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## MARXIST CRITICISM

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In a posthumously published fragment on method Walter Benjamin spoke of the temptation of analysing the literary text as though it were a ‘thing in itself’, a self-contained entity; and he likened literary tradition to a river, fed by numerous springs (or ‘sources’—the German *Quellen* means both) and flowing for as far as the eye can see between finely outlined slopes. But, he went on, a Marxist literary theory will refuse the traditional substantialist categories, the familiarity of the ‘landscape’, and the sublimated interests the ‘river’ reflects:

It doesn’t seek the image of the clouds in this river. Even less does it turn away from it, to ‘drink at the source’ and pursue the ‘thing itself’ behind men’s backs. Whose mill does the river drive? Who fishes in it?—these are the questions that critical theory asks, and it alters the image of the landscape by calling not only the physical but also the social forces at work in it by their names.

(Benjamin, 1969, p. 1)

The core claim of Marxist criticism is that it cannot be ranked on the same level as other critical methods. It has a different task, works to a different urgency, asks different questions. It is or should be unlike any conventional discipline in its radical discomfort with the way things are, in its insistence on redefining—to switch metaphors—the contours of its field of study and what goes on inside this field, and in thinking this field in relation to its social determinations. However theoretically sophisticated it might become, it persists in asking crude and awkward questions about power, privilege and benefit.

At the same time it must be recognized that the questions asked by Marxist criticism derive as much from the disciplinary formations of general aesthetics and literary criticism as from an autonomous Marxist theory. The prestige of the aesthetic problematic inherited from German idealist philosophy, in particular, has, from the aesthetic anthropology of Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts*

(trans. 1964) and the passages on Greek art in his *Grundrisse* through to the totalizing aesthetic projects of Mehring, Lukács, Adorno, Bloch, Marcuse, Della Volpe, Jameson, and the East European academic theorists of realism, represented a continuous temptation to hypostatize and universalize the categories of art and literature. The explanation that links this preoccupation to the separation of Western Marxism from revolutionary praxis is too easy, but certainly one of Western Marxism's dominant features has been the tendency to substitute aesthetic for directly political concerns.

A number of distinct problems were posed for literary criticism and what we might anachronistically call cultural studies by the theoretical and political revolutions of Marxism. They included: first, a reformulation of the status of all symbolic activity (language, law, politics, religion, moral codes, art), such that it constituted a secondary and determinate domain of the social in relation to a primary domain of economic structures, processes and relations. The precise terms of this distinction, and of the relations it sets up between the two domains, are matters of deep contention, but some form of hierarchical ranking which stresses the greater social determinacy of one area of the social than another is central to all Marxist thinking. The architectural metaphor of the foundations and the superstructure of a building, which proposes that the upper levels rest upon and so in a sense are determined by the 'base', has been an influential way of thinking the causal relations involved, but its implications have also been widely contested; questions of the dialectical mediation or interchange between the different 'levels', of multiple and uneven structures of causality, and of the 'relative autonomy' of some areas of the social, have continuously accompanied the simpler metaphor.

If Marxism insists on the methodological separation of two domains of the social, it simultaneously supposes some sort of correlation, either in the form of a correspondence between the values produced in symbolic processes and the values arising from or serving the relations of material production, or in the more mediated form of the assertion of a generalized ruling-class control over relatively disparate areas of social life. In moving from a theory of social domains to a theory of the class agents who live them, we move from a theory of the 'superstructures' to a theory of ideology. Again, the term is contentious, but broadly speaking it designates the relativity of knowledge and belief to class interest. There are two extreme responses to the implications of the concept of ideology for literary criticism: either to read literary texts as a direct expression of class interest (this position is characteristic of so-called 'vulgar' or 'mechanical' materialism), or to exempt all or some literary texts from the realm of ideology. Most Marxist criticism works with a more differentiated and dialectical conception of ideology which allows it to define the class basis of literary production (in terms both of control of the apparatus

of publishing and distribution, and of the structural imposition of ideas and values), and yet to recognize the ways in which discursive complexity (which in its turn of course has definite material conditions of existence) makes possible contradiction and even contestation.

