



The Sociological Truth of Fiction: The Aesthetic Structure of a Novel and the Iconic Experience of Reading

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I INTRODUCTION

In the absence of an adequate social science, critics and novelists, dramatists and poets have been the major, and often the only, formulators of private troubles and even of public issues. Art does express such feelings ... but still not with the intellectual clarity required for their understanding or relief today. (Mills 1959, p. 18)

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In the citation, Charles W. Mills expresses a common belief among social scientists that literature often does a better job expressing social life than social sciences but lacks the proper “intellectual clarity” to understand it. Historically, various authors asserted that literature is a “mode of knowledge” (Levin 1965, p. 149), which to a great extent has “autonomous power ... in analysing its contemporary social scene” (Pincott 1970, p. 180). Austin Harrington (2004, p. 3) even claims that literature “can tell us about society that social science cannot tell us.” Trevor Noble (1976, p. 212) agrees that “[n]ovels tell much more about society than any sociological commentary.” Also, Robert Nisbet (1962, p. 69) recognizes that literature adopts a specific “mode of knowledge ... by which man arrives at an understanding of his environment” and which is of no less importance than sociological inquiry. However, despite the longstanding enthusiasm toward literary texts, sociologists fail to embrace the unique social knowledge mediated by literature in its full scope. Literature renders a view of societies “from the inside,” which is “*formally distinct* from either non-fiction or theoretical argument” (Felski 2008, pp. 88–91; emphasis added). To deal with this difference, sociological studies often subsume literary fiction into the sociological frameworks, approaching literature as data to be translated or converted into sociological discourse. As an inspiration, an example of a sociological issue, or a source of sociological imagination (further see Váňa 2020b, pp. 6–7), literature has been treated as sociology’s powerless *sidekick* lacking the “certified knowledge” (Coser 1963, p. 3; cf. Watson 2016, p. 433).¹

My research model seeks to make up for this deficiency. Following the strong program in cultural sociology (Alexander and Smith 2003), I propose a “literary turn,” and more broadly an “aesthetic turn” in cultural sociology in order to recognize literary texts as relatively autonomous cultural entities, independent variables resisting the judgmental eye of an analyst while allowing strong explanatory theories to infer knowledge about general social phenomena. I suggest an epistemological-theoretical shift to form an alliance between literature and sociology—a mutually respectful partnership where both sides contribute to social knowledge in a *symmetrical* way. Following Jeffrey Alexander’s and Philip Smith’s (2003, p. 13) inspiration by the strong program in science studies, I go a step further. David Bloor (1976, p. 5) famously defined the third principle of

¹Lewis Coser’s (1963) *Introductory Reader* is a classic example; see also a more recent reader by Edling and Rydgren (2010).

the strong program in the sociology of scientific knowledge as the principle of symmetry: “It would be symmetrical in its style of explanation. The same types of cause would explain, say, true and false beliefs.” I introduce the symmetry principle into the sociological studies of literature. To be symmetric “means not to impose a priori some spurious *asymmetry* among” (Latour 2005, p. 76) fictional and nonfictional.² Literary fiction should not be treated as less “objective” because of its literariness or fictitiousness. Just the opposite: a strong program in the sociology of literature will access literature as an autonomous source of social knowledge, which due to its aesthetic aspects can mediate textures of social life that are only barely graspable by sociology.

My model is based on three main principles. First and foremost, I search for ways to let literature *speak for itself*. Following a “hermeneutics of faith” rather than a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” I “seek to understand the text on its own terms” (Jacobs 2019, p. 260). Therefore, I focus on the text’s role during reading. I conceive reading as a dynamic interaction between the text and the reader, mediating social knowledge as a part of the aesthetic experience. The aesthetic experience does not exist separate of the communicative and cognitive aspects, but it makes communication possible in the first place. I approach the aesthetic experience of reading as the central analytical unit of my model. The point of departure is the phenomenology of reading of the Constance School of Reception Aesthetics (Iser 1972; Jauss 1982) informed by the hermeneutic phenomenology of Paul Ricoeur (1976, 1981). Second, I probe into the text’s insides, exploring how it communicates by means of aesthetic devices. Since every message fundamentally relies on its form, I do not narrow the text to its content or informational value. I do not narrow the text to its content or informational value. My model employs the structural aesthetics developed by linguists Jan Mukařovský (1971, 1978) and the Prague Linguistic Circle.³ I explore how the text triggers and maintains particular aesthetic experience through sentence structure, narration, plot, and specific metaphors but also pace, rhythm, and the phonetic aspects of the text. Third, to strengthen the aesthetic does not mean to reject the social. Literary

²Perhaps ironically, Latour brought the idea of “non-human actors” as a basis for the Actor-Network Theory from literary science. Now is the time for this concept to return to where it once originated.

³Founded in 1926, the Prague Linguistic Circle was an association of linguists theoretically based on, and critically reflecting upon, Saussurean structuralism and Russian formalism.

communication varies and shifts between different reading publics and periods. Therefore, I contrast the aesthetic structure of the text with the evolving socio-historical background of its production and its reception in the sense of the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic dialogue between the literary work and its social milieu aims to grasp social knowledge mediated by literature in a comprehensive and historically situated way. When the interpretive potential is exhausted, the result is a contextually rich but also explanatorily powerful social knowledge about the inquired social phenomena as well as various ways these phenomena were codified, communicated, and understood.

A substantial part of the model is the discussion of the “iconic turn” in cultural sociology (Alexander 2015; Alexander et al. 2012; Bartmanski 2016) and its possible benefits when sociologically approaching the aesthetic dimensions of a literary text—that is, the aesthetic/iconic experience in the reading process. Thanks to “iconic augmentation” (Ricoeur 1976, p. 40) and “iconic condensation” (Bartmanski 2016, p. 542), literary fiction can capture sensuous and existential aspects of social life and posit them into a bigger picture of the whole societies. These subtle and hard-to-grasp yet relatively stable underlying social patterns have been sociologically elaborated as *Zeitgeist* (Krause 2019), mood (Flatley 2017), atmosphere (de la Fuente and Walsh 2021), texture (de la Fuente 2019), and Heideggerian *Stimmung* or “attunement” (Felski 2020, p. 75). We can access these patterns through a contextually rich interpretation of a literary text inside its meaningful surroundings—as in the sense of Geertzian thick description (Reed 2011, pp. 89–121; cf. Alexander and Smith 2003, p. 13). Such interpretation allows for understanding how literature both *captures* (iconic augmentation vis-à-vis the text’s production) and *communicates* (iconic experience of reading vis-à-vis the text’s reception) social knowledge that is iconic of a social milieu in a given time and place.

