

Tracing the Evolution of French Sociology of Literature: From Moral Ethics to the Sociological Fiction

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Abstract: Emerging in nineteenth-century France, sociology was intimately tied to French literature and even philosophy from its very inception. This paper examines how moral and ethical concerns shape the distinctive trajectory of the French sociology of literature ever since. Focusing on the moral ontology and ethical object of literature, it traces the evolution of the sociology of literature in the French context, analyzing its turn toward literary criticism, art, and politics before its subsequent return to the tradition of the social sciences exemplified by Bourdieu's sociology. This shift has reoriented literary studies by integrating the dissemination and reception of literary works and authors into a comparative framework, thereby opening new avenues of inquiry. Furthermore, a sociological consciousness is evident both in studies of the *histoire des mentalités* and in the literary works of Annie Ernaux, reflecting a broader transition in the focal points of moral and ethical reflection.

Keywords: France; literature; sociology; morality; ethics

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标题：法国文学社会学演变：从道德伦理到文学的社会学取向

摘要：自19世纪在法国发轫之初，社会学便与法国文学乃至哲学紧密相连。本文以文学的道德本体论与伦理对象为切入，考察道德与伦理关怀如何塑造法国文学社会学的独特发展轨迹：其一，分析该领域从文艺批评、艺术与政治的转向；其二，梳理其在布尔迪厄社会学中回归社会科学传统的过程。此种社会科学取向反过来重塑了文学研究，将文学作品与作者的传播与接受纳入比较研究与文学社会学的框架之中，由此开辟新的问题域。此外，无论在历史学的感性史研究，还是在安妮·埃尔诺的文学创作中，都可见鲜明的文学

社会学意识，揭示出其道德与伦理反思的关注重心正在发生转移。

关键词：法国；文学；社会学；道德；伦理

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Morality's Origin, Ethical Object

The sociology of literature initially evolved outside the boundaries of sociology as a formal academic discipline. The Italian Renaissance and European Enlightenment gave rise to a diverse array of new social ideas and intellectual currents—movements further shaped by the British Industrial Revolution and French Revolution—and these developments in turn brought transformative shifts to the conceptual underpinnings of both literature and sociology.

In the discussion of human morality, literature tends to regard morality as a fundamental characteristic of human nature, and ethics as a reflection of social relations. The examination of morality and ethics in literature and modern social sciences should be refocused on classical studies. The analysis of the relationship between literature and society can be traced back to ancient Greece, when philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and Horace examined the social function of literature from a philosophical perspective. Plato posited that the world of ideas is the most authentic existence, emphasized the educational function of art and has established standards for literature in *The Republic*, combining literary works evaluation with moral scrutiny. Furthermore, Aristotle, in *Poetics*, considered art as an imitation of the real world, while Horace suggested that the subjects of literary works encompass individuals and affairs from reality.

These studies on emotions in the ancient Western world laid the intellectual foundation for the exploration of morality and ethics in the literary sphere of modern Western society. Following the eleventh century, with the recovery and development of the economy, the boom of cities, and improvement of living standards, citizens gradually shifted from a pessimistic perspective to a more aspiring examination of their life, with a deeper dive into secularism. In the fourteenth century, Europe experienced a cultural movement known as the Renaissance, characterized by a focus on humanism, realism, and human emotions in art. Leonardo da Vinci proposed that the explanation of art and science should be accessed from people's

sensory experience. French poet and literary critic Nicolas Boileau authored the theoretical work *L'Art poétique*, which reflected the continuation of research on the relationship between literature and society.

