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“You Cannot Transform the History of Ideas
Into a Comic Strip”:
An Interview with Marc Angenot

I spoke with Marc Angenot during a visit he made to the University of Western Ontario, Canada, in 2001. The interview lasted almost two hours, and has been edited for clarity.

—Robert Barsky

Robert Barsky: Your work has not been engaged by the community of literary and historical scholars in the United States. There have been the usual intellectual fads, and concomitant intellectual roadblocks along the way, but for some reason your work, your approach, hasn't quite entered the debate. Why is this?

Marc Angenot: There have been a number of ongoing fads for continental French-speaking thinkers, philosophers, and theoreticians, but to a certain degree all these fads seem worn out, or are vanishing away. I don't mind much. It's very hard to find out how and when and why in a given intellectual milieu some kind of thinking or paradigm becomes fashionable or suddenly looks interesting to a group of people. We must assume that the component of misunderstanding is usually much more important than the actual relevance of what is being understood. When there are different sets of expectations, different issues, and different stakes, there is clearly a better chance for one to be misunderstood. So I really don't mind much. I'm not too interested in creative misunderstandings.

RB: Is one of the obstacles to understanding the overall corpus of your work the fact that you are primarily a historian who teaches in a literature department? Or does the problem extend elsewhere, since your work in history is deeply informed by discourse analysis and discourse theory? One way or the other, your work doesn't fit easily into any of the traditional disciplines as the university defines them.

MA: I am only one of many. Most of my work has dealt with French, or at least continental, material, so it may not look as relevant as all-encompassing global theories. But there is nothing unusual in this; most of the time, people who become known are either senile or already dead. In the French-speaking realm, the most important

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thoughts of the twentieth century were actually digested, and became widespread, twenty to forty years after the death of their author. The process takes a long time, despite the myth one encounters in the media, that there exists an instantaneous diffusion of ideas. Normally it would take forty to fifty years. Let's work out a theory: If one's thinking is easily understood it's because it is just a variant of what everybody expects; it is not very significant or original, but swallowable, palatable. In that case, you stand a chance of being acclaimed without much resistance. But if there is something that is unavoidably a bit difficult and only relevant for people who have already made an effort to think in this framework, then it is perfectly reasonable to expect that it will take at least one generation for it to be understood by the people who need it, who are able to do something with it.

RB: Does what you've just said correspond to your approach to socio-criticism, where you talk about literature "coming afterwards," speaking after other discourses have had their say? In the article that follows this interview, you distinguish between literary texts that speak to contemporary concerns in familiar ways and those which are more challenging, less familiar. According to your conception, the latter type has a greater chance of enduring. Is that a possible corollary?

MA: Yes. Either a given thought that looks revolutionary or original is, in fact, made out of recycled or worn-out paradigms, so it works easily in the short term and then just fades away, or what you are doing relates to a specific community of scholars and is invested with a certain effort. In the latter case, it will take fifteen to twenty years for a small group of people to see what you are doing. I'm not even expecting that. There is an existential angle to the suggestion that there is some kind of pleasure to be expected from being an acclaimed intellectual. The way intellectuals work does not normally operate this way. Individuals have their own fair share of vanity. But we all know where life is leading us. That's not the issue. I seldom meet anyone I respect who, like a politician, works in order to gain popular acclaim. It's not that they would dislike it, but dealing with intellectual issues is quite a different endeavor. It entails loneliness, certainly, and not popularity. That's the way it is. Since we do this kind of work while being more or less protected from police inquiries, and getting a paycheck every fortnight, we can say we are just operating according to our role in society. That's the way it should be.

RB: The other obstacle to understanding your work is the sheer ambition of the intellectual task you pursue. There are very few theorists who have attempted to talk about all domains of discursive work, as you have in your inquiries about "grand narratives," or in your work on the year 1889, and there are very few historians who are willing to

engage the theoretical or philosophical issues that are so central to your perspective. That kind of ambition is challenging not only for you, but for those people who wish to study in your framework. Your social discourse theory, for example, places a huge burden of responsibility upon us, demanding nothing less than our engaging the whole social discourse paradigm prior to studying the discursive action that happens within it. This work is monumental. I wonder how that plays both in your work and in its reception.

