

Marc Angenot, *Le Roman populaire:*  
*Recherches en paralittérature*

It says a good deal for the quality of Marc Angenot's literary intelligence that his book does not suffer from the defect of discontinuity which often stems from the decision to place a number of articles originally published separately and in different reviews between the covers of one volume (Montreal: Les Presses de l'Université de Québec, 1975). This is partly because he is carried forward by the unity of his preoccupations, but more particularly because the various facts that he mentions all serve to illuminate different and interesting aspects of the problem he is treating. Thus the paradox whereby the highly conservative *Journal des Débats* published Eugène Sue's apparently left-wing *Mystères de Paris* is mentioned in Chapter I—originally published in *Etudes littéraires*—as an indication of how dangerous it is to assure that “popular” fiction has had an exclusively working-class readership, and then recurs in Chapter I, Part II—taken from the *Revue des langues*—as illustration of another, even more interesting observation: that Sue's novel, as Marx himself had observed, is very far from being a liberating and revolutionary work. Each of the characters in the novel is made less free, independent, and interesting by Rodolphe de Gérolstein's intervention, so that what M. Angenot calls the novel's “paternalistic and demobilising” message makes it in fact a very appropriate work both to have been published in the *Journal des Débats* and to have prepared the way in which the serialized publication of *Le Juif Errant* restored the fortunes of the equally conservative *Le Constitutionnel*.

M. Angenot observes that the very conditions under which the popular fiction of the July Monarchy was published prevented it from becoming more than a reflection of the contradictions of the liberal bourgeoisie which wanted to “go to the people” without forfeiting the economic advantages of its position. From the very outset, such fiction depended upon the existence of private capital and of a privately owned press in order to reach its public, and was consequently led by its own economic origins to be an opium for the people at the very same time that its potential readership encouraged it to become the vehicle for a critique of society. This critique, however, never went beyond the presentation of idealized and ineffectual solutions for the immense misery generated by the industrial revolution in France, so that the conservative writers who fulminated against the works of Eugène Sue, Paul Féval, or Gabriel Ferry were wasting both their rhetoric and their attempts at censorship on a nonexistent menace.

M. Angenot is resolutely Marxist in his own approach and rightly observes that the absence among the characters in Sue's, Dumas's, or Aimard's novels of any representatives of the industrial working class is itself symbolic of the inherent conservatism of this kind of fiction. It was only from this class—and not from the Secret Societies which were so frequently depicted as plotting the overthrow of civilization—that real social change could come, and its members were either so illiterate or so alienated by the very novels they consumed that they were unable to achieve sufficient consciousness of themselves as a class to act as a revolutionary force on their own account. It was, after all, Sue's working class readers who wrote to ask him for more episodes in which the main character was le Chourineur, the ex-convict whom Rodolphe successfully transforms into a respectable small landowner in French Algeria.

*Le roman populaire* could nevertheless have been a better book than it is if M. Angenot had broken down his original articles and rewritten them as a single and unified study. He could then have exploited his material more consciously and established, for example, a more deliberate relationship between le Chourineur's popularity and the remark which he quotes from Christiane Metz to the effect that "chaque film pour midinette enferme un peu plus la midinette dans une problématique de midinette" (p. 12). To have stood back from his material sufficiently to cast it into book form might also have led him to speculate on why it is that virtually everybody who has written about "paraliterature" (the term is more or less M. Angenot's own, and a very useful one to describe books which combine strong popular appeal with a marked lack of traditional literary qualities) has ended up with the criticism that such literature perpetuates a "false consciousness" on the part of its readers. Thus George Orwell commented on the world of *Peg's Paper* or the *Oracle* that there is "no suggestion anywhere that there can be anything wrong with the system as a system; there are only individual misfortunes, which are generally due to somebody's wickedness and can in any case be put right in the last chapter,"<sup>1</sup> and his strictures could apply exactly to the fiction studied in *Le Roman populaire*.

Does this tendency to see the same weakness stem from the fact that people who study paraliterature are Marxists to start off with, and are therefore committed in advance to the view that the only desirable literature is the one that explicitly or implicitly presents violent revolution as the only remedy for society's ills? Or is it that paraliterature, if read at length and with a critical eye, creates such a revulsion against its constant shirking of every serious moral, religious, or political issue, such disgust at its presentation of a world from which genuinely agonizing decisions are absent, that critics flee into the most puritanical system of political analysis in much the same way that the debauchees of the past sought forgiveness for their sins in the austere monasteries of the Catholic Church? Or is it that paraliterature is by its very nature one of those cultural phenomena which actually do illustrate Marx's contention that the products of the mind are determined by such fundamental economic factors as the division of society into those who own and those who are exploited, so that its very lack of complex literary qualities brings out a truth hidden in more sophisticated literary works?