French literature inherited and redeveloped the Renaissance legacy, undergoing a vital indigenization shift around the French Revolution. On the eve of the French Revolution, literary authors began integrating modern elements with their concerns regarding social and moral matters, adopting a critical stance towards the ethical aspects of the old order. Concurrently, humanist thought embarked on exploring novel moral quandaries. Literary works in this period delved into phenomena of social injustice, exposing the aristocratic class's privileges and the exploitation and oppression faced by common people in French society at that time. Through depictions of characters' inner struggles and moral conflicts, these literary works exhibited the complexity of moral choices and the dilemmas people faced in adversity. Additionally, some works revealed the darker aspects of human nature and the decline of morality, highlighting the weaknesses and corruption within social morals.

Religion served as a lens through which moral issues were explored in most cases. Faith and religious rituals have been promoted by characters who tend to seek moral guidance and redemption, or reflect on the influence of religious institutions on moral behaviour. Love was also a recurrent theme with romantic relationships often involving moral choices and ethical conflicts shaped by social, familial, and personal moral beliefs. For instance, François Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* satirized feudalism and the rules of the church, criticizing Catholic asceticism and scholasticism while advocating for secular happiness. Similarly, Montaigne's *Essays* presented a strong respect for human nature, reason, and truth.

The influence of the French Revolution on literature is also reflected in the modernization of the French language, the formation of institutions like the French Academy, and the spread of concepts including revolution, nation, and state through the French language to European countries and North America, exerting revolutionary impact on them. Humanism, which emerged during the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods, was also partially institutionalized and incorporated into national education systems. This integration facilitated the creation and reception of literature as well as the transmission of new moral ethics through literary works.

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, influential upheavals took place in French society. Concurrently, during this period, there was an increasing awareness among the people regarding knowledge acquisition and educational development. Following the French Revolution, French writers exhibited robust

political sentiments and awareness by their nation identities. In *The Red and the Black* written by Stendhal, the word “politics” appeared as a main concern, as illustrated by the observation that “Mme de Renal was discussing politics with considerable heat” (91). Incorporating his concerns about politics through his characters’ dialogue, Stendhal stated, “I’ve never in my life wanted to hear anything about politics, and it’s politics that drove me away” (320) and “I have left Paris, I tell them, in order not to talk nor hear anyone talk about politics” (321). Balzac also contended that literary works during this period often manifested a rebellious spirit, condemning the reign of terror and the Napoleonic dictatorship. Examples of such works include Hugo’s *Quatre-Vingt-Treize*. Moreover, *Les Misérables* by Hugo and *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* by Dumas depict social phenomena by portraying the ordeals and unjust fates of characters, thereby highlighting their ethical decisions. The sociological perspective presented here encompass both literary and philosophical dimensions, offering a critical analysis of social classes, traditions, and the emerging challenges posed by capitalism.

The development of natural sciences led to the gradual dominance of materialism over idealism during the 18th century. Scholars like Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, and Rousseau became advocates of the Enlightenment, further liberating the thoughts of people. Meanwhile, the Industrial Revolution, the international trade expansion, and the rise of capitalism brought about vital socioeconomic and political changes, leading to an increase in scholars focusing on literary and social issues. This can be observed in the growth in the number of scholars and their theories in countries like Britain, Germany, and France, including Hume, Winckelmann, Lessing, Herder, Goethe, Kant, and Schiller. Although Britain, France, and Germany differed in the speed of modernization, they showed consistency in the discussion of modern social problems in literature and philosophy and exerted mutual influence on each other.

In this process, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s thought exerted substantial influence across Britain, France, and Germany within literary and philosophical discourse. In the eighteenth century, Rousseau highlighted the connection between high literature and social wealth, emphasizing the significance of “the people” in Enlightenment thought.¹ Rousseau contended that the progress of the arts and sciences carries profound implications for morality and virtue, significantly shaping societal ethical standards and ideals. Yet he also warns, “As the conveniences of life increase, as the arts are brought to perfection, and luxury spreads, true courage flags, the

1 See Fang Weigui, “The History, Theory, and Methodology of The Sociology of Literature,” *Social Science Forum* 13 (2010): 78-103.

virtues disappear; and all this is the effect of the sciences and of those arts which are exercised in the privacy of men's dwellings" (12). Furthermore, Rousseau highlighted that the arts and sciences frequently accompany luxury, which corrupts social morals while stimulating pursuits of utility and vanity, often at the expense of genuine aesthetic and ethical values. He also emphasized how society shapes writers: "Luxury is seldom unattended by the arts and sciences; and they are always attended by luxury" (10). "But if the progress of the arts and sciences has added nothing to our real happiness; if it has corrupted our morals, and if that corruption has vitiated our taste, what are we to think of the herd of text-book authors" (16).