MA: You start in life with a set of unanswered questions. And in a naive way, you expect that at some given moment you will find the right answers. But of course, it is an endless process. The generation of people who started university in the sixties began with a great number of relatively new and unanswered questions about culture, ideologies, aesthetic value, the interface between societal values and aesthetic ones, and so on. We experimented with different paradigms. I tried not to disregard this set of issues in favor of comfortable answers. With my social discourse theory I tried to explore the basic contentions about ideology. For instance, how does a society try to produce values? And for what kind of so-called interests? It took me ten years to write four or five books on the social discourse of 1889 in France. What I'm doing right now is another way of asking myself the same set of questions in response to the same set of problems. It's not in my temperament to become a specialist in any given theoretical paradigm.

My work on social discourse led me to try to understand what modernity was all about. What is central to modernity is a new way of dealing with evil. That's what I'm working with now, new ways of dealing with evil as determined by so-called "wrong" social organizations. You find an axiomatics of social evil, replace it with its contrary, and work out a brave new world based on different axiomatics. But it is just a different axiomatic. I'm dealing with evil and its cures. We live in a society where we know that evil still exists, but we are not sure there is a cure for it. It's either back to the premodern metaphysical stance about human nature, or not. An epistemology from the starting point is the unknowable, the idea that the world is just a scandal. Not in the eyes of the rightful, like in the religions, where you can overcome the scandals of the world. There is a hidden providence that takes care of the basic scandal, which is the success of the wicked and the misery of the righteous. I don't believe we think in order to make the world we are supposed to study clearer and more consistent; we think in order to hide in the basic scandal of the empirical world and our inability to tackle it. I am in the midst of changing my approach. That's true. Whatever I have done at any given stage of my intellectual career has opened up onto a new set of issues that seem to demand an overall reworking of my questioning.

RB: Is there not some strong consistency, even despite this evolution? The questions you posed early in your career, about the relationship between the center and the margins, the utterance and the entirety, seem to lead to the questions you are posing now, and there is, in my opinion, a red thread that runs from studies of paraliterature and science fiction through social discourse theory and the grand narratives.

MA: That is not for me to answer. I don't have the right angle to see myself as both subject and object. You don't have to start at the age of twenty with a general program you end up implementing before retirement. If consistency implies that you did not give up at a certain moment, saying "this is too complicated," or "I cannot solve this," then my work is consistent. The usual reproach made in intellectual polemics about scholars such as Michel Foucault is that his work is inconsistent because it is clear from one book to another that not only his object of analysis, but his basic heuristic tools changed dramatically. This is a very superficial kind of objection. That's why my scandal hypothesis seems to work, because it suggests that, even with changes in approach, scholars are still hindered by the same blind spot. One's thinking tends to focus on a blind spot, not on some dawn of certitude that emanates from the work out into the world.

RB: I have taught your approach to discourse and history on a number of occasions, and find that students are excited by your interest in left wing movements, your assessment of what literature undertakes to accomplish, and by the general discourse theory you propose. They also tend to perceive a link between the different projects, suggesting that they can learn something about how one should act in the world, even though most of your analysis specifically renounces the idea of applying a particular paradigm to solving the problems of the world.