In empirical studies (Váňa 2020a, 2021), I employed my model by analyzing two selected Czech novels: *Bliss Was It in Bohemia* by Michal Viewegh (2015 [1992]) and *City, Sister, Silver* by Jáchym Topol (2000 [1994]). I focused on the iconic experience of reading as a key methodological feature to grasp the *ambivalence* of daily life during the period of late socialism in the 1970s and 1980s Czechoslovakia. I investigated how the novels mediate social knowledge of continuity and discontinuity of the revolutionary year 1989 through their aesthetic structure. Unlike the historical and social scientific analyses, both studied novels allowed for

capturing the people's experiences in the sense of "totality" as a meaningful whole introduced by Lucien Goldmann (1980): by means of a limited number of textual signs, the novel mediates social life as a meaningful whole through its form. By conjuring the iconic experience within the reader, the selected novels channel the dynamic interplay between various dis/continuities epitomized within routinized, inconsistent, and often contradictory daily practices. Mapping out the aesthetic structures of the novels, I could access the deeper understanding that is representative of social moods before and during the transformation of 1989. In this chapter, I introduce the theoretical and methodological cornerstones of my model. Moreover, making literature "stronger" in sociological analysis is of great service not only to the sociology of literature, but it can substantially enhance social theory⁴ per se. I discuss how literature theorizes, represents, and explains social phenomena to assert that literary texts, hitherto neglected by sociologists, are treasures of profound social knowledge waiting for a fitting interpretation to unlock them.

2 AESTHETIC/ICONIC EXPERIENCE AS A SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE

Proposing a cultural sociology of reading, María Angélica Thumala Olave (Chap. 2 in this volume) asserts that reading fiction is inherently social, even when practiced individually. Readers often value reading for its capacity to convey "imagination, empathy, knowledge of the world, understanding, joy, moral character, critical capacity, upward social mobility, stimulation, curiosity and support for 'the life of the mind'" (Thumala Olave, Chap. 6 in this volume). Through the aesthetic experience, reading connects cognitive and aesthetic to mediate emotions and understanding as two inseparable aspects. The reflection, understanding, and knowledge are not latently waiting in the text. They emerge as the reader "engages in active and creative exercise of the imagination" in order to "group together the various components of the text to form a consistent whole" (Thumala Olave, Chap. 2).

⁴The terms "social" and "sociological" theory are often used interchangeably. Here, I consider "sociological" theory as a subset of "social" theory, supposing that social theory relates to the social sciences in general. My position is different from Sanderson's (2005, p. 2f) suggestion that "sociological" theory is more concerned with understanding society while "social" theory with "criticizing and rebuilding."

Nevertheless, by “placing the experience and agency of readers at the center of the analysis,” Thumala Olave (Chap. 2) plays down *the active role of the text* that “enchants” the readers and allures them to read. Thumala Olave (Chap. 2) stresses three main areas of understanding: “self-understanding,” “ethical reflection and social bonds,” and “self-care,” all of which focus primarily on the reader. Reflecting upon the reader’s emotional, ethical, and social situations, the novels themselves are approached as mere resources passively waiting to be given meaning by their readers. However, it is the convergence of text and reader—and not just the reader—that brings literary meaning into existence. Rita Felski (2020, p. 65) talks about “the irresolvable ambiguities of agency: we make works of art even as they make us.” My intention is not to decide the balance of power between the reader and the text. Yet, all too often, sociologists claim positions through the authoritative voice of social science that privileges the social over the aesthetic. I strive to reinvigorate and employ the part of the aesthetic experience of reading that is on the textual side of literary communication. Then, we can fix the epistemological bias preventing us from properly understanding the emergence of literary meaning.

In this regard, Wolfgang Iser (1972, p. 284) speaks about the “sentence-thought” (*Satzdenken*) as a basic building unit of literary meaning. The sentence-thought operates as an ongoing interplay between the constantly changing “horizon of expectation” (Jauss 1982) and the dynamic set of language signs and their meaning perceived during reading. The text itself steers the reading by “a repertoire of familiar literary patterns and recurrent literary themes together with allusions to familiar social and historical context” as well as “strategies used to set the familiar against the unfamiliar” (Iser 1972, p. 293). Consequently, there is a perpetual “oscillation between consistency and ‘alien associations,’ between involvement” and distance (Iser 1972, p. 291) that incites the aesthetic experience of reading. Iser (1972, pp. 294–295) puts an example from *Ulysses* (Joyce 1992 [1922]) where the character Mr. Bloom holds a cigar simultaneously narrated as if it was a spear. By equating two usually unrelated entities, the narrative technique forces the reader to ask questions about the possible meanings of such a connection. The text, here, is an active agent in the meaning-making process.

It is impossible to fully describe and categorize literary meaning in scientific language, as there is always something beyond the language that can only be felt. Ricoeur (1976, pp. 45–46) speaks about the “surplus of meaning,” which points “beyond the linguistic sign” and opens up the

space for “semantic ambiguity.” This ambiguity, importantly, can refer to several meanings simultaneously without the necessity for the reader to choose among them. What occurs here is a split of reference into two parts, one of which can only be alluded to as it avoids description. Like in the case of Mr. Bloom’s cigar/spear introduced above, there is no rational way to decide the “true” meaning of the reference. As the readers try “to impose a consistent pattern on the text,” they might find out that meaning “cannot be formulated at all” (Iser 1972, p. 295). The most apparent case is a textual device of *ellipsis*, where the literary meaning is constructed by the omission of words. With ellipsis, the very condition of the meaning is the non-existence of its verbal signification. The surplus of meaning that exceeds the literal interpretation is not an unnecessary noise to be cut off by rigid analytical categories. Just the opposite, the surplus of meaning is the very center around which the literary understanding forms and circulates.