It confirms that there exists a connection between socially significant art and literature with social reality. In the context of Europe, the establishment of capitalist production led to significant social transformations, marking the transition into a capitalist society and subsequently into a civil society. It can be observed that this progression gave rise to the emergence of literature reflective of civil society, prompting writers to contemplate the relationship between literature and society. This exploration involved portraying how literature reflects the evolving spirit of the times and how society influences people's perception of literary art. During this era, writers were economically dependent on society and spiritually influenced by social factors such as social conditions, cultural norms, social strata, structural dynamics, and values.

Literary Orientation and Moral Ethics in Modern Sociology

In the literary works of this period, the interaction between literature and research brought literary expression closer to philosophy and gave rise to an early, incipient form of sociology of literature. A reciprocal influence was evident between English Victorian writers and French literary-philosophical thought. Against the backdrop of the French Revolution, Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* exposes the harm inflicted on human nature by feudal oppression, vividly reflecting sharp class antagonism and intense class struggle, while also uncovering the misdeeds of the feudal aristocracy. Additionally, Dickens' *David Copperfield* praised the virtues of human nature and its power to influence others through character portrayal. Similarly, Hugo's humanitarian spirit can be observed in his compassion for the unfortunate plight of the lower classes, ruthless condemnation of social evils, and belief in and admiration for universal love, kindness, forgiveness, and moral influence.

Honoré de Balzac vividly portrayed characters through meticulous detail, reflecting his insightful understanding of social phenomena and profound analysis

of human nature. At the same time, Balzac and Eugène Sue envisaged their literary endeavours as social research of contemporary society.¹ The annals of literary scholarship have long grappled with the intricate dynamics governing literary production, tracing back to Madame de Staël, Hippolyte Taine, Émile Zola, Marie Guyau, Gustave Lanson and beyond. Madame de Staël is one of the early writers who delved into the relationship between literature and society. Renowned for her historical perspective, she examined literature through the lens of social institutions. Her work *De la littérature*, published in 1800, elucidated the interplay between literature and society. Madame de Staël's work *De la littérature* marked the beginning of a systematic and mature approach to the revival of artistic thought and methods.²

The integrated social concerns shared by literature and philosophy gradually evolved into a distinct sociological orientation following the rise of modern sociology, while continuing to employ methodologies that connect literary expression with social issues. Auguste Comte, one of the founders of modern sociology, focused on exploring the connection between literature and society. He founded positivist sociology in the 1830s. Additionally, in his book *Cours de philosophie positive*, he introduced the term "sociology," marking the establishment of sociology as a discipline. Comte explained the relation of sociology to the other departments of positive philosophy. He emphasized the social significance of art, viewing it as a social phenomenon, "in its nascent state every science is implicated with its corresponding art" (112). He summarized the similarities between art and sociology, noting that both fields of study are inseparable from human beings.³ Comte inherited the previous moral and ethical questions, bridging humanitarianism and morality. According to Comte, social progress fundamentally lies in the advancement of inherent human morality and reason.⁴

Hippolyte Taine, working as a philosopher and literary critic, developed a distinctively sociological perspective for his time, deeply influenced by the thought of Auguste Comte. Additionally, he adhered to an artistic perspective rooted in positivism and naturalism. Taine believed that literature, to some extent, is a product of both the individual and society. "The artist himself, considered in connection

1 See Gisele Sapiro, "Le champ littéraire. Penser le fait littéraire comme fait social," *Histoire de La Recherche Contemporaine* 10 (2021): 45-51.