MA: Younger intellectuals in the 1960s started with certainties that have vanished in the current generation. They have been replaced by a general disorientation, an inability to conserve certainties as solid bases for criticizing society. There is a certain degree of disenchantment in the current context. But one can do something with disenchantment, which is to become truly critical, to renounce the idea that virtuous faithfulness is the right starting point for examining an occasionally unbearable world. It is true that most of the scholars who were young in the sixties, and who are now my age, started with some kind of personal tinkering that aimed at deconstructing the orthodox Marxist or leftist set of certainties. When I was a student of romance languages in the early sixties, we were all just starting to learn about these people who have now become so familiar, beginning with Ferdinand de Saussure, and then, a few years later, Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss, Bakhtin, Weber, Simmel, and then the whole classical tradition, sup-

plemented by the range of new social science theorists. We could have worked out some kind of eclectic, superficial paradigm with this hodgepodge of methodologies; on the other hand, if you took seriously what these people were dealing with, you had the whole twentieth century jumping into your face. In light of this, the great temptation of my generation was clearly towards eclecticism, the idea of piling up without reworking. Today, because things have become less clear and more complicated, we are probably better positioned to look at the perverted effects of virtuous civic assumptions, in part because we are not as naive as we used to be. It has always been easy for people to believe that it is more virtuous to be in favor of the miserable than the omnipotent, rich, wicked people of this world. You can feel that your basic virtuous assumptions shield you from having to criticize your own position. But issues have become extremely complicated at the end of this century, and if they are going to be dealt with in a serious, responsible, perspicacious, insightful way, they can no longer be addressed through easy and simplistic values.

RB: But how are we to gain this level of awareness? People are born without knowledge of their social discourse, they're simply surrounded by it and immersed in all of its categories, opinions, values, and prejudices. In order to understand a prevailing social discourse, they must come to recognize its existence and then grapple with its peculiar characteristics. What does this entail?

MA: What one needs, what one has always needed, and what we expect from modern human beings, is suspicion. We are being immersed in a given state of social discourse, with its axiologies, values, and paradigms, and whatever else we can intuitively try to locate therein. It is not enough to accept this position as natural and work within it, like splashing around in a lukewarm bath. What you have to say is, like in *Porgy and Bess*, "it ain't necessarily so." What does that mean? It's easy enough to say "it ain't necessarily so" when you're dealing with other people, other proofs, and other places. But it's certainly more demanding, and more urgent, to try to see your own society as extremely queer and bizarre.

RB: It's interesting to hear you say that, because this is one of Noam Chomsky's credos. It's not that there are strong overlaps between your work and his, but one of the things he says in his discussion of the political world is that it's a lot easier to talk about the "other" (especially the official enemy) than it is to talk about one's own society. The work involved with getting to know oneself or, in this case, the context one takes as the norm, is not only daunting, but intrinsically unsettling.

MA: In any kind of research, you don't start with your conclusions in hand, but with something that looks surprising. All the major thinkers

of this century started with something that looked absolutely banal and familiar to ordinary people but was extremely surprising to them, to the point where they were ready to spend thirty or forty years of their lives trying to make sense of it. For me, culture and cultural values are extremely strange, but saying that they are arbitrary doesn't amount to much, and neither does the bombastic attitude of saying that we can easily disentangle ourselves from cultural arbitrariness. All these catch words about cultural relativity do not answer the question. Perhaps that's a good example of something that prevents us from doing critical work. You cannot look at the world and say, "Okay, we know what cultural relativity is, we know that its values are arbitrary and that they change historically, thereby concealing the interests of the dominant groups in society." That is bullshit. It's not an answer, it's just provisional labeling in order to start asking other questions, which will be potentially much more insightful, much more demanding.

RB: In a sense, you are proposing a theory of suspicion, an approach to seeing the world through new eyes. But how do you teach a theory of strangeness? How do you teach people to look at the world and think of it as strange?

