studies which aim at defining the specificity of discourses by the analysis and the correlation of their different structural levels (syntactical, lexical, semantic, pragmatic). These studies are all inspired by the theory and the method defined in the 1950's by the American linguist Zellig S. Harris. In the French sector there can be found diverse illustrations in many issues of the review *Langages* (especially in issues No. 13, 23, 37, 41 and 52) and in several works such as those by M. Pêcheux (*Les Vérités de la Palice*, Paris, Maspero, 1975) and P. Henry (*Le Mauvais Outil*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1977). But with the expression "analysis of discourse" I also mean the masterful studies by M. Foucault of the discourses in the so-called "human" sciences (*Les Mots et les choses, l'Archéologie du savoir, L'Ordre du discours*), decisive studies in that to them is owed the conception, for the first time clearly defined and rigorously analyzed, of discourses as *social practices* (on this notion see note 3).

24

of problems: the structure of discursive practices[3] in general; the relation of these practices to the institutions which underlie them; the problem (which we believe is one of the most important of those which appear in literary theory today) of the relations existing between discursive formation and specific concrete discourses[4] (more traditionally termed "works"); and finally the problem of the specificity of discourses which are called "literary".

The identity of the object called "literature" seems, both in diachrony as in synchrony itself, too problematic for it to be reasonable to propose it, even hypothetically, as the immediate object of an examination. That "literary" discourses are fundamentally discursive practices (specific or not), is, on the other hand, beyond doubt. And it is only apparently a trivial proposition. Despite the various studies of which it has been the object, the notion of discursive practice today is hardly so transparent in theory that any questioning of it can be thought to be superfluous.

I. Some Basic Conceptual Distinctions

The only concrete object with which the receiver of any word act is concerned (and the theoretician of discourse himself in the first stage of his reflection) is the particular discourse. This is the empirical object which we will take as the point of departure for our analysis; we will attempt to apprehend its production process and, more generally, to determine its place within the overall mechanism in which it is inscribed. We are aware that this activity

---

[3] Like many others, I am borrowing this notion from M. Foucault who defines it as follows: "What is called 'discursive practice' can now be defined. It cannot be confused with the expressive operation by which an individual formulates an idea, a desire, an image; nor with the rational activity which can be used in a system of inference; nor with the 'competence' of a speaking subject when he forms grammatical phrases; it is an ensemble of anonymous historical rules, always determined in time and space, which have defined for a given epoch, and for a given social, economic, geographic or linguistic realm, the conditions for the exercise of the enunciative function." (*L'Archéologie du savoir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1969, p. 153-154).
[4] I hope I will be pardoned this expression which smacks somewhat of jargon, preferred here to the more traditional one of *work*, loaded with ideological implications, certain ones of which (and I will explain why later) seem to me to be a little suspicious. For the meaning given to this expression see below § IV.

25

may seem arbitrary. Our subsequent discussion will attempt to justify this choice.

The production of specific concrete discourses seems controlled by mechanisms the most of important of which—though not all—are subject to a code. We know, since the studies of M. Foucault, that any individual language performance is part of a discursive whole controlled by a specific system of laws; to designate this whole we will use the by now classic expression *discursive formation.*[5] Discursive formations can thus be considered to be the immediate determining mechanism of particular concrete discourses. We will note, however, and this distinction is of an essential importance for our subsequent analyses, that the rules to which these formations are subject derive from two distinct orders: a linguistic order, on the one hand, and a semantic-pragmatic order on the other.[6] To the first correspond the rules which regulate, at a given moment in its history, the structures of a determined language and ensure the creation of well-formed phrases and series of phrases. To the second correspond those which regulate the specific use which a subject, occupying one or more particular positions in a given society, makes of these structures. These latter rules have a selective function: they actualize certain lexical, syntactical, semantic and pragmatic potentialities offered by the language and eliminate other ones. They also confer on selected linguistic structures a specific significance and function. Behind these two types of rules there are two distinct types of institutions:

---

[5] A notion which I am borrowing once more from M. Foucault who defined it thus: the "[discursive] formation systems... are not constraints which had their origin in the thinking of men nor in the play of their representations; nor are they determinations which, formed at the level of institutions or social relations or of the economy, would be transcribed by force at the surface of discourses. These systems —and we have already stressed this—reside in the discourse itself [...] By formation system should be understood a complex network of relations which function as a norm. [...] To define a formation system in its particular individuality is thus to characterize a discourse or a group of statements by the regularity of a practice" (*L'Archéologie du savoir*, pp. 97-98).
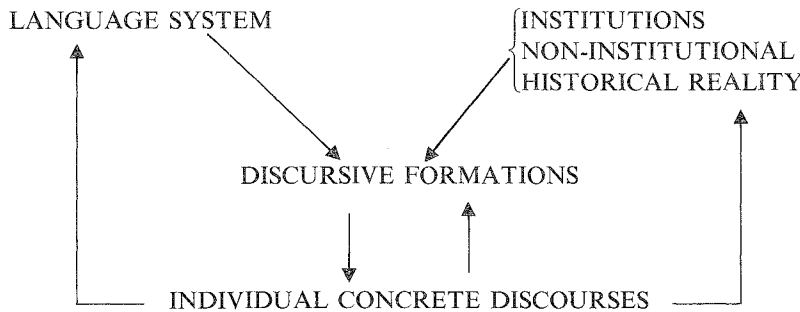
[6] We are here referring principally to the works of D. Slakta, particularly to *L'Ordre du texte (Etudes de linguistique appliquée*, No. 19, 1975), and to *Sémiologie et Grammaire de texte*, 1980, Parix X (to appear)—which have, it seems to us, given distinction to these two orders for which E. Benveniste was the first to establish with clarity (see *Problèmes de linguistique générale II*, chapter III) most rigorous theoretical status.

26

language on the one hand, and social institutions as such on the other. To the first are subject all types of discourse without exception. The second enjoy specific relations with this or that particular type of discourse.

No matter how primordial might seem their role, language and social institutions are not the only determining factors of concrete discourses. These are also subject to factors which, contrary to the preceding ones, are not codified: namely all realities and social-historical events which, although associated with institutions, are not in themselves of an institutional nature (it is this non-institutional reality which, more than any other, causes profound transformations in History, including, naturally, those in the institutions themselves).

These preliminaries would not offer an exact vision of the mechanism which we are attempting to discern if we did not point out this essential element, too frequently neglected: determining relationships between concrete discourses and their factors of production are not univocal; individual discourses have, in fact, a retroactive action both on the language system (for which they represent the principal factor for evolution) and on discursive formations, institutions and non-institutional social reality (all factors to whose transformation they contribute).

The following diagram can thus be proposed to represent the general mechanism for the production and the functioning of discourse:

There remains the task—and this is the most delicate point—of specifying the relations between the various components of this mechanism: in particular those which relate discursive formations to institutions, on the one hand, to concrete discourse on the other. But it is, first of all, the very notion of discursive formation which requires analysis; this "component" forms, in fact, a complex totality.

II. THE COMPONENTS OF A DISCURSIVE FORMATION AND THEIR RELATIONS

We have seen what are the principal factors for the production of a discursive formation. They determine essentially its contents and its structure,[7] at the same time as they confer on it (this role falling essentially on institutions) a specific function. Moreover, since every enunciation supposes that it is addressed to someone, each discursive formation also includes a specific reception regime. This should not be conceived, as classic communications models suggested, as the purely passive pole of the discursive process, nor as its *terminus ad quem.* It constitutes (and the studies of the School of Constance and in particular those of H. R. Jauss[8] have established this definitively) a factor which exercises its action on the other components of discourse to the same extent that it is in turn subject to the action of these others. (And we should note in passing that from this fact results a radical modification in the conception which we might have of literary history; on this point we refer the reader to the work by Jauss just cited.) It is important to stress the following fact: the four principal components of a discursive formation—its production regime, its internal contents and structure, its function, its reception regime—are closely correlated (we will see that this is no longer true at the level of individual concrete discourses, where the same components are