2 See Alphons Silbermann, *Einführung in die Literatursoziologie*, München: Oldenbourg, 1981, 7.

3 See Fang Weigui, "The History, Theory, and Methodology of The Sociology of Literature," *Social Science Forum* 13 (2010): 78-103.

4 See Xi Heng, "The Person of Comte and His Theoretical Contributions to Sociology," *Journal of Northwest University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)* 4 (2001): 116.

with his productions, is not isolated; he also belongs to a whole, one greater than himself, comprising the school or family of artists of the time and country to which he belongs" (2).

In the field of literature, Zola made significant contributions through his naturalistic literature, providing profound insights into social critique and portrayal. "Further, naturalism, they assure us, dates from the first written works" (109). "It is in one word the literature of our scientific age, as the classical and romantic literature corresponded to a scholastic and theological age" (Zola 23). In his seminal work on naturalistic literary theory, *Le Roman expérimental*, he referred to his own literary creations as "applied sociology." Jean-Marie Guyau also approached issues and explored literature from a sociological perspective. In 1889, he published the book *L'Art au point de vue sociologique* and put forward the viewpoint of "Art from a Sociological Point of View." In that specific period, there appeared widespread doubts about the future of art in the face of the triple threat of modern industry, democratic egalitarianism, and scientific development. Guyau has provided a strong rationality of existence for art, "all arts, fundamentally, are nothing more than various ways of condensing individual emotion to make it immediately communicable to others, to make it somehow sociable" (19).

At the turn of the 20th century, literary critic Gustave Lanson furthered the study of literature-society relations, specifically within French literary history. Lanson emphasizes the significance of the reception of literature by either a single audience or multiple audiences. Lanson referred to this as the focal point of the sociology of literature. He "rejects as incomplete the formula that literature is the expression of society and proposes instead the richer idea that literature complements life" (221). Émile Durkheim, a renowned sociologist, conducted in-depth studies on social structure and function, extending his insights to the realm of the sociology of literature. His sociological ideas have had a profound impact on the development of the sociology of literature. He enriched the positivist sociology initiated by Comte, providing substantive content to sociological methodology.¹ In his work *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique*, Durkheim introduced the concept of "social fact," emphasizing the primacy of society as an originating source and its influence on individuals. Durkheim and his collaborators have surveyed and analysed world literature in the social sciences.² "Sociology is a very special mode

1 See Fang Weigui, "The History, Theory, and Methodology of The Sociology of Literature," *Social Science Forum* 13 (2010): 78-103.

2 See Émile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, translated by W. D. Halls and edited by Steven Lukes, New York: The Free Press, 1982, 1.

of speculation, halfway between philosophy and literature” (189). “One has even gone so far as to attribute an important role to societies in a field which might not unreasonably be regarded as more especially reserved to individuals, namely, that of art and literature” (201). These statements articulate Durkheim’s core premise that literary works are not merely products of individual genius but are fundamentally shaped by broader social forces, thereby underscoring society’s constitutive role in literary creation.

Furthermore, Marxist scholars such as György Lukács, Lucien Goldmann, Pierre Macherey, and Fredric Jameson have enriched this discourse with their critical insights, alongside the pioneering contributions of cultural studies doyens like Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart.¹ In the 1950s, Lucien Goldmann introduced the critical method of “literary dialectical sociology,” founding the “genetic structuralism” school of literary research. The emergence of Goldmann’s sociology of literature theory is linked to his early personal experiences, family circumstances, and social background. He posited the subject of cultural creation as a supra-individual subject, the collective subject, rather than the individual.