Cultural sociology deals with the aesthetic experience through the concept of iconicity, which marks an effort of the strong program “to connect the experience of cultural texts ... with structures of aesthetic sensibility” (Alexander 2015, p. 3). We can understand iconic experience as analogous to aesthetic experience, which brings literary understanding as an indivisible amalgam of cognitive and aesthetic aspects.⁵ Within the original conception of iconic experience, Alexander (2008a, b) conceives these parts as a dichotomy: As the reader approaches the *aesthetic surface*—words, sentences, and paragraphs combined in a certain style and artistic form—the text opens access to its *discursive depth*—condensed meaning encoded within the text that can be mediated only through the iconic experience. My research model, however, is not coherent with the arbitrariness of the sign based on Saussurean (2011 [1916]) structuralism. To make cultural meanings “autonomous,” the strong program asserts that “meanings are arbitrary and are generated from within the sign system” (Alexander and Smith 2003, pp. 23–24). In Alexander’s (2008a, p. 783) concept of iconicity, the “[p]ure sound is only a signified; its meaning is determined by internally organized signifiers, self-regulating relations of concepts”—that

⁵Whereas Iser (1972) refers to the “aesthetic experience” only in relation to the experience of reading, Alexander (2008b) understands “iconic experience” as a sensuous experience of any aesthetic surface.

is, the relation between a sensuous experience (e.g., a sound) as a signifier and cultural meaning signified by this experience is arbitrary.⁶

Interestingly, Alexander (2008a) connects in a single paragraph idea of Saussure and the chief critic of Saussure's dichotomies, linguist and literary theorist Roman Jakobson. On the one hand, Alexander (2008a, p. 783) contends that "Saussure rightly insisted that the sound of language, in itself, carries no meaning," on the other hand, he believes that "[t]he science that Jakobson called poetics concerns the internal sounds and rhythms of speaking and hearing, and how they affect the construal of meaning." However, Alexander's invocation of Jakobson is only partial. In fact, Jakobson dedicated a large portion of his scholarly endeavor to argue that the relation between phonemes and language signs is not arbitrary but "motivated" by "a factual similarity relation between *signans* and *signatum*" (Waugh 1980, p. 71). This similarity is iconic⁷ in the Peircean sense, that is, based on the experience of the signifier's sensuous quality (the aesthetic surface in Alexander's sense). Jakobson shows that people make decisions about the structure of their utterances based on their similar aesthetic qualities.⁸ On a famous example of the political slogan "I like Ike,"⁹ Jakobson (1960, p. 357) further demonstrates how aesthetic devices such as rhyme, paronomasia, and alliteration take part in the meaning-making. Although the slogan refers to a political campaign, the mediated meaning comes from the sound of the words themselves rather than the extra-textual references.

The case here is not to decide which part of the binary surface/depth (Alexander 2008a) is more significant for attributing the meaning but to dismiss the dichotomy in the first place. The text in literary fiction does

⁶For Alexander (2015, p. 5), the claim that "surface and depth combine arbitrarily" is of high political and ideological importance. "The conflation of surface and depth is ... dangerous" because iconicity "makes meaning seem natural" (Alexander 2015, p. 5), which makes ideological space for conservative and essentialist thinking.

⁷To be precise, Jakobson also introduced the so-called artifice, which stands for "imputed similarity" (Waugh 1980, p. 71): non-arbitrary connections between parallelisms, repetitions, and equivalencies, which are made "artificially"—typically in poetry.

⁸We say "horrible Harry"—and "not dreadful, terrible, frightful, disgusting"—because of the poetic device of paronomasia, that is, a grouping of words that sound similar but have different meanings (Jakobson 1960, p. 357).

⁹A well-known linguistic example comes from the 1951 political campaign of Dwight Eisenhower, playing a pun on his nickname. The success of using this linguistic principle was repeated in a 1992 popular commercial "Be Like Mike" featuring American basketball player Michael Jordan.

not merely represent the extra-textual world and its deeper symbolic logic. As Jessica Widner (Chap. 4 in this volume) proposes in her chapter on the bodily reading experience, the text and reader's body enter an intimate co-creative relationship. Within the iconic experience of reading, the "readers' fully-sensing body, their embodied subjectivity, engages in simultaneous processes of sensual, emotional, and intellectual mediation with the text" (Widner, Chap. 4 in this volume). Authors who write a piece of literary fiction have only a limited number of textual signs and aesthetic devices at their disposal to account for the unlimited stream of their lived experience. They necessarily employ what Ricoeur (1976, p. 40) terms an "iconic augmentation," that is, they use iconic condensation "to resist the entropic tendency of ordinary vision and to increase the meaning ... by capturing it in the network of its abbreviated signs." Jakobson (1960, pp. 368–370) shows this by applying the principle of "parallelism," which stands for entanglement of textual entities—words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, etc., up to the whole of the book—based on their phonetic and semantic attributes. The field of possible links among intra-, inter-, and extra-textual entities is hypothetically infinite yet by no means arbitrary. Literary texts enforce their agency through "iconic *affordances*" (Bartmanski 2016, p. 547) that direct the reader through the iconic experience of reading. In this regard, Binder (2018, pp. 404–405) brings forth Peirce's idea that "[i]cons 'excite' their interpretants via resemblance to their objects; and even the meaning of symbols is partially 'determined' by the objects to which they refer" (cf. Peirce 1998 [1908], p. 478).¹⁰ Even though following the Saussurean legacy has proven itself immensely fruitful when investigating "code, narrative, performance, and so forth" (Alexander and Smith 2010, p. 16), it falls short when it comes to acknowledging "concrete entanglements themselves, without reducing them to analytically distinct components" (Bartmanski 2016, p. 550).

¹⁰Binder (2018, p. 404) understands Peircean "interpretants" as the "act of articulation" that stands for an "idea produced in the mind" by the Saussurean signifier.

3 AESTHETIC STRUCTURE AS A METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Leaving the arbitrariness argument and Saussurean structuralism behind does not mean giving up an explanatorily powerful model. The structural aesthetics of Mukařovský (1971, 1978) serve as a mediating layer between the iconic experience of reading and its social surroundings. Unlike Saussure and the Russian Formalists who focused on ahistorical—synchronic—aspects of language, the Prague Linguistic Circle understands poetics as historically and socially situated. The structural analysis explores how particular aesthetic devices refer to the extra- and intra-textual entities involved in the iconic experience of reading (further see Skovajsa 2021, pp. 6–8). How can the aesthetic structure of a novel help us to access the social knowledge mediated by the iconic experience of reading?

When immersing readers, literary fiction ceases to be a mere codification of the author’s experience. Through iconic augmentation, the novel mediates social knowledge about various social, cultural, and aesthetic norms, moral and ethical paradigms but also conceptions of bodily perception, sexuality, etc. The text draws the reader into a cognitive and emotional dialogue with the socio-historical background of its creation and various socio-historical backgrounds of its reception (see the double arrow in Fig. 5.1). By enticing the reader, the aesthetic textual devices channel these backgrounds in iconic experience, thus becoming *iconic of social phenomena*. That is when reading the novel becomes “iconic in its grasp of an entire social order” (Nisbet 1962, p. 72).