MA: According to my own assumptions, I am a product of a number of objective possibilities that exist at this moment in our civilization. In the last thirty years, we have been provided with an extensive number of heuristic tools from the likes of Bakhtin, Lévi-Strauss, Jakobson, Propp, the narratologists, the linguists, the sociologists, and so on. They provided us with a gigantic workload, but they also provided us with tools that, although valuable, were not suited for all circumstances or all issues. Today, a young intellectual working in socio-historical cultural studies has at his or her disposal many more tools than we had even one or two generations ago. What we have to do at any given moment is use the tools that have been made available, but not just for their respective formal purposes. For instance, what we need now is a new, strong, and dynamic problematology, a new set of heuristic questionings. We are faced as well with something that is much more important: the twentieth century itself. It unfolded with its tragedies, dramas, and catastrophes and it has been a scandal from the 1900s on. I suppose there is, at the end of this century, an ethical predicament that comes from having the tools for asking the right questions. We are asking a great number of questions, and some might not be the right ones. Over the last thirty years there has been a great temptation, especially in literary studies, to veil one's face, not to look at the complexities of the ethical world, but instead to make sense of narratological gimmicks and post-modernistic texts. I don't want to let these tools go rotten in my workshop; I want to do something with them.

RB: Does literature play a special role in all of this? What is literary knowledge? Does it teach us the problematological approach because it is by nature something that poses unusual or strange questions?

MA: Literature does occasionally play a special role, but I'm interested in something else that I'm not sure I want to name or label, something that is neither literature nor actual cultural civilization. I'm studying the strangeness of symbolic inventiveness during the last two centuries, trying to understand things whose location is not necessarily found in what we call literature. It may be music, it may be comic strips, it may be political propaganda. I know what I'm looking at, but I'm not sure it's something that can be found in one specific cultural field. It is not inventiveness in the sense of creativity, which looks like some kind of psychological phenomenon. Literature as such, as an established institution, does not necessarily provide what I'm looking for. At given moments, the most promising and creative ideas came from places other than literature. In the Romantic period in France, you would not find inventiveness by reading Lamartine. You have to go to other cellars and attics, you have to explore the modern city rather than the literary salon. You go to a city where you are a foreigner and you ask yourself, where should I go? Under what roof is there something that will be truly astonishing?

RB: The roof you describe is not only a physical place, like a bar or a café, but also the gathering place for popular movements. I'm thinking of your work on anarchists, socialists, and Marxists, and your studies of paraliterature, political pamphlets, and marginal discourses in a range of domains.

MA: In popular movements, as we have seen over the last centuries, the boldest emancipatory dreams of modern times and the most dangerous, fanatical tendencies can coexist. You can find in the conflicts of utopian thought and established blindness things that are worth looking at. One of the very dangerous attitudes of our time is the Philistine one that says so many mistakes have been made in these two centuries, and we have fallen into such abominable traps, that it's just the right moment to forget about it all and start doing something different. On the contrary, I feel that that's where all the things worth learning will be found.

RB: I have heard the opposite from Michel Serres, who says that now is the moment to abandon memory.

MA: There are a number of easy programs that encourage us to disregard, to look elsewhere. Michel Serres is just one example of this type of attitude, such as a faith in science that prevents you from looking at the horrors of positivism or the fact that science has played an ex-

tremely threatening and inhuman role in history. If you're not Michel Serres, you can play the role of official pervert, like Baudrillard has done, by going adrift toward catastrophes and pleasures and describing them to accomplices in perversity. Or you can take another tack, like going back to the church or synagogue. In times of crisis there are a number of charlatans around, the televangelists of intellectual circles, who tell you there is a way to salvation, especially if you're willing follow them and not look back. It's not that I enjoy looking backwards, but I don't think modern societies or humankind in general are in a position to reinvent the world. I don't want to tell people what to do; they have to guide themselves. Modern societies have a big problem dealing with their own memory. I am a memorialist, not a historian. Historiography tends to be transformed into a narrative oriented toward a meaningful future. I'm not an entomologist dealing with smaller insects, but a memorialist dealing with different moments in history, where given groups of people or sects have been in the same position we are now, trying to make sense of a world that seems hostile and threatening. That is my only solution. Occasionally great writers, such as Joyce or Kafka, offer a way to deal with modern times that is too easy. They were minor geniuses. I want to find out how, at very different moments, in different circles, and in different settings, people try to account for the societal scandal. That is it. These may be groups of anarchists, union parties, feminists, pacifists, and so on.

