

SOCIAL VALUES IN LITERATURE

In this paper I intend to draw attention to certain theoretical and methodological aspects of Hungarian research concerning value-sociology over the past ten years.

This research began in the middle of the seventies at the Institute of Literary Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Our aim was to draw conclusions concerning social, or more precisely literary value consciousness on the basis of an analysis of the Hungarian short story from 1945 to the present day. I shall attempt to show what kinds of values appeared and disappeared over the period analysed, considering how frequently and with what emphasis these values came to the fore, whether their role was positive or negative, and how, over the process of time, their positions altered in relation to one another.

Our starting point is self-evident. Everyone knows that literature is one of the richest sources as regards the knowledge of social consciousness. Literature does not merely portray the notions of value and modes of thought of a given age, but also exerts an influence – through its readers – upon the very formation of these.

Our investigation nevertheless presented us with a complicated task. To build up a suitable method for this research was not easy. From the outset we were quite aware of the fact that due to the intermediary position of our investigation it was liable to produce antagonism in literary and sociological circles alike. In analysing literary works we disregarded literary and aesthetic values form the start and concerned ourselves solely with the interpretation of values appearing in the works themselves. At the same time we took into consideration the poetic and modal specificity of the works considered, so our approach could not properly be called sociological.

Here I can do no more than refer to those conceptual considerations which delineated our research.

The literary critic is first and foremost concerned with the aesthetic and literary values of literary works. Understandably so, after all it is in the ascertainment of these values that he is qualified. The effect of literature, however, amounts to much more than this, in that the literary public may not be reduced to the professional readings of critics. Right from the start the author takes the life-experience of his potential reader into consideration, not merely his level of literary culture. It was precisely this that we tried to exploit in undertaking the presentation of the social images appearing within the literary work itself.

But the question is more complex than any such reassuring answer would allow. The question of what we do and do not choose to analyse is merely a matter of practical decision. Insofar as we are interested in the formation of *literary consciousness* we exclude popular works of a less artistic nature. That is to say, the criteria of our normative selection was that the short story possesses some kind of aesthetic quality, although we did not define this quality with any great precision.

We did not define it because more subtle classification would have influenced in advance the potential results of our investigation. A consideration of the artistic success of the works examined would have complicated or even foreclosed the possibility of the information we held to be of importance: the comparison of the values appearing in the works. The sociological credibility of the literary work and its aesthetic value are of course in the last instance related, but a preoccupation with these "last instance" problems oversteps the possibilities of empirical analysis.

The sociologist on the other hand is not in the least interested in the aesthetic value of literature, the assessment of which is anyway beyond his competence. For this reason he either ignores it altogether, or only considers it as a given parameter of analysis; that is to say, he conceives of the work as belonging to a higher or lower literary category. As far as the credibility of information is concerned he does not distinguish between the literary and the non-literary text. For us this disposition was unacceptable. We held that in the case of a work with artistic pretensions the possibilities were quite different from those of a non-literary text.

On the one hand the degree of exactitude afforded by the well tested techniques of content-analysis is inaccessible in that artistic texts abound in connotative secondary meanings. Often even the reading of the apparently most simple categories requires prior — non-sociological — interpretation. Thus for example in the short stories of the seventies occupations more than once are used as pretexts, with waiters and bill-collectors acting as incognitoes for intellectuals.

On the other hand, we do not generally consider literary works — even if we view them as sociological documents — as representatives of social consciousness, but rather as representatives of one special aspect of this latter: literary consciousness. One cannot overemphasize the significance of specific literary conventions in production and reception. It would be a mistake to explain the meaning of literary works purely in unmediated social terms. For example the question of the degrees to which the thematic specificities of Hungarian fiction at the end of the sixties (the focus upon the hobo way of life and the mutinization of female characters) originate from literary fashions and conventions, in this case a Hungarian adaptation of American beatnik literature, is a matter for separate investigation. Only at the end of analysis can we really determine what kinds of social observations play an active part in the choice of theme.

I think that without these kinds of considerations and restrictions we might expect more of the evaluation of literary works than such evaluation is capable or qualified to produce.

It was after this that the real methodological work began. We had to decide the kind of conceptions and categories with which to work; for example what to term in general

"value", and how this could be identifiable, recognizable in terms of the concrete types of value in the texts themselves.

We took our definition of value from the psychologist *Ferenc Méri*. He adopted the attitude, mainly known from the specialist literature of social psychology, which emphasized the role of value in orienting human behaviour. This attitude is perhaps most succinctly expressed by *H. Cantrill*, according to whom: "man strives after values in order to find guidance in them".

The social psychological approach seemed suitable to our purposes because we may interpret short stories as a specific form of human behaviour. Indeed we may do so in two ways. On the one hand in the fictive world of the short story the characters and narrator constitute a more or less definite point of view on the basis of which they judge and evaluate. On the other hand, the short story as a whole – and here the social consciousness is by no means fictive – "acts" like a speaking or rather persuading partner who offers a fixed position, a gesture of evaluation. Correspondingly in the course of analysis we turn to the description of the system of values of each point of view locatable in the work (major and minor characters, the narrator) and in charting the relationships and conflicts of value we attempt to grasp the value structure of the story as a whole.

Our definition of value runs as follows: a *value* may be defined as an expression of quality which appears in the form of, or rather as the result of a conscious choice, preference or affirmation which almost always evokes some positive emotional gain in the evaluator. In the literary text we may identify as a value any phenomenon (character, object, conception) associated with such an expression of quality.