The overall purpose of my model is to make explicit the implicit social knowledge mediated by the iconic experience of reading. Because we cannot access it directly through various readers’ reading experiences, we need to extrapolate the iconic social knowledge from the interaction between the text and its meaningful surroundings. Such a process requires two steps. First, the investigator conducts a formal analysis of the text focusing on the aesthetic devices and their role in conjuring the text’s meaning, as in Jakobson’s example in the previous section. Second, the investigator relates the meaning-making to the socio-historical backgrounds involved in the reading. This includes the socio-historical

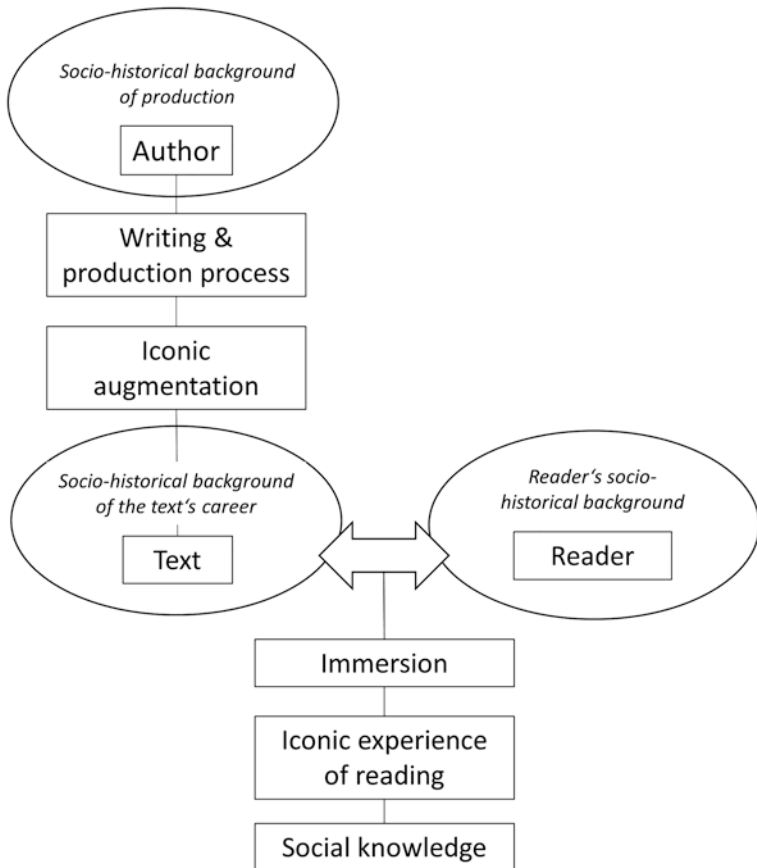


Fig. 5.1 Social knowledge mediated by the iconic experience of reading

background of the text’s production, the text’s career¹¹ outside of its production, and the socio-historical backgrounds of respective interpretive communities. The investigator further sensitizes this insight through the hermeneutic circle wherein the first and the second step repeatedly inform and navigate each other (cf. Harrington 2002, p. 56). We end up with a

¹¹Literary texts achieve an independent “career outside its original context of production” (Santana-Acuña 2014, p. 98). Tracing the text’s career adds an important diachronic aspect to the interpretation.

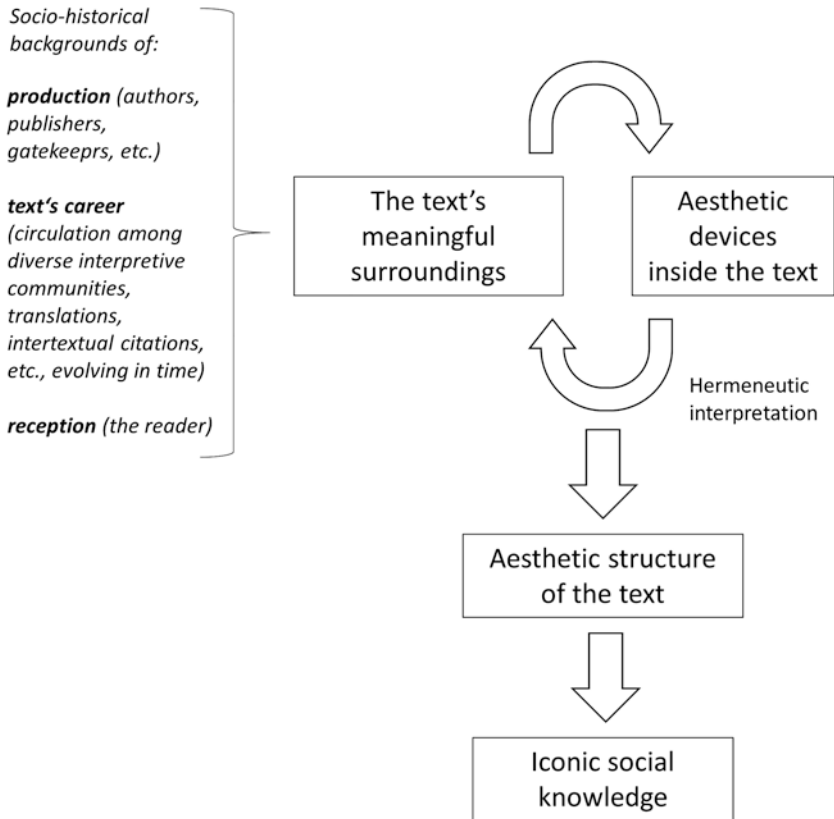


Fig. 5.2 The aesthetic structure of the text

tentative (never fully completed) description of dynamic meaning-making relations, that is, the aesthetic structure (see Fig. 5.2).

Here, it is instructive to recall the idea of explanation as interpretation (Reed 2011, pp. 123–162; cf. Ricoeur 1981, pp. 91–156). The model strives for a contextually rich interpretation that thickly describes various connections between the formal analysis of the text, its extra-textual referents—concrete socio-historical realities—and the ways they coalesce into complex, ambiguous, and often counterintuitive meanings. Such an analytical approach involves a “double reading” in the sense of Reed and Alexander (2009, p. 33). Mukařovský’s (1971) structural aesthetics

enables us to *read* how the readers potentially *read* the concerned texts. Through the aesthetic structure, we can simulate the iconic experience of reading and identify the iconic social knowledge without translating it into social scientific discourse.