In the 1960s, Alphons Silbermann inherited the theoretical speculation tradition of pre-war German “The sociology of literature,” initiating a new phase of theoretical criticism in the sociology of literature. His work also exerted influence on French intellectual circles. Silbermann viewed artistic works as commodities and stated that the relationship between artists, artworks, and recipients mirrored the relationship between production and consumption of commodities. Hence, he emphasized studying the social behaviours, dependencies, and interactions among the three.² Additionally, the debate between Silbermann and Adorno in the 1960s proved particularly significant. It centers on fundamental questions such as whether the sociology of literature constitutes an independent field, what its proper objects and core problems should be, and how its philosophical dimensions and social functions ought to be understood.

Subsequently, Robert Escarpit emerged as a pivotal figure in the sociology of literature, concentrating on the interplay between literary works and social realities. He published *Sociologie de la littérature* in 1958, regarded as a landmark in the inception of the discipline of the sociology of literature. Advocating empiricism, he played a crucial role in the shift towards empiricism within the sociology of

1 See Gisele Sapiro, “Le champ littéraire. Penser le fait littéraire comme fait social,” *Histoire de La Recherche Contemporaine* 10 (2021): 45-51.

2 See Fang Weigui, “The Literary Sociological Debate between Silbermann and Adorno: A Discussion on the Positioning of The Sociology of Literature,” *Social Science Research* 2 (2014): 179.

literature. “Looking at the production of literature, he considers such factors as demography and economics and the way these shape the formation of literary communities at particular times” (2). He dismissed the utility of internal studies of literature, asserting that the sociology of literature encompasses both the literary and the social dimensions.

The Turns of Art, Critical Theory and Bourdieu's Sociology

Within the context of socio-criticism, art and critical theory have also exerted a significant influence on the development of the sociology of literature. Three literary criticism methods, including psychoanalytic criticism, structuralist criticism, and sociological criticism, have emerged in the early 20th century.¹ However, Pierre Popovic proposed that socio-criticism has continuously asserted its difference from the sociology of literature and the need to affirm its specificity from its beginnings around 1970 to its most contemporary developments.² Zima proposed that all social issues can be interpreted through linguistic frameworks, encompassing semantic, syntactic, and narrative dimensions.³ Thus, textual sociology directed its attention to the analysis of the relationship between literature and society primarily through linguistic lenses. Semiotics, therefore, should be integrated into the framework of sociological criticism and evolve into a novel approach known as textual sociological criticism.

From the perspective of art criticism, following the Romantic and Neoclassical movements, Expressionism first appeared in Germany and then spread widely in the Western world, including France. Expressionism portrayed life through subjective distortions, reflecting the middle class's discontent with their era and society.⁴ Adorno is an important figure in literary criticism. As the person who staunchly supported modernist art, he criticized the avant-garde's artistic ideas, which centres on the concept of “spontaneity,” from the concept of “art autonomy.”⁵ In Chang's view, Adorno thinks that the artistic form of the avant-garde is inorganic, which hampers itself to engage in reality and the critique of the capitalist system.

1 See Wu Yuetian, “Zima and His Text Sociology,” *Chinese Social Sciences Today* 14 October 2021: 8.

2 See Pierre Popovic, “La sociocritique. Définition, histoire, concepts, voies d'avenir,” *Pratiques* 151-152 (2011): 7-38.

3 See Pierre V. Zima, *Pour une sociologie du texte littéraire*, Paris, France; Montréal, Canada: L'Harmattan, 2000.

4 See Lu Mingjun, “Gothic Recursion: Expressionism and Its Historico-Spiritual Origins,” *Art Research* 5 (2023): 130-136.

5 See Chang Peijie, “Adorno's Critique of the ‘Spontaneity’ of Avant-Garde Art,” *Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art* 37 (2017): 55.