Thus Marxist criticism, beginning with Marx and Engels, has consistently and productively worked with the paradox of a non-correlation between class position and aesthetic value. The paradigm case is that of the reactionary Balzac who produces a more valid knowledge of Restoration French society than do more 'progressive' writers free of Balzac's ruling-class sympathies. On the other hand, the concepts of ideology and class interest have forced attention to the possible role of writers and intellectuals in the revolutionary process. Much of the work of practising writers and of political activists—Brecht and Trotsky are exemplary figures—centres on questions of political commitment and effect. Overlaid on this debate throughout much of the twentieth century has been a fierce struggle concerning the political status of modernism and of formal innovation. The difficult counterpart of these issues has been that of the role of writers in the established socialist states—where 'commitment' has more often meant the demand for conformity to an official aesthetic.

One cluster of problems that was present in much of Marx's own thinking but was developed only somewhat later in the twentieth century has to do with the Utopian content of literature or of aesthetic creation. The early Marxist concept of alienation (the importance of which only became apparent with the publication in 1932 of the *1844 Manuscripts*) supposes an essential (but historically developed) human nature which is distorted or repressed by the conditions of capitalist production. The reification of human relations in the production of commodities, in particular, turns social life into a play of surfaces abstracted from the deep structure of the social totality. Aesthetic creation then figures as something like an archetype of repressed human powers, and thus as a promise of a future in which history and a sense of the wholeness of being will be restored to humankind. Because it performs, or at least adumbrates, this totalizing function, literature and art are seen as general human capacities rather than as specific products of class antagonism.

Let me mention a final set of themes which, although there are throwaway sentences in Marx's writings which prefigure it, was also not properly developed until the 1930s. It concerns the material conditions of literary production—that is, the fact that it is among other things an economic activity and so belongs in part to the social 'base'. Thinking of literature as a historically specific system of production makes it easier to move away from essentialist understandings of literary discourse; it also helps in the move away from a relatively passive, 'expressive' conception of the working of texts towards a sense of their active intertextual relation to other representations of the real. The growth of the mass media in the twentieth century probably did much to

encourage attention to the systemic conditions of production, and in turn these questions seem to take on a particular intensity when they are applied to the mass media.

Marxist criticism is a diverse body of writing and it gives very diverse answers to the different problems that I have schematically identified. Posada (1969) gives a useful summary of what many of these answers have in common:

Important sectors of Marxist criticism considered art an *ideal* translation of the *real* conditions of the historical process. Its task consisted in reflecting these more or less faithfully, and hence the interpretation of art should be an *analogon* of the (hopefully previous) interpretation of the given reality. On the one hand, mechanical materialism postulated a correlation between the evolution of the base and that of art; on the other, explicit or concealed Hegelianism made it into a direct 'expression' of the 'spirit' of a class, or the integrating element of a world-vision seen as a social group's global framework of representation of reality.

(p. 217)

Let me set aside the mechanical materialist tradition (Plekhanov, Caudwell, most orthodox Soviet and East European criticism), which is of little theoretical interest, and group Marxist criticism into three main traditions, which I shall call the Hegelian, structuralist, and Gramscian traditions. By far the most important and fruitful of these in the twentieth century has been the Hegelian, and its most important representative was undoubtedly Georg Lukács.

Lukács's career began with a long pre-Marxist period and passed through a number of further phases. It seems possible, nevertheless, to map out a relatively unified conceptual schema underlying all his work. Its central categories are those of form and genre; totality and mediation; and the general and the concrete. To summarize: the 'forms' that Lukács describes in *Soul and Form* ([1911] trans. 1974) are historically mutable structures of consciousness which make possible certain kinds of knowledge of the real. They reach their maximum intensity in the aesthetic genres, which correspond to different and relatively stable modes of historical experience. In *History and Class Consciousness* ([1923] 1971a) this function is ascribed, in the realm of objective spirit, to that 'imputed class consciousness' which represents the most concentrated awareness of reality and its own real interests that a social class can attain. Aesthetic creation, which is marked by its unique degree of coherence, corresponds on the level of aesthetic form to the imputed consciousness or 'life form' which, in the case of the proletariat, is realized in the Party. The two categories are structurally identical. Thus the constant model through which Lukács (and later his disciple Goldmann) imagines the integration of levels within the social totality is one of a series of homologous