---

[7] By *structure* of a discourse, we mean principally the following elements: specific positions for subjects, certain formal structures (narratives, arguments, etc.) proper to the statements, a semantic structure, an ensemble of references, a system of norms, a specific secondary semiotic functioning and intertextual functioning.
[8] Cf. especially H.R. Jauss, *Pour une esthétique de la réception*, Paris, Gallimard, 1978 (French translation).

28

found but do not have the same relations). These four components (particularly the last three) are "programmed" conjointly by what might be called with K. Stierle the same "discursive regime".[9] From this derives the fact that the reception regime of a discursive formation is not independent of its production regime, but the former is predetermined by the latter; this element, like the others, is part of the "program" inherent in this formation. From this there likewise derive the *biunivocal* determining relations which associate the internal structure of a discursive formation to its reception mode. It would seem that the reception mode, and particularly the interpretation mode of a discourse should logically result from the contents and the structure of the discourse. Such a point of view, however, would only be partially true. In many cases, in fact, it is, conversely, the reception mode of the discourse which determines its structures. A reader does not interpret according to what he reads; he reads according to the mode which is prescribed for him by the hermeneutic code proper to this or that discursive formation. Such "reading contracts" play an essential role in the formation of certain genres such as the novel or autobiography. As has been shown by E. W. Bruss,[10] at the level of formal structure, nothing distinguishes an autobiography from a fictional novel told in the first person; both genres are perceived as being quite different, however. If, in the first case, the reader identifies the "I" of the narrator with the person of the author while in the second case he dissociates the two, this fundamental difference in reading does not have its origin in any kind of specific signals inherent in the formal structure proper to each of the two genres. It can only be explained by the difference in their respective receptional codes, codes which, through different "effects of reading", engender discursive structures which are equally different.

[9] Cf. K. Stierle, "Identité du discours et transgression lyrique", *Poétique 32*, 1977, p. 426.
[10] Cf. E.W. Bruss, "L'autobiographie considérée comme acte littéraire, *Poétique 17*, 1974.

29

III. DISCURSIVE FORMATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS

Although it is clear that all discourse is founded on institutional bases, a more difficult problem is raised by the nature of the relations which exist between discourses and institutions. We would willingly imagine that, since a certain number of discourses are involved, the matter is simple, that discourses seem to have univocal relations with certain well-determined institutions: the discourse of a defending lawyer or a prosecuting attorney with the judicial institution, the discourse of a preacher with the religious institution, that of a parliamentarian or a cabinet minister with political institutions, that of a teacher with the scholastic institution and so on. This appearance is no doubt misleading. On the one hand each of the discourses mentioned above, in addition to the specific institution to which it is attached by dominant ties, depends on another institution to which all types of discourse without exception are subject: the judicial institution. This institution prescribes laws for all discursive practices, some of which are universal and are applied indiscriminately to all types of discourse (such as prohibitions against calumny, insults, etc.) and others are specific and proper to this or that particular type of discourse (such as the prohibition against plagiarism in a literary or scientific type discourse). All the above-mentioned types of discourse can, in addition, be integrated *virtually* into another institution: the literary institution precisely. Examples of this are not lacking: the orations of Demosthenes and of Cicero, the sermons of Bossuet and the conferences of Lacordaire, the *Commentaires* of Monluc and the *Mémoires* of De Gaulle derived from and/or continue today to derive from, not only the specific institution on which they formerly depended or depend at present (the judicial, religious or political-military institution), but also from the literary institution. And this is one of the original features of this institution—and we will be coming back to this point. It is the only institution (today at least) which is capable of assimilating—of "making literary"—all existing types of discourse, including those which derive from ideological institutions or systems which in themselves are not at all literary.

