

Historical Periods as Problematics: Socio-linguistic Situations, Sociolects and Discourses

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The author attempts a redefinition of literary epochs or periods as problematics, i.e. as constellations of problems to which individuals and groups react in many different ways. In this respect he differs from those who construct literary periods as world visions, ideologies, aesthetics or stylistics. He defines problematics from a sociosemiotic point of view: as socio-linguistic situations in which competing collective languages (sociolects) and discourses react critically and polemically to one another.

We have by now become accustomed to the notion of literary epochs or periods being largely perceived as relatively homogeneous entities whose styles, aesthetics or world views succeed each other in the course of time. Terms such as ‘romantic *Weltanschauung*’, ‘romantic style’ or – in Italy – ‘*stile seicentesco*’ have become commonplace and are rarely called into question. Connoting linguistic, aesthetic and political homogeneity they (as homogeneities usually remain implicit) turn out, on closer examination, to be problematic.

Yet these terminological conventions, for all their obliteration of the interplay of heterogeneous movements, aesthetics and styles within a certain epoch, have not prevented us from recognizing the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous. Thus, we are aware of the simultaneity of romantic, classicistic and realistic writing within different European cultures that saw a gradual transition from romanticism towards realism. We also know that German, English and French Romanticism were extraordinarily heterogeneous in political terms, and that Shelley’s youthful anarchism and the conservative views of the elder Coleridge cannot be reduced to one common denominator.

By showing that despite official reconciliation between Liberals and Conservatives political animosities continued to turn into aesthetic and literary controversies, Philippe Van Tieghem gives a realistic account of antagonistic tendencies within French Romanticism.¹ In his account, it becomes clear that it does not make sense to conceive French Romanticism as homogeneous in political or aesthetic terms. Nor does the literature of realism appear as a homogeneous system, and Stephan Kohl quite rightly points out that the contrast between Liberalism and Conservatism is also a distinguishing mark of

realism.² In view of such diagnoses, which tend to emphasize antagonisms and dissonances, one wonders whether it is still appropriate to characterize romanticism, realism or modernism as coherent entities. Does it make sense to speak with Douwe Fokkema of a ‘socio-code’³ of modernism? Are we still dealing with definable terms at all? Or should we follow Croce’s nominalism and surrender in view of the seemingly insoluble problems posed by literary and genre history?

Problems of this sort seem to get out of control if one attempts to define the concept of literary modernism on an international and intercultural level. Commenting on the works of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats in *The Birth of Modernism*, Leon Surette believes that his detailed analyses allow for the formulation of general hypotheses concerning modernist literature as a whole. Surette arrives at the somewhat peculiar conclusion that ‘Modernism was committed to stylistic severity and tolerated metaphysical and epistemological absolutism’.⁴ He adds that modernism was ‘classically severe ... occult or mystical’.⁴

This definition, which I do not wish to comment on in detail, may hold true for T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and W.B. Yeats. As for W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Christopher Isherwood or James Joyce, however, it seems hardly relevant, and it completely loses credibility if applied to politically active authors such as Jean-Paul Sartre and André Malraux in France or Heinrich Mann and Bertolt Brecht in Germany.

At this point it seems advisable to return to the initial question: how can we define romanticism, modernism or postmodernism without lapsing into a reductionism that would narrow down modernism to its conservative components in Eliot’s and Pound’s sense? One possible answer might be an attempt to define epochs or periods as *problematics* or *socio-linguistic situations*. The notion of problematic, which in this context is not used in Louis Althusser’s sense, is to make explicit the political and aesthetic heterogeneity of epochs, such as romanticism and modernism, without concealing their relative unity: a unity ensured by the fact that the immense heterogeneity is not merely perceived as an element leading to deconstruction and eventually causing the collapse of the building of literary history, but as one aspect of the socio-linguistic situation as a whole marked by a set of interrelated problems and questions. In short, the point is to perceive unity within heterogeneity.

Problematics as a Socio-linguistic Situation

As contemporary language is proliferating, even besetting us with neologisms, it is perhaps not superfluous to explain and justify terms such as ‘problematic’ and ‘socio-linguistic situation’. The term ‘problematic’ indicates that we are not dealing with a homogeneous aesthetic, poetic or stylistic totality, but an interaction of problems; the complementary term ‘socio-linguistic situation’ is meant to reveal concrete aspects of this interaction by presenting it as a collusion or conflict of collective languages.

