

Ingo Berensmeyer

›Your inside is out when your outside is in‹
Literature as Paratopia

- Dominique Maingueneau, *Paratopia. Literature as Discourse*. (Postdisciplinary Studies in Discourse) Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2023. 156 pp. [Price: EUR 48.14] ISBN 978-3-031-50969-8.

This is the first book by Dominique Maingueneau to appear in English. While Maingueneau is a household name in French linguistics and discourse analysis, his work remains relatively little known in the Anglophone world. Introduced rather modestly as an »essay« (2), the book systematically sets out his discourse-analytical perspective on literature, centred on the concept of »paratopia«, first developed in *Le contexte de l'œuvre littéraire* (1993). At its core, *paratopia* designates a set of »self-constituting discourses« (17) – including literature – that »claim to derive their authority from themselves« and must secure legitimacy through an unmediated relationship with what Maingueneau calls their capital-S »Source« (17). Methodologically, Maingueneau's theory – most fully laid out in *Le discours littéraire: Paratopie et scène d'énonciation* (2004) – intends to connect »the biography of writers, the content of their works, and the staging of their enunciation, in constant interaction with the literary institution of a given period« (7). In the simplest terms, paratopia is a form of »paradoxical belonging«: »the fact of belonging to, and at the same time not belonging to a certain space« (3). This condition, Maingueneau argues, is crucial both for writers and for literature as discourse. Across eleven chapters, he elaborates this claim, supporting it by many brief references to, and a smaller number of sustained close readings of, an impressive range of texts, from the *Odyssey* to *Game of Thrones*.

The opening chapter, »A Paradoxical Belonging«, lays out the book's main theoretical assumptions and principles: the concept of paratopia (usefully differentiated from Bakhtin's *exotopia* and Foucault's *heterotopia*) and the notion of »paratopic shifters« (4 and passim), those textual features that point to the paradoxical tension between inside and outside that, for Maingueneau, characterises literary discourse. According to this model, social factors are inextricably involved in the creation and circulation of literature. Literature as an institution provides writers with a »place of enunciation« (3) that they must make their own and »constantly justify« (4) in order to succeed in the literary field. This process of explicit and often implicit self-justification – the production of its own conditions of legitimacy – is dynamically reflected in literary texts in various elements such as characters, places or situations. Thus, orphaned characters such as Jane Eyre or Madame Bovary serve as paratopic shifters, through which their authors »obliquely show« (5) the marginal status of writers in society.

Chapter two builds on this by developing the notion of literature as a self-constituting discourse, combining linguistics with literary sociology in a way that recalls Bourdieu but also Mary-Louise Pratt's *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (1977). Chapter three focuses on authorship, distinguishing between the writer as a person, an »actor« (or rather, agent) and an author. While this may evoke Bourdieu's idea of authorial position-taking, Maingueneau offers a more nuanced differentiation between the biographical individual, the professional writer working within generic conventions, and the narrator constructed in a text. Drawing on examples from Hardy, Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Proust, the chapter underscores the tension

between an author's social position and its negotiation in literary works, culminating in the observation that the ›felicity conditions‹ of literary writing can only be recognised retrospectively. Proust's reconstructed bedroom is now a tourist attraction – but it might just as easily have been one of the many places where an author failed to create a masterpiece or find lasting recognition.

Chapter four situates literature in its historical social conditions, from ancient bards through early modern salons to nineteenth-century literary ›tribes‹. Maingueneau cautions against both overstating and underestimating an author's social marginality. Apparently, social formations before the nineteenth century knew ›less ostentatious and more unstable manifestations of paratopia‹ (51). It is in the nineteenth and early twentieth century that the modern social formation of literature as an autonomous institution or field gains its most definite shape. Today, however – and this is a thought that occurs towards the end of the book – literature may be returning to a pre-modern condition, its status diminished within the hierarchy of cultural productions.

The fifth and sixth chapters address literary language and style, exploring the tension between an author's style and ordinary language, and between narrative voice and character speech. Authors who do not write (only) in their native language or who work across and between languages as part of their creative process are presented as special cases of paratopia. Here, Maingueneau distinguishes social, spatial, temporal and linguistic forms of paratopia, arguing that authors must mobilise their ›paratopic potential‹ – be it social, spatial, temporal or linguistic, or any combination of these factors – to establish and maintain their own place of enunciation. This is reflected in literary texts by means of ›paratopic shifters‹ such as outcast characters, isolated communities or aliens (explored in some detail in chapter seven). Without explicitly invoking Bourdieu's notion of the convertibility of symbolic into economic capital, Maingueneau nonetheless gestures towards it: troubadours (landless knights establishing status through poetry, 74), Voltaire's pseudo-aristocratic self-fashioning (74), or Thomas Mann, who in his novel *Buddenbrooks* ›converts the ›decline of a family‹ into the triumph of a creator‹ (92). This vision of authors' paratopic creative potential is further developed in chapter eight with detailed analyses of five nineteenth-century authors: Jane Austen, Gustave Flaubert, Thomas Hardy, and the Heredia cousins (confusingly named José Maria Heredia and José Maria de Heredia).