We do not analyse values in isolation, but as series and complexes consisting of varieties of positive, negative and ambivalent values; that is, *dimensions of value* which themselves stand in relation, or may come into relation with other value dimensions in the production of *sets*. For example the dimensions of *life and death, health and illness, strength and weakness* along with others constitute the set of *vital values*. Between these value dimensions and sets relations of superiority, inferiority and equality may develop; to the delineated hierarchy of values we give the name *value configuration*.

I hope I have been able to give an idea of the complexity of the phenomenon we understand by the term value. The act of classification, the object of value and the evaluating subject constitute a unity to such a great extent that it is impossible to interpret the one without a consideration of the other two. This is why the notion of *point of view* is so important to us. The value is not independent of the evaluator; only in a given system of values – the evaluator's own system of values – can validity be considered unequivocal.

If this formulation is correct, our own interpretations of value must be expected to operate from an unified point of view. This is in part solved by a *value catalogue* which we compiled on the basis of our experimental analyses. This value catalogue contained all the most important notions of value we could identify and illustrate in the texts.

The value catalogue contained a hundred and sixty value dimensions, classifying these into the following eleven sets: *vital values, personality values, emotional values,*

behavioural values, *moral* values, *political* values, *ideological* values, *life-style* values, *economic* values, *knowledge* values and *aesthetic* values.

These designations were not entirely happy; for example the emotions always play a large part in evaluation, and the gesture of evaluation itself can be interpreted behaviourally from the outset. But we did not consider the designations themselves to be of the greatest importance, rather the definable delineations of the sets, even if we were aware of the fact that any such delineations may only be relative.

Thus for example the *patriotic-unpatriotic* value dimension can be seen at once as political, moral, ideological and emotional. Personality and behavioural values frequently overlap, as do the ideological and life-style value sets, and still more complicated is the question of classification of moral values. It is not rare for the oppositions between different values (such as *work* and *family*) to appear in the consciousness of characters as a conflict of moral values. That is to say, one of the fundamental functions of moral values is precisely that of equalizing and mediation. Nonetheless it is difficult to delimit the place of this set in relation to the other value sets.

We have seen how it has been necessary to introduce distinctions between *primary* and *secondary* values. When moral values stand in for, or rather represent other values — economic, ideological, life-style, etc. —, they are merely secondary in relation to the latter. This phenomenon can indeed be typical of a given age. At the end of the forties for example, under pressures from the political leadership, Hungarian literature had to engage in agitation to resist the influence of the church, to support nationalization, to force peasants to join cooperatives and other such functions. According to the conceptions of the age the difference between literature and open propaganda was that the former could represent the correct political orientation in the form of a moral value. (That is, it was not interested in disguising, but strengthening the desired political aims.)

Through our disclosure of these relations and oppositions of value we may further conclude that the value consciousness is a multi-layered formation and that we must distinguish between its *surface* and *deep structures*. For example significant surface oppositions can be located between the liberalizing view of the early sixties. Power and morality only very rarely come into opposition in the plots of the short stories of the fifties, and when they do, this conflict never produces tragic consequences. In contrast to this the tragic opposition of power and morality is a popular theme in our literature of the early sixties.

At the deeper level, however, only the literature of the seventies brought about radical change in terms of view-points. Our value analyses showed that our literature of the early sixties was still typified by a tone of moralism, didacticism and pathos, and the gesture of reckoning mentioned above (the lament of the confrontation of power and morality) was motivated by exactly the same thinking as that of the fifties. At that time most authors believed that the possibilities of individual and social well-being were interdependent, and that in order to create a worthy level of human life, the institutional conditions of such a life must first be realized. As a matter of fact they called the political leadership of the fifties to account because of their negligence in this area. In the seventies, on the other hand, the earlier premises themselves became the objects of doubt.

More and more writers refused the possibility of the institutional side of well-being. To this is related the rapid headway of the ironic-grotesque tone.

In conclusion I should like to speak about one of the most important concerns of our research: the way we attempted to remain *open minded*.

This was no easy task. Obviously even the most cautiously compiled catalogue of values cannot contain every single category, nor take into account every possibility of value. For this reason we do not conceive of our catalogue as closed. Its extension, of course, is governed by certain practical limits. Too many categories would have confused the catalogue and have endangered the possibility of common analysis.

We are also aware that the catalogue is no more than a common analytical frame, and only really useful as a point of departure. The values appearing in the texts of the short stories are variable and enormous in number. The catalogue merely contains those notions of value in the texts most accessible to generalization. But other ungeneralizable aspects can be of equal importance – such as a scene, an event or a specific type of character.

As an example I might refer to a short story which, quoting Che Guevara's *Bolivian Diary*, depicts this Latin-American country as a promised land. There at least – the text suggests – one may die for one's country, while in other lands, like our own, such a possibility does not even come into consideration and all is a stagnant mire. What is important to value analysis is not only that the absence of freedom forms the central problem of this short story, but rather the fact that the author presents this absence through the opposition and idealization of scenes. It is for this reason that we may not stop at the simple reading and identification of value categories, but must go on to undertake the complete charting of the text's system of values.

The work of interpretation takes place over several stages. The analysis is necessarily subjective, but must *not* be arbitrary. The credibility of the results is not merely guaranteed by the common methodology and catalogue of values. In our group every short story is analysed by several people whose analyses are brought together by others, in an attempt to clear up biases. We check value descriptions by returning to the texts and elucidate the causes of significant differences through additional analysis. Obviously we cannot escape our own shadow: our own evaluative point of view plays as large a part in the reconstructed literary consciousness produced by our analysis as that of the short stories themselves.

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