Moreover, this situation would also be contaminated by the “cultural industry” inasmuch as its tattered form, and degenerate into the capitalist system.¹

Following the end of World War II, the left-wing intellectuals in France led the *May 68*. Intellectual currents including Marxism, existentialism and structuralism have influenced literature, philosophy and sociology. Outside the left, Bourdieu became a leading exponent in the field of the sociology of literature after the 1960s. Pierre Bourdieu was influenced by structuralism in his early years, attempted to develop a “universal cultural theory” based on Saussure (Bao 70). Additionally, Bourdieu borrowed Marxist terminology to “contemplate the material determinants of culture and history, placing class at the centre of his analysis of modern society” (Bao 72).

In Speller’s (2011) examination of Bourdieu’s contributions to the sociology of literature, the role of literature is presented as both foundational and transformative within Bourdieu’s theoretical framework. Literature, as Speller notes, was a recurring theme in Bourdieu’s early work. Bourdieu first introduced the theme of literature in his seminal text *Champ intellectuel et projet créateur*, and further developed his ideas on the literary field in *Le Marché des biens symboliques*. Bourdieu attempted to “establish a literary science and advocated for an intellectual love of literary and artistic works” (Liu 2). Speller highlighted that literature played a critical role in the evolution of Bourdieu’s key concept of “field.” This concept was initially developed through Bourdieu’s research on literature, which defined its early characteristics and guided its subsequent application across various domains. In his analysis of literary figures, Bourdieu explored the differences between “scientific” and “literary” representations of social reality. This inquiry not only furnished inspiration for his sociological work but also exerted a reciprocal influence on literary practice and writers themselves. Speller pointed out that Bourdieu’s sociology assigned a unique status to literature in the pursuit of political and aesthetic autonomy. He believed that different social classes engage in struggles within fields to “maintain the stability of social structures, resulting in educational inequality” (Lei 1). His belief in literature as a liberating force is reflected in his specific reform proposals for literary education, addressing both secondary and higher education levels.² Therefore, he advocated for “enhancing the artistic creation and aesthetic ability of culturally disadvantaged classes” and explained the conditions for “the production and reception of literary and artistic works,” making the sociology of literature a practice of aesthetics based

1 See Chang Peijie, “Adorno’s Critique of the ‘Spontaneity’ of Avant-Garde Art,” *Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art* 37 (2017): 55.

2 See John R.W. Speller, *Bourdieu and Literature*, Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2011.

on scientific epistemology (Lei 4).

As students of Bourdieu, Sapiro and Nathalie Heinrich inherited and developed his theory. Sapiro highlighted the limitations of autonomy as a sensitive issue and the reconfigurations that occur according to different periods.¹ She demonstrated how this issue allows Bourdieu to indirectly question the construction mechanisms and structures of other fields, especially in the realm of science, within the literary domain. After conducting research on Pierre Bourdieu's critical sociology, Heinrich discovered another approach called interpretive sociology, one characterized by analytical and descriptive features, devoid of value judgments, and maintaining a neutral stance. Consequently, she shifted from Bourdieu's critical sociological standpoint to interpretive sociology, focusing on the theoretical and exploratory aspects of interpretive art sociology. Her primary research areas included art sociology and women's identity sociology. According to Guo, Heinrich "neither agrees with the sociological stance (objective, empirical, collective phenomena) nor with the idealistic stance (subjective, a priori, aesthetic-based), advocating for a descriptive rather than evaluative perspective on artworks" (51). She pursued a position of value neutrality, advocating for a value-neutral art sociology that transcends individualism and collectivism, representing a third stance.²

While the social conditions of production of works indeed need to be studied and updated according to the evolution of societies, it is equally essential to focus our attention on the practices involved in the circulation and dissemination of literature.³ Consequently, the focus of the sociology of literature has expanded to encompass the reception and interpretation of literary works. This expansion centrally involves analyzing how specific media, publishing dynamics, and translation strategies mediate and transform those very acts of reception. This research focus has extended the sociology of literature into new domains, exploring how these techniques and methods play a role in the dissemination and reception of literature.