Although each type of discourse derives (actually or virtually) from several institutions at the same time, we can observe that,

30

conversely, the same institution can be the basis of quite different types of discourse. For example, a sermon, a canticle and a confession, all three discourses to be found in the institution of the Christian church: each has a structure, a content and to a certain extent even a function which are quite unlike. Similarly poetry and the novel are both genres which derive primarily from the literary institution; but for each period of history they manifest fundamental differences both in terms of their respective structures as well as their content and their function.

Should we conclude from this that, although these types of discourse do have an institutional foundation, this latter cannot form a valid theoretical basis for a typology of discourses since there is no fixed relation which can be discerned between the various discursive formations and these institutions? Such a conclusion would certainly be erroneous. That the same discourse does in fact always depend on several institutions at the same time no doubt makes an examination of relations between discourses and institutions more complex, but it in no way eliminates the reality of these relations. In the same way, the (converse) fact that very different types of discourse can derive from the same institution does not mean that their very diversification does not have its origin and its *raison d'être* in this institution, to the contrary. Institutions are, in fact, complex systems which contain diversified functions, assumed by discourses which are themselves diverse (and sometimes opposed in their functions; this is, for example, the case in the judicial institution with the discourse of the defender and that of the prosecutor). It remains true that at the level of their structure primarily discourses form relatively autonomous realities which cannot be thought of as simply reflections of the institutions. It would seem that a typology of discourses should, therefore, take into consideration two distinct but correlative series of relationships: a series of "horizontal" relations of opposition which make it possible to specify and to distinguish the different types of discursive formations from one another, and "vertical" relations of dependence which connect each of these formations to the institutional systems which underlie it and which determine in part its specificity.

31

IV. Discursive Formations and Individual Concrete Discourses

Although it would seem fundamental, in the literary realm in particular, the problem of relations between discursive formations and individual concrete discourses has been very little studied until now, in France at least. The reason for this is quite clear: whereas the "discourse analysts" (whether they be historians like Mr. Foucault or linguists like Mr. Pêcheux) immediately exclude from their realm of study individual concrete discourses (which they identity with the traditional object called the *work*) as not being pertinent to this realm and, more fundamentally, as ideological artifacts incompatible with all scientific analysis of discourse,[11] the "literary" scholars, in the great majority, continue (from routine more than from a motivated decision) to consider these individual discourses, under the name of *works*, as the object of literary research *par excellence*. Let us be clear: to propose conferring a theoretical status on individual concrete discourses—or rather, affirming the urgency of such a task—in no way is equal, to our mind, to attempting to restore the old notion of work by dressing it in new garments. We, more than anyone else, are convinced that this notion is sustained by scientifically unacceptable presuppositions; and we cannot be faulted if we do not demonstrate this point once again, after so many others have already done so. And so what we mean by individual concrete discourse has nothing to do with what is denoted by the notion of work. The individuality in question is not that of a creative consciousness. It is that of a *textual structure* on the one hand and of a *discursive labor* on the other.

Even if every individual concrete discourse is modeled on the abstract schema of a discursive formation, it could not be conceived of as the simple manifestation in an individual form of this schema. Such a conception would simply reintroduce into the discursive process the factor of the creative subject whose specific

---

[11] "Any literary notion referring to the inner unity of a work [...] is null and void, given the theoretical presuppositions which we have recalled earlier". (M. Pêcheux and C. Fuchs, "Mises au point et perspectives à propos de l'analyse automatique du discours", *Langages* 37, March 1975, p. 28).

32

effect would be measured in this case by the coefficient of individuality (of "subjectivity") with which the application of a general and anonymous model would be affected. However, even if individual concrete discourses form specific objects which cannot be reduced to discursive formations in the field in which they lie, this does not mean that they introduce into this anonymous system of rules the individuality of a "personal" subject. This is because their structure never coincides perfectly with that of the discursive schema which controls them, and that moreover it happens that they subject this schema to distortions which can be more or less important. Let us consider each of these two points in turn.