In practical terms, I demonstrated (Váňa 2021) how sociologists can enter and facilitate a dialogue with a novel to acquire genuine social knowledge in the case of *Bliss Was It in Bohemia* (Viewegh 2015 [1992]). First, I outlined the aesthetic structure of the novel through my reading navigated by the public and scholarly discourse about the novel (literary critiques, radio debates, readers' comments, social media discussions, etc.) as well as an inquiry into the novel's production (interviews with the author and the publisher, biographical information, etc.). Second, I contrasted the aesthetic structure with its socio-historical background, which I accessed through the historical and social scientific accounts of the period of late socialism and transformation in Czechoslovakia. Thus, I identified two main characteristics of the novel's aesthetic structure: (1) focus on the ambivalence of daily life; and (2) formal experimentation combining realistic and linear narration with flashbacks, introspections, varying perspectives of the narrator, and most of all—alternating and mixing up various genres such as irony, drama, comedy, tragedy, and satire. Both features operate as aesthetic mediators through which the author's experience of normalization was encoded within the text in the form of iconic condensation and consequently invoked as an iconic experience of reading. Only thanks to these aesthetic mediators can the novel provide social knowledge that is iconic of the poetics of late socialism in Czechoslovakia. That is, the indeterminate, interactional, and emotional aspects of everyday social experience, which tend to fall through the filter of social scientific discourse.

4 THE SOCIOLOGICAL TRUTH OF FICTION: IMPLICATIONS AND PROSPECTS

4.1 *An Unexpected Journey Toward Establishing a New Alliance*

When I presented different stages of my model at various colloquiums and conferences, I noticed a repeating pattern in how sociologists reacted to the idea of an “autonomous social knowledge” mediated by literature. While there was always some skeptical frowning and suspicious

questioning during the presentation, the words of sympathy and support I received on coffee breaks struck me by their emotional engagement. I had a chance to witness countless times that sociologists love books. They are “hooked” (Felski 2020) and enchanted by them. Sociologists especially value fiction that is fun to read and, in one way or another, tackle sociological thinking. When Becker (2007, pp. 271–284) talks about Italo Calvino’s “urbanology,” Narayan (2012, p. 16) refers to Anton Chekhov as “ethnographic muse,” and Brinkmann (2009) praises Michel Houellebecq as “lyrical sociologist”; they, first of all, admire these authors’ ability to amuse them with their wit.

Sociologists often look at literary fiction with deep respect and admiration, sometimes even jealousy, emphasizing literature’s ability to tell the “larger truth” (Becker 2007, p. 247) of the social. Works of literature, Harrington (2004, p. 3) tells us, “can be enlightening in their fictivity; and they can tell a truth that is of a different order from the truth of correspondences-to-the-facts.” The major issue seems to be that we cannot easily measure the fictional “truth order” according to the criteria of social science, such as validity and reliability. When it comes to mediating social knowledge, the biggest strength of literature is also its biggest weakness: aesthetic devices employed in literary fiction allow for nuanced and far-reaching social analyses, but they also make it rather complicated to grasp these analyses with sociological language. Many sociologists somehow recognize or feel the power and usefulness of social knowledge mediated by literature yet have difficulty locating and approaching it sociologically.

My mistake in the initial phase of this project was that I tried to make my research more sociologically plausible by focusing on a large data sample and implementing standardized procedures such as coding. I thought that processing a large set of novels published in the last 30 years would open up something utterly revealing about the Czech post-communist society, something that no single book can tell. However, I soon found it difficult to group the codes according to shared categories. I often felt that imposing any classification on the texts significantly changed the meaning crucial for mediating literary social knowledge. In these early stages, I learned what Mukařovský (1982 [1925]) points out in his syntactic-semantic experimentations: how changing the form, for example, by substituting the words or changing the word order, drastically influences the meaning of the literary text. I realized that for grasping this meaning, I must be faithful to the novel’s aesthetic structure. Thus, from the original

plan of processing around a hundred novels, I ended up with two. I read them cautiously, paying attention to every little detail, continuously comparing the texts with their extra-textual surroundings (production, reception, and the text's career) as they evolved in time. Through the hermeneutic interpretation, I could trace how social knowledge comes into existence from the aesthetic experience of reading.

Perhaps not surprisingly, as I presented tentative versions of my model, social scientists often criticized me for *privileging* the text in the analysis, while literary scholars insisted I was *neglecting* the text in favor of its social surroundings. On the one hand, I held onto the aesthetic qualities of the novels, as they are essential for mediating social knowledge within the iconic experience of reading. On the other hand, I did not want to lock myself inside the text. My goal was to relate literary texts to particular socio-historical milieus in order to learn about their "deeper generative principles" in the sense of Alexander's and Smith's (2003, p. 11) paraphrase of Claude Lévi-Strauss' (1974) famous analogy between the study of culture and the study of geology. Literature excels in accounting for more stable social patterns while not losing sight of the minutiae of everyday life that constitute these patterns. It is necessary that *Bliss Was It in Bohemia* immerses readers into the kitchen talks between the main character's parents. Through these dynamic micro-situations, the readers can understand the irresolvable tensions of daily negotiation with the Czechoslovak communist regime. At the same time, social knowledge mediated via the iconic experience of reading makes only sense against the backdrop of a concrete historical situation: vis-à-vis conditions of production, interpretive communities, literary gatekeepers, and the text's career. The task is to make the literary social knowledge explicit and thus usable by sociology while "believing that [the text] has something important to say and working to draw out as fully as possible [its] key messages and contributions" (Jacobs 2019: 260). In contrast to the dominant paradigms in sociological studies of literature, a strong program in the sociology of literature discards the uneven relationship between the social and the literary and advances the idea of producing social knowledge in their mutual codependency.

4.2 *Autonomy and Agency: Let Literature Speak for Itself*

The imperative of "letting literature speak for itself" is not a mere provocation aiming to cause a stir in sociological circles. It stands for crucial

epistemological and methodological premises, based on which a strong program in the sociology of literature can benefit from social knowledge mediated by literary fiction without turning it into a passive object of inquiry. Like the cultural sociology of reading, I build on a meaning-centered approach sensitive to the affective aspects of reading. I endorse the threefold iconicity of books as (1) material objects, (2) emotional and cognitive collective representations, and (3) sources of aesthetic immersion (Thumala Olave, Chap. 6 in this volume). I concur with the idea that the “[a]esthetic immersion is a dual process of subjectification and objectification” wherein readers alternate between “making [the books’] content and surface their own” and “los[ing] themselves in the object as they read it and when they submit to its formal and physical properties” (Thumala Olave, Chap. 6). This is how, I believe, literary works mediate social knowledge that is subjectively felt and at the same time iconic of broader social phenomena.