Consideration of these issues might also have helped M. Angenot to provide a fuller answer to his own very interesting question of how exactly we define what he calls paraliterature and what other French critics have dubbed "littérature parallèle," ou "littérature marginale," or the Germans have referred to as "Konsumliteratur," "Massenroman," and occasionally—a very good term—"Kitschroman" (p. 4). He makes the point that paraliterature can only be satisfactorily defined by contrast with what I would call "proper" literature, and suggests that this latter always possesses what Lukacs calls an "ironic" quality. In Balzac or Flaubert, for example (and, one might add, Stendhal, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Constant, or Tolstoy), the narrator sets and keeps himself somewhat apart from the hero, commenting without committing himself, preserving a certain distance between his point of view and the ideology which the main character is testing out against society. In paraliterature, on the other hand, the involvement of the narrator in the attitude and adventures of his hero is absolute, and the author is as much the alienated victim of his own inventions as his readers are. You cannot produce paraliterature, especially in its purest form of a controlled but wholly absorbing daydream, without somehow believing in it yourself. Thousands of literary

intellectuals have proved this *a contrario* by failing to write the sentimental or pornographic bestseller which would make their fortune, and *Le Roman populaire* would again have been a more satisfying book if M. Angenot had told us more about the value systems of the authors themselves as well as of the worlds they created. We might then perhaps have tested his distinction between real and paraliterature from a different angle, either confirming or falsifying the traditional view that the real creative artist must be someone not only of great imaginative power but also of superlative intelligence.

Yet even this very useful concept of irony as the defining characteristic of real literature does not entirely answer M. Angenot's interesting problem of definition, for it is difficult to see how it could be systematically applied to an author whose works exhibit many of the alienating defects detected in the popular literature of the early nineteenth century but whom no one could refuse to classify as a real writer: Charles Dickens. It is, in this respect, a great pity that M. Angenot's bibliography contains no reference to George Orwell's study of Dickens—or for that matter to Orwell's pioneering work in paraliterature in the essays on *Boys' Weeklies* or *Raffles and Miss Blandish*—since one of the points that Orwell makes is that Dickens's novels are also very vulnerable to the kind of Marxist approach adopted in *Le Roman populaire* towards Eugène Sue. Dickens, as Orwell observes, depicts no agricultural workers and only one industrial worker. The tendency of his novels, he argues in *Charles Dickens* "is if anything pro-capitalist, because the whole moral is that capitalists ought to be kind, not workers rebellious."<sup>2</sup> Neither, except perhaps in *Great Expectations*, does Dickens show the detached irony which, in the Lukacian aesthetic, characterizes the real writer, and in *David Copperfield* his own point of view coincides almost completely with that of the first-person narrator. The plots of *Great Expectations* and *Bleak House* also belong to the category which M. Angenot dubs "progressive-regressive" (p. 76) and finds characteristic of "le roman populaire," while the "bon riche, aussi célèbre pour ses 'fêtes' que pour sa 'bienfaisance inépuisable'" (p. 59) who recurs monotonously in the French popular fiction of the 1830's is clearly Mr. Pickwick's brother. But it would be a brave critic who, on the strength of these undoubted resemblances, relegated Dickens to the category of "paraliterature," and *Le Roman populaire* would once more have been more satisfying as a study of an intriguing phenomenon if it had contained a more critical examination of the difference between para and proper literature hinted at in the references to Lukacs.

M. Angenot's omission of Orwell from his bibliography is also unfortunate in that it neglects the insights which the creative writer can have into literary questions which tend increasingly to be treated scientifically, and this neglect is paralleled by an apparent but unacknowledged debt to Jean-Paul Sartre. After a damning but fascinating analysis of "le roman revanchard," M. Angenot comments on how the "panache" of Fantômas "exprime à sa manière la réaction nationale à la déculottée de 1870," (p. 109) and his remark seems to echo Sartre's observation in *Les Mots* that "ce Cyrano de la Pègre, Arsène Lupin . . . devait sa force herculéenne, son courage narquois, son intelligence bien française à notre déculottée de 1870."<sup>3</sup> The coincidence itself is not important except as an illustration, through Sartre's experience, of one of the most important conditions which the student of popular, para, or dream literature must fulfil. Like Renan's ideal philosopher of religion, he must have both believed and ceased to believe. He must, normally in his adolescence, have so steeped himself with that uncritical belief of childhood in the imaginary worlds created for him by the dream merchants that he knows intuitively

how they work and what their value systems are. Then, when he reaches man's estate, he can look back with both emotional understanding and intellectual detachment and understand just how deliciously he had been fooled.