That an individual discourse is, basically, formed of a linguistic or, more precisely, textual structure ceases at this point of our analysis to appear a trivial proposition. As *text*, in fact, that is, as a series of well formed and correctly combined phrases, every individual discourse forms a *determined* ensemble of semantic and pragmatic *potentialities*. This ensemble is closed to the extent that it is determined (that is, limited in its potentialities), while at the same time it is open to the extent that these potentialities can be actualized in a series of multiple semantic and pragmatic realizations. The transformation of a *text* into a *discourse* has, it is true, the effect of reducing this multiplicity, the property of this transformation being to actualize certain potentialities of the text and by the same token to exclude others. But, as K. Stierle thinks[12] and on this point we share his point of view, the transformation of texts into discourses is never a perfect operation, that is, an absolutely and definitively completed one. Even when actualized as discourse, textual structures maintain a certain indetermination within this discourse, a certain structural "vagueness"; the actualization, under the control of a "discursive schema", of the text into discourse (the selection, among the potentialities offered by the text, of certain effects of meaning and of certain illocutory powers and the correlative exclusion of others) always bears a certain degree of precariousness. To speak as K. Stierle, the *identity* of a discourse (its coincidence with the "discursive schema" from which it derives) is never absolute, not in diachrony nor even in synchrony. And if it is not, it is because, as we have seen, discourses—products of

---

[12] Cf. *art. cit.*

33

linguistic rules on the one hand and ideological-pragmatic rules on the other—are dual by nature and the effects of this constitutive duality are felt even at the very level of their most concrete actualization.

The irreducibility of individual discourses to the discursive formations from which they derive is based on a second reason whose effects are combined with those of the preceding one. If every individual discourse is modeled on a pre-existent "discursive schema", it is no less true that, in many cases, this same discourse is constructed either *counter to* other individual discourses proceding from the same schema or *counter to* the constitutive rules of this schema itself. This is, after all, simply to recall a truism: although no one can speak without conforming to general rules which are proper to a specific discursive formation, it is equally clear that the person who speaks does so in general (with the exception of discourses in which the ritual is of a purely repetitive type) either to say what has not yet been said or to say it in another manner. In both cases, it is done in order to produce an effect of newness, that is of *difference*. We cannot conceive of scientific discourses which do not produce new declarations, different from those which have already been proffered in the field of the discipline from which the discourse derives (without speaking of those which revolutionize this discipline itself by the "epistemological severings" which they exercise therein). The same is true in the literary realm, even if the effect of newness here takes on a different nature and different forms: a novel or a poem is generally written (with the exception of those which are intended to reproduce stereotypes) either to say what other novels or other poems have not yet said or to say it in another way, or, more radically, to say what the novel and poetry genres have not yet had the possibility of saying up until then because of their very nature. If speaking always implies, to a certain extent (variable, in fact), an *effect of repetition* (to speak is always to conform more or less to pre-established rules, that is, to a certain extent to say what has already been said and will be said again: "To speak", said Borges, "is to fall into tautology."), this effect of repetition is coupled in most cases with an *effect of difference* (if we speak it is to produce statements which are at least partially original).

Individual concrete discourses, then, represent, relative to the

34

discursive formations which correspond to them, a double principle of otherness: as textual structures on the one hand and as discourses aiming at producing an effect of difference on the other. Every study of the concrete functioning of discourses must take this otherness into account. Only a recognition of this allows understanding the reception process of individual discourses, an essential problem in the history of discourses, particularly of literary discourses.