RB: How does this relate to your current work on militancy?

MA: I'm interested in the array of militant groups that emerged out of the contradictions of modern societies. That's one angle of approach, one way of dealing with modernity. I think there is much to be done in terms of understanding the invention of propaganda, because it relates to people's efforts to come up with answers to social ills. I've been researching the forgotten utopian socialists of the 1830s, who thought they could say, a century and a half ago, "I've got the final ultimate answer." During this period the term "utopianists," invented not by Marx but by conventional journalists, suggested you could simply forget them, leave them in the attic. I want to make sense of the kind of strange discursive output they produced. This is part and parcel of the wider project of describing marginal figures of modern times; the "utopianists" are one of many figures of modernity, albeit very observant ones. Although we would all agree that their answers were wrong, we should tackle the questions that triggered them to elaborate the all-encompassing answers they attempted to provide. Saying that they are obsolete does not mean that whenever we read a Victorian newspaper we do not encounter, in the same naive way, the same kinds of questioning, the same kind of social critiques that, in another time, allowed them to work out an overall system. There is

something there that can make a researcher or scholar or intellectual happy. Such an open-ended program will easily fill several lives.

You began this discussion asking “How do you feel about your work being known or not known, or being influential on other people, either during or after your lifetime?” My sense of eternity is that I deal with issues that are subjectively relevant, and I approach them within a program that I will not be able to fulfill as a human being within the existential constraint between cradle and sepulcher. That is perhaps the best answer to the question of how to find a sense of eternity: doing something you will not be able to fulfill.

RB: The discussion of memory, and the previous discussion of methodology, leads to another difficult problem: not only studying 1889, but evaluating the relationship between the studies of 1889 and 1888, 1890, 1891, and so on. I don’t know if this is an obstacle or a challenge, but if we are to understand the world as you are describing it, we must be able to concentrate on a certain time, in all of its complexity, while situating it as a time among other times.

MA: What surprises me about the idea of working within a so-called synchronic slice, aside from the methodological issues it entails, is the contemporaneity of the people who live within the so-called same society. In studying a late nineteenth-century society, like France in 1889, you discover a set of common values, topoi, dominant ideas, and paradigms, while at the same time, you find people within this so-called hegemony operating in totally divergent directions to such an extent that they may not seem contemporaneous to each other. We live in a society where we are assumed to have a sense of community, to belong, but if you knew the ideas in everybody’s mind in this so-called community, you would be extremely surprised. That’s why I wrote papers and books on anti-Semitism as it developed in late nineteenth-century France. These issues seem worth studying, not in order to warn people against the dangers of fanaticism, but because it is so strange that these ideas existed, and were so successfully imagined.

RB: What does your work reveal about science as a narrative and science as a practice?

MA: I’ve done some work on what could be described as established sciences, work on the psychopathology of hysteria in the nineteenth century. Life is too short. I would certainly like to do other things. I have perhaps managed to satiate my curiosity here and there, but I’ve worked in these sectors without being very satisfied with the kind of findings I come up with.

RB: In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard suggests that science is a narrative with its own rules and criteria for adjudication that are estab-

lished according to the contemporary scientific paradigm, and that therefore one can think about scientific discourse in terms of other narrative practices. Another model might suggest the opposite, that pure science is the study of the next thing, that the scientist builds incrementally upon the solid basis of knowledge previously uncovered on the road to truly understanding the object of his or her research. The distance between those two is vast, and it underwrites the problem of how we talk about science. What does your work have to say about these approaches?