and increasingly more expressive and concentrated structures, moving from the economic base through group consciousness (unformed class consciousness), through the historical 'forms'—the literary genre *or* concentrated class consciousness—to individual consciousness or the individual text.

The literary genre thus stands in a privileged relation to the historical period, but it also expresses the tension between the given historical 'form' (the structure of social life) and a transcendental form laid down in the genre as an absolute possibility. Under ideal conditions (the culture of the Greek epic, the transparent social order of achieved Communism) the sum of the literary genres would give immediate access to a totalized, coherent structure of knowledge corresponding to the *continuous* nature of the real. This continuity has, however, been distorted by the reification resulting from commodity production, and the immediacy of the social totality thus remains inaccessible except under conditions of revolutionary self-consciousness. Reflecting this loss of a sense of totality, the modernist movement in art brings about a confusion of genres and so produces only a distorted representation of the real. 'Realistic' representation remains a historical possibility, but only under certain conditions: political, on the one hand (the writer's identification with the progressive rationality of history), formal on the other (the use of features corresponding to the absolute structure of the genre; in the case of 'epic' writing, this means third-person and preterite narration, the creation of 'typical' and 'living' characters, the use of identification and catharsis, and so on). The 'organically developing work of art' must function as a piece of nature:

The more 'artless' a work of art, the more it gives the effect of life and nature, the more clearly it exemplifies an actual concentrated reflection of its times and the more clearly it demonstrates that the only function of its form is the expression of this objectivity, this reflection of life in the greatest concreteness and clarity and with all its motivating contradictions.

(Lukács, 1971b, p. 52)

Since the function of form is to negate itself, to be totally transparent, any laying bare of formal structure, any disjunction between world and fictional 'world', must destroy, along with the illusion of non-fictionality, the appearance of an objectively moving historical regularity.

It will be apparent that Lukács's central concerns are above all with questions of the representation of the real. Since the relation between 'content' and 'form' is understood in a manner parallel to that between 'base' and 'superstructure', the work of art comes to be understood as a secondary phenomenon, derivative of the reality it reflects. Its formal composition is (or should be) entirely subordinated to this task, and ultimately this entails an impatience with questions of form, and a hypostatization of certain historical

genres (particularly the nineteenth-century realist novel) as absolute norms. Lukács produced criticism of considerable power which has come to form the core of orthodox Marxist criticism; but his merit is perhaps to have been essentially a great nineteenth-century critic.

Lukács's criticism is Hegelian in its insistence that the work of art is expressive of a structure which precedes it. This structure is not a brute reality, but rather the Real understood as a moment of a philosophico-historical process (the rational and orderly progression of History as it is grasped by the categories of dialectical thought). The specificity of textual structures and of the structure of literary production is of importance only in so far as it permits the shining through of this content.

Theodor Adorno's criticism is in many ways, and particularly in its committed defence of modernism and its concern with the irreducibility of formal structure, diametrically opposed to that of Lukács; but Adorno shares with him much of this Hegelian conceptual framework.

Where Lukács thinks of the literary text in terms of its representational potential, Adorno tends to think of it as a closed monad whose historicity is internal and formal rather than a function of its content. The development of artistic material corresponds (as the 'answer' to a 'problem') to the necessary stages of the self-realization of spirit, and so bears a direct but concealed testimony to the historical dialectic. The immanent determination of the truth of the work through this relation to an autonomous history of forms thus demands an uncompromising rejection of extra-aesthetic considerations. Social categories cannot be externally applied but only deduced from the work's formal structure, and 'it is only in the crystallization of its own law of form, not in the passive registration of objects, that art converges with the real' (Adorno, 1961, p. 164). Through its formal structure the work negates the empirical, and *thereby* hides empirical substance in itself. The degree of its 'negation of identity' becomes the criterion for the real and paradoxical identity of the work with social being; communication takes place precisely through the denial of referentiality implicit in the work's closure. Because of this constitution of the work through difference,

the unresolved antagonisms of reality return in the work as immanent formal problems.... Relations of tension in works of art are crystallized in a pure form there, and by their emancipation from the factual façade of the everyday encounter the essence of reality.