As for discursive formations, the reception regime of discourses does not have true autonomy, as we have seen. "Programmed" jointly by the same "discursive schema", the four components of a discursive formation are closely correlated; no separation, no "play" exists at this level which could allow any kind of process of transformation or distortion between one or the other of these components. No specific problematic of the reception of discourses is conceivable within a theory of discursive practices which would be limited only to the level of the system of discourse formation. It is no accident if in the works of M. Foucault no space is given to the problem of the reception of discourses. It is only at the level of individual concrete discourses that this problem arises because it is only at this level that a disjunction becomes possible—and is in fact observed in diachrony as well as in synchrony itself—between a "discursive schema" thought to confer upon an individual discourse its canonical identity and an effective manner of reception capable of modifying (or of subverting) this identity by the application of an abnormal hermeneutics (not in conformity with the original "program"). The fact that an individual discourse originally destined, by reason of norms proper to the discursive formation from which it derives, to a specific reception mode, can be subjected by another discursive formation (contemporary or not with the preceding one) to a reception regime which is different from that for which it was programmed, this fact explains, among other things, the phenomenon of the "making literary" (partially or totally) of non-literary discourses, a phenomenon characteristic of our Western culture for several centuries. It also explains this other essential phenomenon of literary history which is tradition: the discursive formation from which originally derived an individual discourse which has since disappeared or been transformed, it is new discursive formations which subject this discourse, if it

35

has remained "living" (that is, if these new discursive formations reveal themselves capable of assimilating it), to a reception regime and, in particular, an interpretation regime different from that for which it had been "programmed" originally.

Although it is clear that a discourse theory cannot take over for itself the old notion of work, in whatever form it might be, it cannot limit itself either to being a pure theory of abstract regulating systems which control discursive formations. This would mean remaining at a level of abstraction which is legitimate and even necessary at a certain stage of the theory but incapable by itself of explaining (both in terms of synchrony and of diachrony) the actual functioning of linguistic practices. Any theory of discourse which would claim to be complete (which does not mean "completed") must at the least attempt to think of the "dialectical" relation of identity and disparity, of continuity and detachment which unites discursive formations to individual concrete discourses by indissoluble but complex ties. This would be, in any case, the only means of breaking down the barriers—unjustifiable in theory and harmful in practice—which still separate, in France, literary studies from "scientific" research on discourse. Until now only studies prepared across the Rhine at the School of Constance have worked in this direction; their results are telling.

V. On the Specificity of a "Literary" Function

After the numerous and various definitions of "literature" proposed from the 18th century down to our own times, to raise once again the eternal question of the hypothetical specificity of literary "discourses" may seem to be an undertaking both presumptuous and scientifically suspect. Are not eternal questions by definition false questions (or, if we prefer, mythical questions)? And must the person who raises them once again do anything more than sacrifice in his turn to the unchangeable ritual of a myth which requires (because it is a modern myth, and thus "scientific") that it be unceasingly questioned about its own essence and that "scientific" answers be supplied to each interrogation? It is possible and even probable that "literature" is a kind of modern Moloch. But it is a Moloch which has its priests, its institutional structure—literary

36

institutions—to which correspond certainly diverse discourses, whose very diversity, however, should be thought of (if what we said above is true) as determined by the institutions which underlie them (institutions whose functions, like those of every institution, can be presumed to be diversified). In sum, if "Literature" is a religion without divinity—or if at least it is permissible to doubt the existence of this divinity—its existence as religion forms an undeniably positive reality. It should be possible to ask questions about this positivity in a language which is not necessarily that of myth.

The existence at each period of history of specific literary institutions requires admitting as postulate the correlative existence of specific discursive practices associated in a dominating manner with these institutions.

Nevertheless, the specificity of these discourses in practice—no matter what the era considered—proves to be quite difficult to apprehend, for two reasons primarily.