New Directions: Literary Geography, History of Emotions, and Sociological Fiction

Since the 1990s, the sociology of literature has exhibited new research directions and trends. One prominent focus has been the emergence of literary

1 See Denis Saint-Amand, "Ce que Bourdieu fait à la littérature," *Acta Fabula* 11 (2010).

2 See Guo Qian, "Value Neutrality: A Study of Nathalie Heinrich's Art Sociology Thought," *Journal of Chinese and Foreign Arts Studies* 3 (2020): 44-51.

3 See Mickaëlle Cedergren, *Le transfert des littératures francophones en(tre) périphérie: Pratiques de sélection, de médiation et de lecture*, avec la collaboration d' Ylva Lindberg, Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2023, 3.

geography, which examines the relationship between place, landscape, vernacular expression, and literary creation. While early inquiries in this vein often engaged with the social relations depicted in traditional agrarian societies or regional literatures, more recent scholarship has reconceptualized the connections between land and identity. In the context of post-industrial societies and globalization, these lines of research explored spaces, communities, and their relationships with people in urban societies, not just in traditional rural or agricultural contexts. Among them, space, order, and emotion appeared in various studies of the sociology of literature orientation in some contradictory relations. The discipline of sociology has evolved into an autonomous epistemological framework, influencing the intellectual and creative realms, including literary production during that era.

The sociological orientation of literary geography was closely related to the early intertwining of geography and sociology. In the late nineteenth century, geography and sociology began to explore the relationship between space and social processes.¹ This interdisciplinary approach, including human geography and cultural geography, emphasized the complex interactions between social activities, cultural customs, and geographic landscapes. This provided a theoretical basis for literary geography, allowing it to explore how social and cultural contexts influence the representation of space in literary works.²

Collot pointed out that the evolution of the humanities and social sciences in the second half of the 20th century promoted the emergence of literary geography.³ Literature and geography were interconnected in terms of how geographers identified and analysed the relationships between people and places in literary works, and how literature depicted these spaces and their symbolic meanings. In literary geography, space not only exists as the background for literary creation but also profoundly influences the content and form of literary works. Baron proposed that literature often uses geographical metaphors to describe social phenomena. Literary geography focused on the role of space in literary texts and explored its function beyond situation or geographical background, reaching social and cultural reflection through metaphors.⁴ Furthermore, the research of Manuel Castells and

1 See Ray Pahl, "Hertfordshire Commuter Villages: From Geography to Sociology," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 2 (2008): 103.

2 See Isaura Cecilia García López, "Antropología del espacio: Consideraciones desde la geografía clásica a la geografía cultural," *Methaodos. Revista de Ciencias Sociales* 3 (2015): 162.

3 See Michel Collot, "Tendances actuelles de la géographie littéraire," *Histoire De La Recherche Contemporaine* 1 (2021): 37-43.

4 See Christine Baron, "Littérature et géographie: lieux, espaces, paysages et écritures," *Fabula-LhT littérature histoire théorie* 8 (2011) 4.

Henri Lefebvre promoted the theoretical development of interdisciplinary research, which had a profound impact on the comprehension of connections between human beings, nature, and space.¹

The emergence of literary geography represented a significant paradigm shift in French literary studies, transcending traditional disciplinary boundaries to explore the multifaceted relationship between literature, geography, and sociology. By delving into the spatial, emotional, and ethical dimensions of literary landscapes, scholars have paved the way for new avenues of inquiry and interpretation in the field of French literature and sociology. This interdisciplinary approach holds immense potential for fostering deeper understandings of social dynamics and cultural representations within literary texts.