(Adorno, 1984, p. 16)

It is by means of a purely immanent analysis, then, that Adorno proceeds not to a concrete socio-historical description of the text but rather to a clarification of the historical dialectic. The categories through which this dialectic realizes

itself are the historically developing poles of the individual and the general, of freedom and system, and of subject and object. Around the given relationship at any time of subject to object converge all other manifestations of social being. From it the path is opened to an understanding of the social function of the individual and the balance maintained between him or her and the social order; of the mutual determination in art of form and content, which is both equivalent to and a measure of the relationship of subject/object; and of dialectical thought itself, which reflects in the process of its formation the central shifts in the movement of history.

Much of Walter Benjamin's work depends upon a similar ability to move freely from one domain of being to another, to read any one moment of the social as possessing a kind of expressive radiance such that it can be used to illuminate other moments informed by the same historical meaning. Take the theme of the experience of shock, which Benjamin elaborates in his essay 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' (*Illuminations*, 1969). Beginning as part of a general meditation on the quality of modern urban and capitalist experience, especially in its organization by different modes of communication (narration, information, journalistic sensation), the concept of shock is then developed in relation to Freud's account in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) of the link between the psyche's defence against external stimuli and the formation of unconscious memory traces. In Benjamin's version (1969, pp. 160–2), the greater the degree of consciousness involved in parrying external shocks, the more these stimuli are incorporated into conscious experience, or *Erlebnis*, and the more they are therefore sterilized for poetic experience, or *Erfahrung*. Quite different modes of temporality and memory correspond to these different forms. The experience of shock is said to be central to Baudelaire's poetry, both as a formal principle of generic rupture and as a registration of the modern experience of the city, and especially of the crowd. But beyond this, the experience of shock is said to be characteristic of a large number of features of an industrial society. Technical changes like the invention of the match and the telephone lead to a mechanization of life and the building of the shock-mechanism into everyday experience. The violence of urban traffic does the same, and the technology of film, based on the succession of discrete and rapidly moving images, is said to correspond to the new, mechanical organization of stimuli. This principle corresponds, indeed, to the whole structure of modern work: 'The shock experience by the passer-by in the crowd corresponds to the "experience" of the worker at his machinery' (p. 176) for example, at the conveyor belt. Finally, gambling is said to work according to the same principle; it involves the same alienation from the continuity of tradition as does industrial work, the same submission to a mechanical process, the same irrelevance of experience (*Erfahrung*).

Now, clearly, much of this involves a purely metaphorical connection; and

this is one of Adorno's reproaches against Benjamin when he writes: 'Throughout your text there is a tendency to relate the pragmatic contents of Baudelaire's work immediately to adjacent features in the social history of his time, preferably economic features' ('Letters to Walter Benjamin', in Bloch *et al.*, 1977, p. 128). Adorno himself is of course hardly immune from such a criticism—think, for example, of his analyses of the twelve-tone row in modern music through an equation between its regressive and self-repressive organization and the alienation inherent in the general system of capitalist production (1973, pp. 65–7). Fredric Jameson tends similarly to set up deliberate and often provocative connections between quite disparate domains of the social—between, for example, impressionist painting, the abstraction and the rationalization of visual experience in nineteenth-century capitalism, and the reification of human relations by commodity production; or between a vast range of 'postmodern' aesthetic forms and the structures of late capitalism. Jameson indeed turns this into a methodological principle. He writes in *Marxism and Form* (1971) of dialectical thinking as being

marked by the will to link together in a single figure two incommensurable realities, two independent codes or systems of signs, two heterogeneous and asymmetrical terms: spirit and matter, the data of individual experience and the vaster forms of institutional society, the language of existence and that of history. (pp. 6–7)