However, there is an inconsistency between the assertion that the cultural sociology of reading “takes seriously both the textual object and the reader’s experience” (Thumala Olave, Chap. 6) and the general “idea that the agency of the reader should be at the centre” (Thumala Olave, Chap. 2) of the analysis. The “dynamic coming together of the text and the reader’s imagination” (Thumala Olave, Chap. 2), or, as Iser says, the “sentence-thought” (1972, p. 284), is initiated and maintained by the reader in the sense of actual physical force used to open the book, focus the eyes, and turn the pages. When forming the literary meaning, the active role of readers is often stressed by the use of active verbal tenses: readers “enter” the narrative, “draw the book into the self,” and “lose themselves in the object” (Thumala Olave, Chap. 6). The book, on the other hand, is depicted as passively waiting, “offer[ing] the promise of future delights” (Thumala Olave, Chap. 6) that readers may or may not use as they will. Notably, when readers are not strictly active in the interaction, the description switches into the passive verb form, for example, the readers are “aesthetically immersed” (Thumala Olave, Chap. 6) and then “called to group together the various components of the text to form a consistent whole” (Thumala Olave, Chap. 2). As a result, they “are moved, repelled, bored or changed” (Thumala Olave 2021). My, perhaps a bit counterintuitive, conception of reading strives to understand precisely this “black-boxed” part of literary communication. I want to show that the agency does not emanate from any external, mysterious power that allures and motivates readers to do things. Rather, the agency stems from the

aesthetic structure of the text and its iconic properties, which are different from the iconic properties of the book as a material object.

In what sense are literary works autonomous? According to the strong program in cultural sociology, we should research cultural meanings as analytically autonomous because they have a tangible impact on social life. Cultural sociological texts typically attribute cultural meaning with the power to “shape social life,” “influence,” “make a difference” (Alexander and Smith 2003), or “channel the course of future actions and events” (Alexander and Smith 2010, p. 19). Because they have effects, cultural meanings are conceptualized as forces and causes of some sort (cf. Reed 2011, pp. 123–162). In the same direction of thinking, Rita Felski suggests that “in one sense, fictional characters are real [because] they have effects in the world; (...) their existence makes a difference” (2020, p. 85). It is the text that captivates, enchants, immerses, and calls readers to participate in the reading—or makes them close the book in frustration and reach for a different one. By limiting literary affordances to aesthetic surfaces in the literal meaning of the word “surface,” that is, material aspects of a bound copy or an e-book reader, we cannot understand the emergence of literary meaning within the iconic experience of reading. Even excellent recent studies such as Clayton Childress’ *Under the Cover* (2017) only prove that current sociological research predominantly explains literature through anything but the literary text itself. Instead, I suggest studying literary texts as analytically autonomous because they make us do things in a way that is unforeseeable by literary producers and unexpected by readers.

Still, in terms of methodology, it is the investigator-reader who testifies about the literary social knowledge through hermeneutic interpretation and subsequent textual codification in an academic paper or a book chapter. In the sense of Latour (1987, p. 71), the investigator behaves as a “spokesperson” of a literary piece. On the one hand, there is a hard-to-grasp bundle of ambivalent, open-ended, and non-discursive literary meanings. On the other hand, the investigator must follow social scientific conventions to share the knowledge with others. As the spokesperson of literature, the investigator necessarily bridges two meaning systems. This bridging, nevertheless, is different from translation, as it does not convert the meaning from one discourse to the other. That would mean losing the part of literary social knowledge, which is ungraspable by—and therefore most precious for—sociology. The conversion would lose track of that part of communication through which literature can channel the whole

spectrum of non-discursive, emotional, and experiential aspects of social knowledge in the form of a meaningful totality. Instead, we can give the text a voice to witness how the literary meaning emerges by itself. To let literature speak for itself is to understand the cultural meaning of fictional texts as it comes to existence in the aesthetic/iconic experience of reading. Proposing the principle of symmetry to sociological studies of literature, I invite sociologists to make justice to the relationship that has been thrown off balance for a long time.

The reference to literature “speaking” to its readers has another epistemologically valuable dimension. Hartmut Rosa develops his concept of “resonance” to account for phenomena taking place in the “inter-space” between humans and entities of their world lives (Rosa and Schiermer 2020, p. 5).¹² Coming from the phenomenological side of people’s relationship to the world, Rosa (2020, p. 48) elaborates on “subtle experiential difference between the statements ‘This mountain has something to say to me’ and ‘This mountain speaks to me.’” When people talk about meaningful engagement with a literary text, they say that particular text “speaks” or “appeals” to them. This engagement, this resonance, “implies something like experiencing an independent (counter)force that resists any form of ‘mechanical’ control” (Rosa 2020, p. 49). Losing ourselves in the text, getting into the flow, feeling immersed—that is when the text takes control over us, directs us with its voice, and transforms us in an unexpected and unpredictable way. In order for resonance to occur, there must happen “an encounter between two independent, autonomous voices” (Rosa 2020, p. 82). Here, Rosa refers to “autonomy as emancipation,” which “means that subjects need to be able to discern and develop their own voices” (Rosa and Schiermer 2020, p. 6). In other words, the reader must experience literary work as an autonomous voice so that the aesthetic experience can develop and resonate. Alexander (2020) elaborates on a similar idea in his recent work on the performativity of objects. “If an object doesn’t speak to them, doesn’t resonate with them, doesn’t ‘catch’ them, an audience is unmoved; iconic performance has failed to fuse, and the audience turns away” (Alexander 2020, p. 397). The aesthetic structure of the text “profoundly affects the possibilities for audience fusion” (Alexander 2020, p. 397), which is a key for mediating the iconic social knowledge between the reader and the text.

¹²I am thankful for this idea to Eduardo de la Fuente.