If, for some readers, this might sound like an overly triumphalist view of literary creation, I should add that Maingueneau points again and again to the fragility and precariousness of literature as paratopic discourse. Failure, as much as or even more than success, is integral to authorship – as in Zola's *L'Œuvre* (90), which dramatizes the risks of artistic endeavour. Most literary texts and their authors fall into oblivion. In a striking phrase – offered during a perceptive analysis of George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* – Maingueneau notes that authors ›vacillate between royalty and exclusion‹ (85). Many characters, from Odysseus and the knights errant onwards to Harry Potter, Tyrion Lannister and Jon Snow, embody this paratopic oscillation and, ›like artists, allow us to look at the world differently‹ (97). Their authors, in turn, are not confronting an undifferentiated ›society as a compact whole‹ (111) but rather institutional formations that shape ›what it means to be a legitimate writer‹ (111). Authors create literature even as they are themselves produced by the institutions of literature.

Chapter nine illustrates this interplay in a particularly insightful case study of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*. This reading draws on all the registers of paratopia that Maingueneau has previously established: social, temporal, spatial and linguistic. Most illuminatingly, he shows how Saint-Exupéry creates a ›hybrid enunciation‹ (121) pitched between a child's and an adult's voice. This stylistic choice functions as proof that the author

of this narrative »is indeed the legitimate writer of this story: someone who knows how to maintain contact with childhood« (121). Here Maingueneau employs the classical rhetorical term ›ethos‹ (›an ethos of simplicity«, 121), which he has elsewhere defined as a discursive effect (in his *Pragmatique pour le discours littéraire*, 1993, and *L'Éthos aux fondements de l'argumentation*, 2014).

The book closes with two chapters that seem more like afterthoughts than definitive conclusions. The first of these revisits the classic »model of masculine creation« (128), in which women function as paratopic shifters – muses, demons, victims or murderers – exemplified by Hardy's Tess or Flaubert's Emma Bovary. Maingueneau concedes that this »male paratopia is no longer hegemonic« (138), though a fuller integration of female or gender-queer perspectives throughout the book would have strengthened his account, which largely adheres to a male canon. The last chapter, »Trouble in Paratopia«, considers contemporary challenges to literature as discourse: the impact of digital media, blurred boundaries between literature and entertainment, and the rise of creativity as a ubiquitous social demand rather than an artistic privilege.

As its case studies are taken mainly from European literature in French and English, with occasional glances at postcolonial literatures, the book will doubtless appeal to audiences educated in these traditions or in comparative literature. Whereas Sartre and Bourdieu built their theories on the single case of Flaubert, Maingueneau draws on a wide spectrum of examples, from classical antiquity to contemporary popular culture. These examples, however, are often fleeting, sometimes crowding out the broader argument and leaving the connections between chapters implicit. The book's format – endnotes and bibliographies appended to each chapter – also reinforces the sense of a collection of essays, while the book's argumentative arc is clearly meant to be that of a unified monograph.

The book is elegantly written but marred by weak proofreading. There are occasional lapses of grammar and idiom, typographical inconsistencies and textual errors (a garbled line from *Hamlet*, p. 5). More troubling are occasional factual inaccuracies: Maingueneau claims that the narrator of Jane Austen's *Emma* leaves unspecified »in which region of England the events take place« (63), whereas the novel clearly situates the fictional village of Highbury sixteen miles from London (chapter 32) and within reach of a day trip to Box Hill in Surrey (chapter 43). He also states that George Eliot and the Brontë sisters adopted male pseudonyms, although the names ›George‹, ›Currer‹ and ›Acton‹ – like ›Dominique‹, for that matter – are in fact gender-ambiguous rather than straightforwardly masculine.

Yet these are unusual lapses in a book that otherwise demonstrates its author's considerable erudition and acuity. By presenting itself as an essay rather than a comprehensive treatise, it avoids polemics and debates with alternative accounts of literature as discourse. As in his previous works, Maingueneau remains chiefly concerned with literature as a product of authors, and with authorship as a product of »the literary institution« (7). This aligns him with the French tradition of literary sociology in the wake of Bourdieu, Bénichou and Viala, alongside figures such as Jérôme Meizoz, José-Luis Diaz and Gisèle Sapiro. Readers familiar with these debates might have wished for more explicit engagement – for example, with Meizoz's concept of *posture*, Bourdieu's notions of *hexis* and *habitus*, or with Sapiro's three models of the author-work relation (metonymy, resemblance, intentionality). The role of audiences in shaping literary authorship also receives less attention than in some of Maingueneau's previous books in French. The concept of paratopia as explored in this book helps explain motives for literary creation, but not why audiences should care about them. Here Maingueneau's work could productively be put into dialogue with recent narrative theory, or with sociologically inflected studies by, for example, Clayton Childress, Dan Sinykin and Mark McGurl on that mysterious

entity, »the literary institution«, from creative writing programmes to publishing houses and book clubs.

The book implicitly raises a more fundamental question: is paratopia a specifically literary condition, or a more general human one? There seems to be no good reason to assume that paratopias should be confined to linguistic artefacts. They could be related more broadly to human »excentricity« (Helmuth Plessner), which inspires us with a paratopic sense of both belonging and not belonging. Pascal's thought that »man infinitely transcends man« – *l'homme passe infiniment l'homme* (*Pensées*, 1670, § 434) – may take us back to Aristotle's notion of representation (*mimesis*) as a basic disposition to engage with what is beyond us. Moreover, if paratopia is indeed a property of fiction-making in general, and fiction-making is a basic human activity, then the decline of literature's cultural prestige may be less cause for regret, since other discourses, other media, other activities will take over.

In sum, this book offers Anglophone readers a valuable opportunity to engage with one of the leading voices in French discourse analysis, literary studies, and authorship theory. It is not only a welcome contribution to authorship research but also a stimulating invitation to think more rigorously about the interfaces between fiction and fact, between literary discourse and other areas of human endeavour, and between sociology and literary studies.

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