Discussions revolving around such fundamental terms as modernism and post-modernism suffer a lot from the fact that participants attempt to define these terms as coherent aesthetics or poetics. Linda Hutcheon, for example, tries to confine modernism to formalism and aesthetic historicism⁵ speaking of a modernist heritage of non-involvedness.⁵

She imagines a unified modernism whose aesthetics and stylistics by and large correspond to its political views. This approach may be useful as long as epithets, such as ‘modern’ or ‘modernist’, are limited to T.S. Eliot, Pound and Yeats; it loses its relevance, however, as soon as it is applied to politically motivated modernists such as Sartre, Céline, Brecht or Hemingway.

The alternative to Hutcheon’s approach is not to condemn periodization and a genre-oriented literary history, but rather to increase the complexity of our theoretical model. The twin terms ‘problematic’ and ‘socio-linguistic situation’ are meant to enhance the complexity of the model without dismissing the criterion of coherence. This is because the problematic or socio-linguistic situation might be perceived as a historical entity that is open both towards the future and the past and made up of heterogeneous sociolects and discourses related to each other in either a ‘friendly’ or a ‘hostile’ manner, but still reacting to the same problems and questions.

Criticizing the synchronic linguistics of the Geneva School and its tendency to conceive the subject of the parole as an abstract entity independent of ideologies, interests and collective languages, Bakhtin and Vološinov note:

In point of fact, the linguistic form, which, as we have just shown, exists for the speaker only in the context of specific utterances, exists, consequently, only in a specific ideological context. In actuality, we never say or hear *words*, we say and hear what is true or false, good or bad, important or unimportant, pleasant or unpleasant, and so on. *Words are always filled with content and meaning drawn from behaviour or ideology.*⁶

Translated into the terminology of socio-semiotics, this paragraph can be read as follows: sociolects and their discourses are related to the problems of an epoch and articulate this epoch’s interests. In this context, the term sociolect may be defined as a collective language characterized by a particular lexical repertoire, a semantic and a classification pattern (‘faire taxinomique’, Greimas) which may serve as starting point for an infinite number of discourses (narratives). Going beyond the formal, purely syntactic definition of discourse proposed by Zellig Harris in 1952, we shall define ‘discourse’ as a transphrastic entity whose semantic basis is part of a code and, more generally, a particular sociolect.

These – very brief – definitions may serve a better understanding of what is meant by ‘socio-linguistic situation’ or ‘problematic’ here: it is an open totality of discourses and sociolects, some of which belong to the past, whereas others announce the future. While some modernist and avant-garde discourses are geared towards Marxism and revolutionary utopia (e.g. those of the Surrealists, the Russian Futurists, Brecht and Benjamin) others (T.S. Eliot, Th. Mann) draw upon classical and humanist traditions or, like Hesse and Breton, explore the languages of psychoanalysis and the unconscious.

Despite these differences, which may raise doubts concerning the concept of modernism, most of these discourses take their cue from fundamental problems that were characteristic of the era of modernism (from 1850 or 1880 until 1950). These include the ambivalent identity of the individual (male) subject, seeking existential truth, the search for a political, aesthetic or religious utopia, and the problem of nature envisaged either as a force capable of freeing the individual from the constraints of culture or as a mortal threat to subjectivity.

It remains to be seen how these orientations change and shift within postmodern problematics. Discourses relevant to modernism tend to become marginal and new forms of discourse move into the centre of the new, postmodern problematic. Discourses on nature no longer focus on the male subject and his identity, but on nature as an ecological problem; discourses on women no longer consist of the male ego's erotically inspired constructions of the feminine, but now (predominantly) consist of feminist discourses on the situation of women, the possibilities of women's liberation, etc. We are thus witnessing substantial shifts within the discursive pattern. Yet such shifts do not entail the disappearance of older sociolects and discourses (e.g. those of modernism) within the postmodern problematic: they are rather relegated to the periphery.

Socio-linguistic Problematic, Episteme and Paradigm

The concept of problematic is defined here in contrast to Foucault's episteme and Kuhn's paradigm. These are the essential differences: to begin with, the concepts introduced by Foucault and Kuhn (regardless of their differences) denote closed systems whose changes resemble biological mutations. While Foucault provides a description of these mutations without explaining them in detail,⁷ Kuhn tries to show that each paradigm contains the elements of its own disintegration: contradictions or anomalies that appear unexpectedly in the course of 'normal science' and eventually cause the collapse of the entire epistemological system. In such cases, the existing paradigm is replaced by a new one, whereupon the epistemological or scientific process starts anew.

The nature of the literary problematic and in general literary history as mapped out here is quite different: it is not a closed system threatened by global failure as a result of its contradictions, but an open historical totality that changes gradually, almost imperceptibly, by relegating to the periphery problems that used to be in the centre. The romantic discourses, for example, some of which were dealing with the relationship between the individual and nature had to give way to realistic and naturalistic discourses focusing on the urban environment and its collective subjects: workers, journalists, weavers and peasants.