MA: Most research in what can be termed historical epistemology deals with things that are already end-products. The master narratives of scientific disciplines, for instance, are in a way end-products; they do not provide a key for the reasons why these narrative frameworks have been implemented and organized the way they have been. That's what I'm trying to do in my work on the so-called utopian socialists. All the work that has been done on Charles Fourier, or others, deals with the counter-proposals, the utopian programs they offered up to solve the problems of society. But my questions begin long before these programs, suggesting that the end-products are not extremely significant in themselves. I would like to find out about the genealogical process, the actual logic of questioning, the social critique, as it were, rather than what triggered their questioning. The fact that scientific paradigms crumble and become superseded may be the right way of describing things at a given level, but in a way you are just describing end-products and not the very process of scientific invention. That's why my first work in sciences was on human paleontology. It was so typically a master narrative, in which an image of progress unfolded through the processes of early humankind. Now I would probably deal with these issues in a different way. I would start with the big metaphor of digging; you dig in the soil of the cave and find things you identify as artifacts. Out of these pebbles, something like a narrative seems to emanate. I don't like, for heuristic reasons, the Lyotardian paradigm; it operates at a superficial level where symptoms can be examined and recognized, but you never try to find out what these symptoms really are. In Marxism or socialism, the question is not what kind of remedial program they command, but how they look at exploitation in order to identify themselves. Why was it obvious? Why was it understood in terms of exploitation, or slavery? I'm now studying the abolitionists of slavery in the 1820s and 1830s, which allows for the same kind of questioning.

RB: Why aren't these questions asked in other research paradigms? Is there something in the way we approach intellectual work that leads us away from posing certain types of questions?

MA: Nobody ever asked the most obvious questions because they were too obvious. Why was the abolition of slavery considered a good thing, and by whom? What are they doing right now? How do they construe the situation? We shouldn't ask how well they solved the problem, but rather what basic assumptions of humankind they presupposed when thinking about abolition. This allows a different angle of approach, something that is, aside from all other considerations, promising. Whenever we deal with the history of Marxism or Marxist thought we take for granted basic Marxist assumptions—not that they are far-fetched or absurd or chimerical. We accept these mental processes when they are already in action. It is already recognized that poverty, or the proletarian condition, was not only miserable, but that it should be transformed into something else. That's why I deal with the productivist paradigm. Productivist means that in order to transform society, you have to increase the production of material goods. A number of anarchists who want to go back to the caves question the very idea of whether an increase in the production of material goods was the preliminary condition that transformed society and made it more harmonious and just. I return to the basic golden rule: "It ain't necessarily so." What is exploitation? Why is war abominable, and peace desirable? And so on. Throughout the nineteenth century, there were always a few unpleasant people who said that war was the best thing for humankind. Peace was a form of daydreaming for philanthropists. Without war you would not be able to change the hierarchies in society, because there is no such thing as a truly egalitarian society. I'm not looking at individuals, I'm looking at Gordian knots of questions—lots of questions. They have never been disassembled, and they are still around. That's why we are, in fact, still in modernity. Along the way we lost a number of certainties about progress, human nature, and the remedies for social evils. There are a number of things that don't work any longer. I'm not interested in projecting my own narratives onto the set of modern narratives by telling you that at the end of the play these were the good cops and these were the bad ones. I'm looking at the Gordian knots of extremely complicated issues.

RB: Is it possible that these questions were posed, or even considered, but that we don't recognize them on account of our current views on the matter?

MA: Indeed. Fourier wrote a number of papers nobody wants to quote today, saying that if we emancipate the African slaves in North America in the way the philanthropists want to, we will make their condition more miserable, due to this and that argument. You cannot transform the history of ideas into a comic strip. People were much more insightful than we'd like to think they were. They saw at the outset that situations could not be superseded by virtue of one truly