And a few pages later he adds that in the developed form of this method

the language of causality gives way to that of analogy or homology, of parallelism. Now the construction of the microcosm, of the cultural continuum—whether it be the formal history of costume or of religious movements, the fate of stylistic conventions or the rise and fall of epistemology as a philosophical issue—will include the analogy with the socio-economic macrocosm or infrastructure as an implied comparison in its very structure, permitting us to transfer the terminology of the latter to the former in ways that are often very revealing.

(p. 10)

This I think is the core of a Hegelian-Marxist mode of analysis: a conception of the social order as what Althusser calls an expressive totality, where a single central principle of meaningfulness (which in turn is a moment of a rational, end-directed historical process) infuses all the diverse, apparently heterogeneous domains of the social with its own informing essence. In Jameson's case this conception is linked to a totalizing interpretative method which moves from the text to its encompassing horizons in a manner which is continuous and integrative (Jameson, 1981, pp. 75–6). The form of self-reflexivity which is built into this method allows on the one hand for competing theories and methodologies to be recognized as structural effects of particular

horizons, and so subsumed as partial moments within the Marxist dialectic, and on the other for Marxist criticism to relate itself to a particular historical conjuncture—but in such a way that it renders this conjuncture transparent and so frees itself from its own relativity.

I spoke before of two other thematic areas which were elaborated only in the twentieth century. One is the anthropological and Utopian humanism which is present in much of Marx's own writings and which was worked out most fully in Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* (1986) and in Marcuse's attempt to use the Freudian concepts of repression and sublimation within a Marxist framework. The other is the understanding of literature as a system of production. In its early stages this is developed largely by Brecht and Benjamin (with a strong influence from left-wing Soviet theorists). The central move is to theorize literary production as a production of commodities within an industry with specific relations of production, and specific technological under-pinnings; the theatre, for example, is understood in terms not only of dramatic values but of institutional ownership and control, economic and technological conditions of existence, and a range of economic and social functions (the argument is then that the structure of the theatrical apparatus frames and limits the possible political effects of theatre). Benjamin's essay on new technologies of mechanical reproduction of artworks ('The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, 1969) extends this analysis to conceptualize the effects of capitalist modes of production on the system of aesthetic values and on the interrelationship between domains of value (for example, between canonical and non-canonical domains and between different media and different stages of technological development).

The concept of production is central to the second major tradition of Marxist criticism, which I have called 'structuralist'. In part this involves a resumption of work on the institutional structure of literary production, but in the work of Pierre Macherey and Terry Eagleton the tension between a potentially reductive account of institutional determinations and a conception of literary discourse as a productive practice is resolved by an emphasis on the latter, on the productive work done by texts on other discursive structures. This entails a move away from the Hegelian problematic of representation.

That problematic depends upon the assumption of an ontological split between the real and its secondary reproduction. The structuralist tradition of Althusser and Macherey, by contrast, seeks to overcome this dichotomy, on the one hand by grouping literature with other productive activities, on the other hand by refusing to think of literary representations as being different *in kind* from what they 'represent': the real is never absolutely other because it is itself semiotically organized. It is always already invested with a structure

which, far from being immanent, is a historical result. You could say that a properly dialectical 'Hegelian' account of representation would reach the same conclusion, since dialectical thinking supposes that both the natural and the social worlds are the historical outcomes of human praxis, so that there can never be an absolute split between subject and object; but structuralism takes this as its starting point rather than as its conclusion.