The Transition from Modernism to Postmodernism

Tracing the gradual transition from political, philosophical and literary modernism to postmodernism from this vantage point, we find that sociolects and discourses that were geared towards utopia and the overcoming of bourgeois society are gradually being replaced by one-dimensional languages stressing the feasible, or by languages of a radical, but despairing revolt. Whatever their orientation – Rorty's Pragmatism, Vattimo's 'pensiero debole', Foucault's late retirement into a privacy with Ancient Greek connotations, or Lyotard's criticism of 'métarécits' – the object of their criticism is the same: the rationalist, revolutionary and aesthetic prophecies of modernity and modernism that are perceived as dangerous illusions.

The new socio-linguistic problematic of postmodernism condemns to atrophy the second, or utopian dimension Marcuse insists on and at the same time deprives André Breton's

surrealist programme of its credibility. ‘Il faut que l’homme s’évade de cette lice ridicule qu’on lui a faite: le prétendu réel actuel avec la perspective d’un réel futur qui ne vaille guère mieux’,⁸ Breton writes in his *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste du surréalisme*. However, the pseudo-reality debunked by Breton has become reality *tout court* (if Baudrillard is right),⁹ and the postmodern subject has not the slightest desire to escape from the prison-house denounced by Breton, for it is no longer aware of its own imprisonment. A new socio-linguistic problematic will bring about changes of linguistic perception and of everything that is thought, written and said – ‘*ce qui peut et doit être dit*’,¹⁰ as Michel Pêcheux puts it following Foucault.

The postmodern refusal of utopia, of the second dimension, which can be observed in many contemporary discourses, goes hand in hand with the refusal of Cartesian or Hegelian universalism: a universalism underlying all of modern and even modernist (late modern) thought. In this context, any postmodern discourse – be it sociological, philosophical or literary – may be conceived of as a revolt against modern universalism.

Barthes’ and Derrida’s upgrading of the signifier, Lyotard’s *paralogy* and the rhizomatic thought developed by Deleuze and Guattari all bear witness to a dramatic particularization of language and of linguistic consciousness: a particularization initiated by Nietzsche and diametrically opposed to Descartes’, Hegel’s and Saussure’s universalist aspirations. Commenting on this radical break with modern universalism, Alain Touraine writes: ‘Eros, nation, entreprise et consommation sont les morceaux éclatés de la modernité qui était rationalisation et identification de l’être humain et de ses rôles sociaux.’¹¹ One may welcome or regret this tendency towards particularization, but most observers will agree that it prevails in the present socio-linguistic situation.

At present, the rejection of universalism is accompanied by a radical criticism of the concept of a unified humanity, or of ‘humankind as a unit’, as Agnes Heller puts it.¹² As soon as it is taken up by postmodernists such as Lyotard, Vattimo or Zygmunt Bauman, the critique of universal humanism, initiated by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, culminates in a radical pluralism. The latter is irreconcilable with the notion of humanity: each collective, each ethnic minority proclaims a particular notion of the human. However, the aspects this tendency towards pluralism and fragmentation assumes in philosophical, literary and political discourses of postmodernism can vary quite dramatically. While Touraine’s late-modernist sociology, for example, aims at curbing the fragmentation of postmodern society, Vattimo, Lyotard and Bauman continue to advocate radical pluralism. Although each of these discourses reacts to the problem of particularization in a specific way, virtually all contemporary languages share the basic orientation towards particularization, pluralization and pragmatism.

Within the framework of the postmodern problematic (i.e. during the transition from modernism to postmodernism), the same can be said of the relationship between subjectivity and nature. Some discourses (e.g. those launched by Foucault’s works) dismiss the notion of subject they consider to be ideological, while others (e.g. Vattimo) advocate the idea of a fractioned, pluralized and fragmented subject. Yet another group (e.g. Touraine in his *Critique de la modernité*) is more inclined to regard social movements as effective antidotes to anonymity and bureaucracy. Nature, which was viewed by the modernist subject as either a liberating force or a serious threat to the socialized

individual, is now considered in an ecological perspective: as a dominated nature managed and exploited by the subject. Hence the postmodern question is less what nature can give to the searching male subject than how it can be protected from exploitation by the social system.

The tendency towards pluralism contains not only political and philosophical, but also aesthetic components. Within the postmodern problematic, discourses on art tend to legitimize stylistic diversity and hybrid forms. The same seems to hold true for the discourses of contemporary Marxists such as Fredric Jameson or Michael Ryan.¹³ Similarly, novelists like Eco, Robbe-Grillet or John Barth feel committed to stylistic pluralism combining elements of the detective novel with avant-garde and traditional techniques. Like modernism, postmodern prose is extraordinarily heterogeneous insofar as each text reacts to the problematic as a whole in its own specific way. Still, mixes of styles and the orientation towards popular forms seem to be a common denominator of postmodern literature in the sense of Eco or Barth. This salient trait is referred to by Vattimo in his aesthetics of *heterotopy*: an aesthetics that contrasts heterogeneity and pluralism with the modernist ideals of coherence, innovation, originality and the transgression of established norms.