In this fashion, we can understand the imperative of letting literature speak for itself as a heuristic tool. The reader-investigator is inevitably the spokesperson of the text. Therefore, the necessary step in the analysis is to establish the symmetry by recognizing the autonomy of the text alongside the already implicit autonomy of the reader. Rosa (2020, pp. 45–46) further asserts that the “*expertise* is certainly not the enemy of resonance” as they employ their “skills in order to make [the text] speak in a way, in order to enter into an ever deeper dialogue with it so that both [the investigator] and [the text] always have something new to say to each other.” Importantly, the resonance-invoking dialogue is “an entirely different form or use of expertise from that of someone who aims” to “master” the piece and make it “controllable” (Rosa 2020, p. 46). On the contrary, it is the uncontrollable, hard-to-grasp quality of social life that literature mediates via the aesthetic experience of reading. By trying to master it, to fixate it by sociological discourse, we deprive literature of its power “to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged” (Greenblatt 1990, p. 19). The investigator should play the role of literary facilitator, rather than the translator, to facilitate the dialogue between two different genres, orders of verisimilitude, or “orders of truth” as Harrington (2004, p. 3) might say.

4.3 *Literature as General Social Theory*

The chief motivation for establishing the strong program in the sociology of literature is to rehabilitate literary fiction in sociological analysis. Following this emancipatory purpose has, however, three significant, and perhaps even more critical, implications for cultural sociology and social theory in general. The first deals with *theorizing* as a fundamental activity of any sociological inquiry, the second relates to the textual *representation* of social phenomena, and the third concerns *explanation* as a process of achieving social knowledge. I suggest that to unlock the wealth of social knowledge in literature, a literary turn—and more broadly an aesthetic turn—in cultural sociology must reconsider these three fundamentals.

First, the idea of using the aesthetic experience as a basic analytical unit in social theory is far from new. Most famously among sociological classics, it is usually attributed to Georg Simmel (1968 [1896]) and his “Soziologische Aesthetik,” which “heralds an approach to the social that is attentive to the felt experience of social actors” (Highmore 2012,

p. 157). In the last decade, this orientation has been most visibly adopted by the approaches converging under the umbrella of a “social aesthetics” (Born et al. 2017; Highmore 2012; Martin 2011; Martin and Merriman 2016) but also as a basis for “a post-Bourdieuian theory of cultural production” (Born 2010) or even for an “aesthetic conception of culture” *per se* (Jacobs and Hanrahan 2005, pp. 10–12).¹³ These approaches share with Simmel’s original conception the ambition to redeem the aesthetic from a “narrowly defined sociology of Culture” focusing on cultural products (Martin and Merriman 2016, p. 132) and “extend aesthetic categories to forms of society as a whole” (Simmel 1968 [1896], p. 74, cited in Highmore 2012, p. 157).

Here, the phenomenological imperative of grounding social aesthetics within the actors’ everyday experience follows the post-positivist idiom of social theorizing (i.e., creating and using social theories) as a general human ability to make sense of the world. Social theories created by sociologists, like non-scholarly ones, are heterogeneous assemblages of empirical observations, feelings, correlations, and generalizations grounded in broader cultural patterns, social conventions, institutional rules, etc. Social theory is more or less useful based on its ability to enhance understanding of social phenomena so it simultaneously “makes sense” to a respective interpretive community (Reed 2011, p. 115; Martin 2011, p. 13). That said, it does not make much sense to measure the usefulness of social theory encoded in literary fiction by the criteria of social scientific texts, as they follow norms bound to different genres.¹⁴ Just like sociological text, “[f]iction is the selective ordering of experience rendered in a unique story” (Banks 2008, p. 160). However, to understand literary fiction properly, we need to find an interpretation key appropriate to its genre specificity.

Second, to decode the implicit social theory in literature, we must understand how it transforms the social experience into a text. The complexities of social aesthetics always appear as a unity to those who

¹³I owe a great deal of gratitude to the anonymous reviewers of my manuscript for their suggestion to discuss social aesthetics, which I find immensely fruitful in comparison to my approach and to Reed’s (2011, p. 10) notion of “interpretive epistemic mode.”

¹⁴Literary criteria, through which particular texts reach their verisimilitude, can be expressed by the dynamic “aesthetic norm” (Mukařovský 1970 [1936]). Unlike the scientific criteria, the aesthetic norm is rather implicitly defined by the whole aggregate of relations between literary texts, reviews, critical essays, and literary actors such as authors, agents, publishers, translators, and readers.

experience them (Martin and Merriman 2016, pp. 136–137). Thus, the textual accounts of this aesthetic experience that strive for “phenomenological validity” (Martin 2011, p. 105) must encode the complexity and subtlety as well as unity and generality. Both sociology and literature developed various strategies for doing this. While, for example, realistic fiction and ethnography proceed through thick descriptions, more lyrically oriented texts adopt the way of metaphors and stylistic impressions. Many literary and sociological texts have in common their ambition to grasp what Highmore (2012, p. 158) calls “moods and modes of modernity.” That is why Goldmann (1980) adopted and de-ontologized György Lukács’ term “totality” referring to the spirit of an epoch (or *Zeitgeist*) as a meaningful whole mediated by literary texts. The principle is analogous to the process of “bracketing-out” suggested by Alexander and Smith (2003, p. 56n55) in their strong program manifesto: “[T]he ontological reality of perceived objects is temporarily repressed in order to search for those subjective elements in the actor’s intentionality that establish the sense of verisimilitude.” Usually, both in sociology and in literature, it is the skillful combination of thick descriptions and use of “brackets” that creates compelling social knowledge such as in *The Man Without Qualities* by Robert Musil (Harrington 2002), Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* (Smith 2004), Clifford Geertz’s (1973) “Deep Play,” or, returning to social aesthetics, Georgina Born’s (2010) sophisticated approach to music production. Even though literature often employs fictional worlds or intentionally disrupts our sense of reality, as a referential system it relates to intersubjectively shared lifeworlds in the same way as the social sciences. The strong program in the sociology of literature offers tools to make this reference more visible, so sociologists can once and for all abandon the false hierarchy between “real” and “fictional” and treat social theory in literature with due respect.