obvious solution or another. We would like to think that our forefathers were naive daydreamers, and that now we are clever and lucid. But these people have seen in their own way the contradictions of given approaches, even when they seemed to be the most rational and generous solutions for humankind. There has been a big bang of empirical and symbolic change over the last few centuries, and it is still expanding. We are just trying to make sense of this. Perhaps we too should work like the astronomers, that is, we should explore a nova or a galaxy without having the ultimate answer, the true dynamic of this thing we call the universe. That comes from my training in rhetoric; I'm much more interested in discovering the anonymous logic that presides over the major rumbling debates of modern times than just figuring out if some guy or another was right about a particular issue. I don't want to come off as a *deus ex machina* sitting on a cloud, arbitrating at the end of modern times and saying: "These were the right guys." If modern humankind had found solutions, we would know about them. Since we do not see many solutions that are irreversible and totally harmonious, we can probably say— but not in a wishy-washy post-modern way— that modern societies are operatic, as they say in philosophy. Whatever solution we try to work out imposes another dead end, instead of providing a positive dialectics superseding the contradictions. We try to get out of it, again and again, but the process recurs, maybe infinitely. This is not a very optimistic paradigm, but if someone had managed to find a solution, we'd have known about it. Let's be naive for a while. After the French Revolution, all over the developing worlds of Europe and North America, people started criticizing society, the human condition, and thousands of people came up with programs, solutions, ideas, remedies, and so on. At this stage we can say either/or: Either they actually found a solution and we overlooked it, or, more probable, there was no solution. I tend to think there is no solution, but I don't conclude in a Philistine way that therefore one must give oneself over to drink. I want to find out how these Gordian knots of questions were cut, because history doesn't tell us how effective a solution was.

I suppose this is why we can rehabilitate literature, to return to one of your earlier questions: Literature never came up with a final solution. That is what Flaubert and Kafka have in common, and that is my final point in "What Can Literature Do?" Everyone external to the literary field thought that they had the right solution, and the most logical thing was to ask literary figures to put themselves in the service of these certainties. We do not generally believe that a theocratic literature or a Stalinist literature was the best thing, but we must be able to say why it was not. We should not do the Pharisee dance that claims human beings do not need ultimate answers to their queries. In the middle of a strike of the CGT (Confédération général de tra-

vail) in France, a reading of Marcel Proust does not provide any strong reinforcement of your will to fight your oppressor. Literature as a discourse does not provide answers to legitimate questions, which is not to say these questions are irrelevant. In *Madame Bovary*, the pharmacist has all the answers because he is Voltairian and not Rousseauist. The Abbé is also an answer-giver, because he was taught the Catholic apologetics in the seminary. Madame Bovary, on the other hand, does not have the answer to the question of whether or not she should remain faithful to her husband. At the very least, what Flaubert's text does is *not* provide us with any answers to any questions that are not discarded as illegitimate. There is probably a role, a very specific role, for literature, in what I call the Gordian model of modern thinking. It doesn't tell us we can disentangle this knot of contradictions, or that we can cut it in the middle like most militant people would do. What it says is: look at the questions, because if you're patient, you may learn something.

RB: The role Michel Meyer ascribes to literature in books like *Problematology*, *Meaning and Reading*, and even *Philosophy and the Passions*, is somewhat similar.¹ For him, literature is not there to help us determine logic, or to find answers. He uses it instead as a starting point for a problematology, a questioning.

MA: I like Meyer's *Meaning and Reading*. I agree with his conclusions. Literature does not provide meaning, in the sense that it does not illuminate a contradictory world and then transform these contradictions into certainties. That is why Meyer, in his own way and within his own logic, as a philosopher, comes up with the same answer I do about the work that literature does and doesn't do. If you have a friend whose child has just died, you cannot tell her to go read Joyce and find some answer to the scandal of death. Literature is a device that helps us decipher not only the world, but the text that is part and parcel of the world in a more honest way than the monosemic, non-contradictory paradigms available to us. Literature cannot transform the world, as so many nice people in the twentieth century, including Gide and Malraux, have suggested. Literature cannot emancipate human life. These people are not naïve, and are quite aware of the logic of aesthetic writing, which suggests that the temptation of finding a solution was, for them, extreme. Literature does not provide an answer to the paradox. So why is it useful? *Because* it does not. There are some thinkers, like Meyer, with different training and interests, who nevertheless come up with similar suggestions. I don't think after all is said and done that studying literature as such, for itself alone, can be the object of any decent and encompassing discipline, even if undertaken in my own way, by rehabilitating the extremely perverse logic of literature's innocuousness. To the extent that literature is innocuous and