The first is that, as Todorov has noted with reference to the contemporary era[13]—but his remark would apply just as well to prior eras—there is no structural nor thematic homogeneity within the discursive ensemble termed "literature". From the point of view of their structure as well as of their content, the various literary genres seem quite different from one another, and many even have no common traits at all. What type of similarity could be demonstrated between a novel by Nathalie Sarraute and a poem by Guillevic (apart from superficial and contingent comparisons)? On the other hand in every era close affinities can be observed between most literary genres and certain types of non-literary discourses. In the 16th century, for example, between certain poetic genres (quite varied in form) and certain scientific discourses such as in physics, natural sciences and astronomy; in the Romantic era between certain sectors of poetry[14] and philosophical-religious discourse, and parallel to this between the so-called "historical" novel

[13] Cf. T. Todorov, "La notion de littérature", *Les Genres du Discours*, Paris, Seuil, 1978.
[14] We are thinking evidently of the *Méditations*, of the *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, of *La Chute d'un Ange* by Lamartine, of the *Destinées* of Vigny, and of many collections of Hugo, in particular *Les Contemplations, Dieu, La Fin de Satan*, etc.

37

and the contemporary historiographical discourse[15]; from the Renaissance to the contemporary era between a certain literary prose (that of Montaigne, of Pascal, of La Rochefoucauld, of Gide, of Valéry among others) and the discourse of moral philosophy. On the other hand, then, "literature" does not manifest an internal unity of a structural or thematic type. Moreover, most literary genres seem closely related, each in its own way, to certain non-literary discourses. From whatever angle it is considered, the unity of "literature" seems to be a phantom that disappears with every attempt at apprehending it.

From these observations, which are not new ones but which need to be recalled, a first conclusion can be drawn. Not only do the various literary genres not have a common structure nor a common content (the absence of unity at this level is not at all surprising in this respect), but they do not have—and this feature is more striking—truly specific content or structure. There is no literary genre which does not, from a structural and/or thematic point of view, seem closely related to discourses which are foreign to "literature". If there exists, then, a specificity of literary discourses (a postulate required, at first glance, by the existence of specific institutions associated with these discourses), these discourses could hold to this specificity by reason of their social *function*. This second conclusion seems in fact confirmed by experience. Everyone knows, from intuition, that a "literary" discourse (let us say, more precisely, a discourse of a predominatingly "literary" character), no matter how close by its structure and its content to a non-literary discourse, does not "function" exactly as the latter (in particular it does not have the same social *effects*). But the problem is only transposed. What, in this case, is the function of "literary" discourses? There is no global answer which can be given to this question. It is clear (and the very historicity of every discursive practice would require us to admit it as a theorical postulate) that the function of "literary" discourses—which, as we have seen, have close connections to contemporary discursive practices—has never stopped changing in the course of history. Nevertheless, if the *nature* of these relations has changed, it seems

[15] Cf. R. Barthes, "Le discours de l'Histoire", *Information sur le sciences sociales*, VI, 4, 1967.

38

that their *form* has remained identical since at least the time of the Renaissance. We can define the form of relations thus: the specificity of "literary" discourses in each period of history resides in the *specific type of transformation* to which they subject contemporary non-literary discourses. And from this come the structural affinities and, at the same time, the functional difference between the former and the latter.

To support this thesis we have chosen two historical examples, significant by virtue of their antinomy, one from the literature of the Renaissance and the other from modern literature.

Within the discursive field of the Renaissance there can be observed, just as today, close structural and thematic affinities between certain literary genres and certain types of non-literary discourses. We have already mentioned the connections which exist between certain poetic genres (such as the Ronsardian *hymn* or encyclopedic poems like the *Microcosme* by Scève or the *Sepmaine* by du Bartas) and various contemporary scientific discourses. The close relations which associate certain currents in poetry to religious discourse[16] as well as to political discourse[17] could also be cited. All these relations have a common feature which can be identified as follows: the literary discourses of the Renaissance—especially the leading one in the hierarchy of genres, the discourse of poetry—represent an *assumption* of contemporary non-literary discursive practices. By this I mean two things. First of all, that as a whole, "renascent" literary discourses assume at their level the different functions which contemporary non-literary formations possess. Consequently there exists overall a basic agreement at the functional level between these discourses and non-literary discourses. In the second place, the transformation effected by the former on the latter—a transformation whose essential instrument was that new poetic language the formulation of which had been declared their first task by the humanist poets—is an operation of *sublimation*. This "sublimating" function assumed by