We think that Alain Corbin also demonstrated literary and sociological features in his work, endowing it with the attributes of the sociology of literature. In the view of Corbin, literary works have been attached importance in exploring and explaining history and society. He also attempted to combine anthropology with history and observe society from the perspective of cultural anthropology, with the focus on the senses.² Some scholars have summarized Corbin's narrative strategy and methodology for studying the history of emotions. Demartini and Kalifa offered insights into the evolving landscape of sensibility in nineteenth-century France, providing a backdrop against which Corbin's contributions can be understood.³ They analysed the cultural imaginaries and social norms shaped by sensibility during this period, shedding light on its manifestations in literature, art, and everyday life. Corbin draw inspiration and reflection from the natural places around the world, laying emphasis on "cultural perception" (Godfrey 388).

We propose that the scholarship of Corbin, deeply rooted in interdisciplinary inquiry, synthesizes elements from history, sociology, and literary analysis to unveil the intricate dynamics between cultural representations and individual experiences of sensibility. Corbin's contributions to the French sociology of literature, especially his foundational work on sensory history and the theory of mentalités, form a cornerstone of the discipline. Through his interdisciplinary approach, which is grounded in social, cultural, political, and historical contexts, attentive to individual senses and emotions, and richly informed by literary sources, Corbin thus achieved

1 See Isaura Cecilia García López, "Antropología del espacio: Consideraciones desde la geografía clásica a la geografía cultural," *Methaodos. Revista de Ciencias Sociales* 3 (2015): 167.

2 See Zhou Xiaolan, "From Social History to History of Emotions: French Historian Alain Corbin," *Historiography Bimonthly* 3 (2021): 138.

3 See Anne-Emmanuelle Demartini and Dominique Kalifa, *Imaginaire et sensibilités au XIXe siècle: études pour Alain Corbin*, Paris: Créaphis, 2005.

a novel synthesis of disciplinary perspectives.

After more than a century of development, the sociology of literature has demonstrated a distinctly interdisciplinary character. Some of the works were not specifically sociological studies, but they embodied a new form of moral–ethical concerns and sociological imagination. The example of Annie Ernaux’s writing shows this new trend. Although her novels are not formally classified as sociology, they possess pronounced sociological qualities and are increasingly regarded as works of sociological fiction. In her novels, she delved into the problems of suburbia, the realities of the industrial shift, the working class, the family, and marriage. Her writing content had a strong sociological colour and social concern, so it can be said that her works are very sociological in nature. Heck contended that Annie Ernaux’s writing can be understood as a form of engagement with social issues, a deliberate effort to confront the complexities of contemporary society.¹ Thomas focused specifically on Annie Ernaux’s portrayal of the class migrant experience, drawing on her autobiographical narratives to illuminate the challenges and complexities of social mobility.² Through close analysis of Annie Ernaux’s texts, Thomas highlighted the ways in which Ernaux reflect on and express her own experiences from the perspective of sociology. She promoted the transition of social reality and identity as a class migrant in literary works.³

Conclusion

In conclusion, the development of the sociology of literature in France has inherited the European historical and literary traditions and has obvious moral foundations and ethical concerns. Prior to and following the French Revolution, this field focused on key social issues and had an impact on the rest of Europe and out of Europe. With the development of modern sociology in the 19th century, the sociology of literature in France gradually became a specialized subject field. Against the backdrop of post-World War II structuralism, French philosophy, and social changes, many distinct schools and branches evolved, with the Bourdieu’s sociology emerging as a particularly prominent one. Since the 1990s, the sociology of French literature has refocused on new issues such as space, city, community, and emotion. At the same time, there also appeared the orientation of Sociology in

1 See Maryline Heck, “Annie Ernaux: «engager» la littérature, essai de positionnement théorique,” *French Cultural Studies* 35 (2024): 31-41.

2 See Lyn Thomas, “Retour à Oxford avec Annie Ernaux: casting light on class migrant experience,” *French Cultural Studies* 35 (2024): 120.

3 See Lyn Thomas, “Retour à Oxford avec Annie Ernaux: casting light on class migrant experience,” *French Cultural Studies* 35 (2024): 116.

literature. These new research directions have further affected the literary creation.

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