The theoretical innovation of structuralism consists, then, in its displacement of the problematic of an expressive or representational relation between two disparate realms. The conception of literature as a production process implies that on the one hand, as a produced object, the text is seen as a component of the general system of social production, that the 'real' is not its object but its institutional conditions of existence; and on the other hand, as a productive activity, the text is seen as a distinct practice of signification which is related not to a nondiscursive truth but to other practices of signification. In both cases literary discourse is treated as a reality in its own right, a practice which cannot be subordinated to an external reality which in the last instance determines its own representation or expression in discourse. It is not just that literary discourse mediates the real through a specific and conventional structure of logical categories, for this is true of all language. The point is rather that 'the autonomy of the writer's discourse is established from its relationship with other uses of language', that it is 'a contestation of language rather than a representation of reality' (Macherey, 1978, pp. 59–61). Rather than being the transposition of a world posited as absolute and absolutely known (but which is in fact a construct of other texts), the literary text is seen as

the production of certain produced representations of the real into an imaginary object. If it distantiates history, it is not because it transmutes it to fantasy, shifting from one ontological gear to another, but because the significations it works into fiction are already representations of reality rather than reality itself. The text is a tissue of meanings, perceptions and responses which inhere in the first place in that imaginary production of the real which is ideology.

(Eagleton, 1976b, p. 75)

The access of the text to the real is always oblique, and in particular is always overdetermined by the structure of the literary system.

Since the representations worked by texts belong to the realm of ideology, literary discourse is both of the same order as the ideological and yet is capable of a reflexive, self-distancing relation to it. The crucial questions for structuralist-Marxist literary criticism are thus epistemological: what are the mechanisms of the production of literary knowledge, how and to what extent can this knowledge be differentiated from ideology, how does it relate to

scientific knowledge? In exploring these questions it runs the risk of once again hypostatizing literary discourse as a distinct ontological domain; it does also, however, open up the possibility of a detailed analysis of specifically textual processes which is nevertheless connected to an analysis (via the concept of ideology) of class power.

I have called the third tradition of Marxist criticism ‘Gramscian’, and I shall mention it only briefly. I mean by this term, not a particular allegiance to Gramsci’s thought but a more diffuse attention to the specific conditions of ruling class hegemony. This would include, for example, analyses of literature as a historical institution (much of Raymond Williams’s work belongs here, as does Eagleton’s *The Function of Criticism*, 1984); of the class function of intellectuals; and of the contradictory interrelationship between canonical and non-canonical cultural forms as they are used in the formation of a ‘national-popular’ culture (the work of Stuart Hall and the Birmingham School, much of Tony Bennett’s work, and more generally the emerging tradition of cultural studies could be included here).

Let me finish by defining what I think the current force of Marxist criticism is. It resides in a four-fold problematization which in part overlaps with the questions posed by other forms of criticism but which has both a range and a political intensity that only feminist theory can match.

The first has to do with the status of theoretical concepts and with the effects of theoretical practice. The precondition of Marxist criticism is a reflection upon its own conditions of existence—that is, upon the material and discursive conditions of the ‘relative autonomy’ of the cultural sphere, and upon the disciplinary network (including the relation to other critical methods) within which it is grounded.

The second concerns the status of its object: instead of taking the concept of Literature for granted, Marxist criticism has attempted to theorize the historical constitution of Literature as a system of normative values with a complex relation to class power; and it has refused the obviousness of this object in order to replace it with a different one—the processes of constitution themselves, both at a systemic level and at the level of interpretative paradigms.

This then merges with the third area of problematization, which has to do with the practices of literary study. Here the question of value is crucial; the major shift operated by Marxist criticism seems to me to have been to move away from understanding value as conformity to a set of unchanging aesthetic attributes in order to define it positionally and differentially—that is, as a function of the uses of texts. This shift has implications for understanding the process of canon-formation and for the ordinary critical practices of reading, which now neither work upon a given object nor derive from it an inherent value.

The fourth area, finally, is that of the field of relations within which the object of criticism is to be situated. This is not a merely taxonomic question, since it involves the complex and changing relations of authority and legitimacy between discursive domains and the differential status of the knowledges they produce. It is, ultimately, a question about the class control of discourse, about the possibilities of discursive contestation, and about ways of changing the image of the landscape (and eventually the landscape itself).

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