impotent toward the evils of the world, we need it in order *not* to fool ourselves. That's fine. But if I like literature, I'm not sure I like literature departments, or literary teaching as such. I don't like the fetishization of symbolic inventiveness that is entailed in the study of a canon of great texts, or not so great texts, or even a canon of texts produced by the oppressed, the workers, the women. In each of these examples, the attitude is to isolate a segment of this intertextual array of social discourse and fetishize it. Of course some literary studies, like the work undertaken by Bakhtin, not only provide us with sound scholarship but also show us that literature is something that operates on the non-literary mesh of production. I'm interested in these pregnancies, these Gordian knots, these endless conflicts.

RB: Literature does play an interesting role in your thinking, though. You make reference to literary texts quite frequently.

MA: Occasionally I can hear the voices of writers, the strong and significant voices of Proust or Kafka in the middle of these dissensions. But I don't think that literary departments as such are a good thing. They correspond to an obsolete concept of division of labor in academia. Being interested in literature is no justification for having literature departments, in the same way it would be ridiculous to say an interest in sex makes one a sexologist. Disciplines do not deal with objects, they deal with questions. My set of questions makes me encounter, at given moments, and even frequently, literary texts, but never exclusively, and never centrally. For some subsets of questions I may have in mind, that are part of the problems I try to explain, literature is decidedly irrelevant. Not that I would criticize other colleagues who have different sets of questions and therefore suggest that there are no good reasons to focus on the literary output of a given place at a given moment. If you are dealing with social evil in the 1830s in Great Britain, you will read *Oliver Twist* in the same way that you would read the philanthropists, the reformists, the chartists, and so on. But in this case you do not isolate Dickens as something that would be necessarily better, higher, or even of a different nature than the pamphlets and writings of these philanthropists and reformers. In dealing with the Gordian knot of questions, you try to discover where a novelist like Dickens put his own thread.

RB: There is, in your work on master narratives, an interest in the stories society tells about itself and its various blind spots, but underwriting all of this is something about the nature of human beings. We have an intense need to tell ourselves stories, to invent narratives, to fit them into the cycles of human life. Perhaps there is not only a desire to process experience, but an actual physical requirement to integrate narratives into our lives.

MA: Our dreams, according to Freud, and everybody since antiquity, are narratives. Freud found two contradictory dynamics in a dream: the superficial logic of narrative consistency and the symptomatic discrepancies that are supposed to emanate from repressed unconscious elements in the dream. Human beings operate with two basic kinds of symbolic imagery, arguments and narremes. Arguments suggest that we are in a dialogical situation, working out an argument within a set of implicit or explicit questions and counter-arguments. We cannot build argumentation alone. Narremes are of another logic, a more subjective one. These are the two sides. We cannot deal with narratology alone; we must also deal with rhetoric and argumentation. Most narratives are in fact argumentative devices. They are parables, sequences of events. They are also answers to a question. They offer a solution to a practical or ontological problem. That's why we can't isolate narratology from rhetorical analyses. The basic issue in narratology is the fantasy of consistency that makes a narrative seem to work in ways similar to a dream. When a dream looks consistent, it's only in terms of its superficial features, whereas when the characters of the dream suddenly seem blurred, when you can't tell whether the character is an old woman or your mother, that is, when you cannot recognize the agents or the syntactic structure of the dream it becomes interesting. I would try to generalize this kind of hermeneutic approach by saying that the point at which the narrative starts to become dysfunctional is the point at which it is most worthy of our concern.

Note

- 1 Michel Meyer, *Meaning and Reading: A Philosophical Essay on Language and Literature* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1984); Michel Meyer, *Philosophy and the Passions: Towards a History of Human Nature*, trans. Robert F. Barsky (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2000); Michel Meyer, *Of Problematology: Philosophy, Science, and Language*, trans. David Jamison (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Michel Meyer, *Rhetoric, Language, and Reason* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1994).