---

[16] Here we can once again recall the importance of religious inspiration in French poetry of the 16th century, from Marot's *Psaumes* (1541) to Sponde's *Sonnets sur la Mort* (1588).

[17] Relations which are illustrated, each in its own way, by two works which are otherwise as diverse as *Discours* by Ronsard and *Tragiques* by Aubigné.

39

literature and, particularly, by "renascent" poetry, appears clearly through the image which the men of the Pléiade, especially Ronsard, had of the poet: a superior mind evolving above the masses, no doubt, and aware of his singularity, or even of his monstrosity ("You will commonly be called frenetic, insane, furious, fierce, fantastic[18]"), but a mind in which human knowledge is fulfilled, borne by it to its highest degree of achievement; a genius whose word causes the assumption of every human word: man touched by the gift of poetry

> —*become a prophet,*
> *He foretold everything before it was made.*
> *He knew nature and the secrets of the Heavens*
> *And an effervescent mind is raised among the Gods.*[19]

Modern literature in its most advanced forms, that is, the most representative of our modernity, represents a radical contrast with the literature of the Renaissance in this respect. Where the latter assumed by way of sublimation all the discursive practices of its time, modern literature, to the contrary, bases its specificity on the suspension of two principal functions assigned to the whole of contemporary discursive practices: the function of knowledge on the one hand (a function assumed by all discourses called "scientific" in the broad sense of the term), and the function of the transformation of the real, particularly of social reality on the other hand (a function common to all discourses whose direct finality is to act in any manner whatever on the condition and the present structures of a society). In this double rejection, the scriptural practices of authors—from Flaubert to Char by way of Mallarmé—rejoins the concepts of theoreticians—from Moritz and Kant to Blanchot, Jakobson and Barthes. To define literature (and more generally any aesthetic practice) as that which "has its value and the end of its existence in itself" (Moritz), "finality without end" (Kant), "a word which does not speak but which is" (Blanchot), "intransitive act" (Barthes) is each time to define "literarity" by

[18] Ronsard, *Hymne de l'Automne.*
[19] *Ibid.*

40

the suspense of the two fundamental functions of language: the one which aims at knowing, at understanding the real, and the one which aims at its transformation. Literary modernity is formed of the suspension and even the rejection of functions and effects inherent in discursive practices which are contemporary with them. Determining the reasons for this rejection is the business of sociologists and literary historians. What is important for us is that the specificity of modern literature—just as for the literature of the Renaissance—seems to us to reside essentially in the nature of the relations which literary discourses form with the discursive practices of their time and in the transformation which they subject them to (this transformation, in the case of modern literature, being a type of internal subversion). Whether it takes the form of an assumption or of a distancing, the specificity of literary discourses seems in every case to be a relational or, if we prefer, intertextual specificity.

The "literary function" is a function whose nature varies with the periods of history. It would thus be vain to seek a trans-historical definition. Only the relational and transformational form of this function seems constant. Like philosophical discourse, literary discourse seems to be one of the "second" discourses whose function is to "interpret", in a historically variable manner, the "primary" discourses which take place alongside them in a society. It has been possible to define the general form of ideology as the "representation of the imaginary relation of individuals to the real conditions of their existence".[20] Perhaps it would be possible in a similar manner to define the general form of the "literary function" as a representation of the imaginary relation of speaking subjects to the discursive practices of their time.

Philippe de Lajarte
(Université de Caen)

---

[20] L. Althusser, "Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'État", *La Pensée*, No. 151, 1970.

41