It is hardly surprising therefore that, in a linguistic situation so favourable to stylistic heterogeneity, institutionalized sociolects and discourses discover an entirely new problem: the disappearance of autonomous art and the arbitrary character of traditional boundaries between art and non-art. Commenting on the transgression of such boundaries, also alluded to by Jean Baudrillard,¹⁴ the British sociologist Scott Lash speaks of a de-differentiation of styles and the literary public.¹⁵ He believes that, in a postmodern situation, no distinct line of demarcation can be traced between highbrow and popular styles, and modernist differentiations calling for a clear-cut distinction between high and popular or commercial literature (art) are rendered increasingly obsolete.

Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommages*, a text parodying the discourse of the detective novel, Eco's *Il nome della rosa* and Patrick Süskind's *Das Parfum* may serve to illustrate Lash's thesis. Along with a de-differentiation of styles, Scott Lash also posits a de-differentiation of publics: it has become almost impossible within the postmodern problematic to tell apart the consumer of commercialized clichés from a literary elite attracted by formal aesthetics and avant-garde experiments. Moreover, avant-garde art itself spares no effort to produce popular effects: witness Robbe-Grillet's *cinéromans*, Eco's novels, or the pop-theatre of the Austrian playwright Werner Schwab.

In spite of the general orientation of many postmodern discourses towards de-differentiation in Lash's sense, one ought not to lose sight of competing models of postmodernism. In opposition to Vattimo, who advocates a boundless aesthetic pluralism, Lyotard imagines a postmodern aesthetics of the Sublime that would employ every available means to defy the expanding industry of culture. At this level, postmodern discursiveness oscillates between two poles: between a negative aesthetics in Lyotard's sense and an affirmative aesthetics of heterotopy and pluralism in Vattimo's or Eco's sense.

All things considered, then it seems that 'postmodernism' – provided it exists! – is neither a homogeneous style, nor an ideology, nor an aesthetics, but a cluster of problems

and questions that may elicit quite heterogeneous reactions. In this context, one could try to understand realism, romanticism and the Enlightenment in analogy to postmodernism as relatively heterogeneous problematics.

Cultural Differences or: the Specific Character of National Problematics

In conclusion, I would like to add a few remarks on the culture-specific and national character of socio-linguistic problematics. Those unfamiliar with the details of the discourses circulating in the Anglo-American world might well ask what modernism and postmodernism actually mean in this context. This question (although too complex to be examined here) is instructive insofar as it makes clear that the problematics differ considerably from one national culture to another. In France, for example, the respective terms would rather be those of ‘modernité’, beginning in the 16th or 17th century, and of modern literature, commencing with Baudelaire (since about 1850). It is in this context that the term ‘modernity’ as coined by Walter Benjamin is located. Still, the term ‘modernisme’ sporadically occurs in French discussions, too, denoting – as it does in English – the literature of Proust, Gide, Joyce, Svevo and Thomas Mann. It is then understood as an antonym to literary postmodernism (as constituted by the works of authors such as Robbe-Grillet, Butor, Calvino, Eco and John Barth) whose affinity to Lyotard’s ‘Condition Postmoderne’ would have to be explicated in greater detail.

Apart from what the Anglo-American and French debates share in this regard, they also often deviate from one another because of the differences between their individual cultures. Thus, while in Anglo-American discourses the term ‘postmodern literature’ figures prominently, in France, although common, it remains a rather marginal phenomenon. This does not mean, however, that contemporary French society has not entered the postmodern stage of its development.

Rather different is the role postmodern literature plays in Québec, where the socio-linguistic situation is heavily influenced by the discussions going on in Anglophone Canada and the USA. (One symptomatic title is *Moments postmodernes dans le roman québécois*.¹⁶) An important document on the postmodern discussion in Québec is the bibliography contained in the special issue of *Tangence 39* compiled by Barbara Hovercroft and Silvia Söderlind for it clearly brings to the fore the contrast between Francophone Canada and France with regard to the reception of the term postmodernism.

All in all, then ‘what has to be said’ (to use Pêcheux’s¹⁰ words again) not only depends on socio-linguistic problematics in a historical sense, but also on national problematics, which occasionally prevents us from understanding the discourses of foreign literary scholars. After all, every word and every statement pertains to specific problematics that have to be reconstructed in order to understand the other’s language.

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