Third, and perhaps most intriguing when it comes to the aesthetic experience and lyrical/aesthetic style of writing, is the problem of explanation. In social theorizing, there is no mere *representation* of reality, but it is always its *re-representation*—“re-writing of reality” (Ricoeur 1976, p. 42), which connects the text with a concrete socio-historical milieu while at the same time re-arranging it, re-naming it, adding something new to it.¹⁵ Social aesthetics proposes to base the verisimilitude of such

¹⁵See also Felski’s (2008, p. 85) conception of literary mimesis as a “re-description,” “a chain of interpretive processes rather than ... an imitation.”

re-presentations on the coherence with the sensory experience of the social phenomena (“phenomenological validity,” Martin 2011, p. 105) rather than the intellectual authority granted by scientific institutions and standardized procedures. For social aesthetics, an interpretation can become an explanation if it informs us beyond the interpreted case (typically answering the “why” question) while remaining “in the same phenomenological world as the actions ... explain[ed]” (Martin 2011, p. 336).¹⁶

The idea of explanation as finding “regularity ... in the realm of the concrete” (Martin 2011, p. 344) is coherent with Isaac Reed’s (2011, pp. 123–162) conception of explanation via interpreting the meaningful surroundings of the inquired social fact as a general principle for interpretive sociology. Both approaches, however, understate the active role of the text as the paramount mediator of the explanation. In this chapter, I focused on the emergence of social knowledge when the text immerses the reader in the reading process. By iconic augmentation, the authors encode within the text not only their own experience but also more stable patterns through which the social experience is filtered both cognitively and emotionally.¹⁷ These patterns are then enlivened again once the text absorbs the reader in the iconic experience of reading. Thanks to iconic augmentation, aesthetically oriented texts (regardless of the genre) excel in channeling those patterns of social life that are “affective” rather than “effective” (Watson 2016, p. 437)—tacit experiences rather than rational abstractions, sensual attunement rather than clear-cut concepts. Ashleigh Watson (2016, p. 437) introduced “sympraxis” as a semiotic concept wherein “the mimetic side of signs” is complemented by “energetic, emotive, involving, and creatively engaged.” And this is exactly when the lyrical comes into play.

The lyrical sociology proposed by Andrew Abbott (2007, pp. 82–96) uses the “lyrical stance” to account for the phenomenological situatedness of social actors in time, space, and their “emotional engagement” with the

¹⁶The phenomenological validity simply means that the investigator does not strive to contradict or overcome people’s experiences but rather makes the explanation coherent with them. As Martin (2011, p. 336) puts it, “the actors [should be able to], with dialogue, understand the referent of every term in our explanation.”

¹⁷Referring to iconicity, Ricoeur (1976, p. 40) shows that the artistic practice does not seek to merely reduplicate the reality as its “less real” copy. Just the opposite: through the aesthetic expression, the segment of reality is transformed into a message (a painting, a novel, a sculpture) that exceeds this particular segment. The iconic augmentation allows for communicating more by presenting less.

world, thus fulfilling the criteria of explanation in social aesthetics (see “first-person explanations” in Martin 2011, p. 23).¹⁸ Simultaneously, lyrical sociology mediates such account through figurative language that is both emotionally engaged in the indexical present and engaging for the reader. The goal, then, is to capture the social experience so that it does not lose its indexical emotional spin even when textually codified and eventually read. “Re-presenting” social experience through lyrical style can mediate the sympractic, inarticulate, and non-discursive dimensions of social life in a condensed and patterned way, along the lines of what Raymond Williams (1977, pp. 128–135) called a “structure of feeling.” The lyrical mediation is possible because the act of reading itself becomes an “experiential signifier” (Bartmanski 2016, p. 546), which arouses a specific mode of meaning-making and ignites the iconic social knowledge.

Since the foundation of sociology, social theories have used metaphors and figurative style to account for discrepancies, ambiguities, and an ever-going flux that are iconic of social life. Weber’s “shell as hard as steel,” Marx’s “womb of the old society” or master metaphors “in which society ‘itself’ is imagined ‘as’ something: organism, cybernetic or autopoietic system, drama, game, text” (Turner 2010, pp. 2–3) did not become famous despite employing an aesthetic style but rather because of that. When encountering the aesthetic in literature, however, sociologists often shy away from the fear of “mysterious” and “sacred” poetic forms. This “syndrome of lyrical exceptionalism” (Váña 2020c, p. 31) usually results in the ignorance of literary meaning in favor of studying production and reception or translating the aesthetic into neat sociological categories. My suggestion is that through reconsidering how both literary and social scientific texts (1) theorize, (2) represent, and (3) explain social life, we can more accurately trace out the fruitful social knowledge mediated by these texts.

We can consider Abbott’s argument for lyrical sociology the other way around: Why should we invent new sophisticated metaphors and lyrical sociological accounts when we have, in fact, an abundance of lyrical texts at our disposal, but we ignore or misuse them? As I showed in the empirical analysis of the novel *Bliss Was It in Bohemia*, mobilizing literature for social knowledge is especially useful when it comes to grasping the “gray

¹⁸The explanation should stem from the concrete first-person perspectives so that our systematized sense of the whole (the explanation) is coherent with those perspectives. The general is explained through the particular, not vice versa.

zone” of social experience. The great strength of literature is capturing uncertainty, ambivalence, and indeterminacy through detailed descriptions alternating with omissions, double entendres, and innuendos, which are iconic of broader socio-historical frames. For example, *Bliss Was It in Bohemia* depicts the semiotics of social life during normalization through daily small talks and random encounters. Having archetypal features of a “common Czech family,” the characters go through situations that are unique and generally identifiable at the same time. The upcoming challenge for the strong program in the sociology of literature is to further elaborate on the methodological intricacies of the relation between the literary form/aesthetic structure of a particular text and the various social milieus to which it refers and within which this text was produced and received.

In a recent article, Alexander (2019, p. 43) points out that “in the last half century American social science has moved away from a humanistic orientation towards a self-conscious association with natural scientific goals and methods,” which resulted in “an enormous gap between the social sciences and humanities.” Wolfgang Iser (1988) claims that social science abandoned the humanistic way in the nineteenth century to distinguish itself from literary fiction, with which it hitherto shared a similar endeavor. By mimicking natural science, social science hoped to earn legitimacy among other sciences. Literature, on the other hand, was banished to the realm supposedly conquered by feelings and fantasy, rendering accounts of social life that are equivocal and ambiguous rather than clear-cut and well-arranged. This uneven division prevails in the current social scientific treatments of literature. Clueless in front of the aesthetic richness and interpretive openness, social science way too often turns literature’s highest qualities into deadwood. I pursue Alexander’s (2019, p. 43) concern with “the blindness of scientists to the humanities” in the original sense of C. P. Snow (2012 [1964], p. 9), who refers to the humanities as “literary culture.” I believe that a strong program in the sociology of literature can contribute to a more general collective enterprise “against the great divide” (Alexander 2019, p. 50) for the sake of more attentive but also robust social sciences.

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