I could do this myself with Sapper, Biggles, Buchan, and Leslie Charteris, and there is no doubt that one of the best books on a "paraliterary" subject, Richard Osborne's *Clubland Heroes*<sup>4</sup> is the product of just this kind of recollection in adult tranquillity of the trips to Arcadia afforded by the books which always attracted the disapproval of one's schoolmasters. Even childhood, however, is not long enough for one reader to know and love all the good-bad books in existence—another category which M. Angenot might add to his list, and one that could produce an even more satisfactory typology than the concept of paraliterature—so that it would be difficult for one person to write a wholly comprehensive study of the highly complex phenomenon treated in *Le Roman populaire*. Richard Osborne's book is disappointingly absent from M. Angenot's bibliography, and I somehow feel that this is significant. M. Angenot's approach is that of the analyst who has never allowed himself to become involved rather than of the erstwhile willing captive who now turns back to what had once enchanted him and yet still writes of it with love.

His more professional approach nevertheless has the possibly accidental advantage of enabling the neophyte in contemporary French critical discourse to understand from the context in which they are used just what certain fashionable terms actually mean. Thus the remark that "Ce qui caractérise de la manière la plus immédiate l'ensemble de ces récits est le partage des personnages en deux camps et la polarisation axiologique sans nuance qui en résulte" (p. 93) means that these stories contain goodies and baddies, while the "structure progressive-régressive" can be paraphrased by talking about stories in which events emerge from the past to make sense of what is happening in the present. M. Angenot is clearly a disciple of Barthes as well as of Marx and Freud, and one would wish that the author of *S/Z* used categories that revealed themselves in practice as being at once so useful and so comprehensible.

It is nevertheless in his "petits faits vrais" that M. Angenot's book is most consistently useful, and his account of how a large reading public was ensured for *Chéri-Bibi* by the free distribution of the first four pages at the entrance of metro stations might even inspire some imitators today. Such a practice might not work for Philippe Sollers, Robbe-Grillet, or Marguerite Duras but they tend in any case to be uninterested in sales and to sympathize with the authors for whom M. Angenot invents another useful but rather different category: that of "ultralittérature," a term under which he ranges Sade, Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and Jarry. It is a particularly useful concept since the two extremities of ultra and para tend, as in Pascal, to come together, with Rimbaud praising the "refrain naïfs, livres érotiques sans orthographe" and the Marquis de Sade waxing enthusiastic about Monk Lewis and Mrs Radcliffe. An obsession with sex also seems to be an attractive quality in both ultra and para, and another of M. Angenot's intriguing facts concerns the sudden upsurge in the sales of pornography at the great *Expositions Universelles* of the late nineteenth century. He justifiably follows this up with the suggestion that popular pornography could teach us a lot about "les obsessions latentes de toute une époque" (p. 29), and comments himself, in his previously unpublished chapter on *Le Roman populaire revanchard*, on how "la belle espionne est un avatar, tardif, peut-être représentatif de la libido collective sous Fallières et Poincaré, de la femme fatale" (p. 99). A serious

study of hard-core pornography is of course already available in English: Gillian Freeman's *The Undergrowth of Literature*,<sup>5</sup> while Henry Spencer Ashbee's ("Pixanus Fraxi") *Index of Forbidden Books* has been on sale as a paperback since 1969. It is unfortunate that neither of these books figures in M. Angenot's bibliography, and almost certain that this particular realm of paraliterature has received much more treatment in recent years. Already, in 1946, Sartre devoted a brilliant passage of his *Réflexions sur la question juive* to an account of the particular role that Jewish women were made to play in pornographic paraliterature ("La belle Juive, c'est celle que les Cosaques du tsar traînent par les cheveux dans les rues de son village en flammes; et les ouvrages spéciaux qui se consacrent aux récits de flagellation font une place d'honneur aux Israélites"<sup>6</sup>) and Jo Orton's *Entertaining Mr Sloane* offers a superb if intuitive analysis of the black leather theme in commercial homosexual pornography. M. Angenot, in fact, has only begun to study a most intriguing literary, sociological, psychological, and political problem. It is one that deserves treatment in a more sustained form than the essay provides, but it is one that the essays in *Le Roman populaire* show M. Angenot as well qualified to undertake.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>George Orwell, *Boys' Weeklies*, 1939.

<sup>2</sup>George Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, I (London: Lecker and Warbury, 1968), p. 417.

<sup>3</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Mots* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), p. 96.

<sup>4</sup>Richard Osborne, *Clubland Heroes* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1957). Reprinted 1974.

<sup>5</sup>Gillian Freeman, *The Undergrowth of Literature* (London: Nelson, 1967).

<sup>6</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *Réflexions sur la question Juive* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p. 58.