

Marxism and Literary History

JOHN FROW

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A NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

Wherever possible I have used a readily available English translation, modifying it where necessary; these modifications are indicated in the notes. All translations from French, German, and Spanish have been checked against the original texts. In cases where verbal detail is of particular importance, I have given the original text together with a translation. Where no translation is specified, the translation is my own.

Preface

IN THIS BOOK I try to theorize the concepts of system and history for a Marxist theory of literary discourse. This theorization is conceived as part of a semiotically oriented intervention in cultural politics. I am not interested in producing a general Marxist theory of literature or in contributing to an aesthetics; and I do not attempt a philosophical purification of these categories. They are difficult categories and I seek to make them more so; but the point is to make them fit tools for critical and political uses.

I use the concept of system in the sense of a nontotalized formation which sets epistemological and practical limits to discourse, and which is thereby productive of discourse; it does not have here its speculative or its systems-theoretical sense of a closed and self-regulating totality. In addition, I seek consistently to deploy the concept in counterpoint to its ongoing deconstruction.

In the same way, the concept of history does not carry the sense of an enfolding narrative continuum or of the given ground of human action. It is used to theorize the discontinuous, nonteleological dynamic of the literary system and the multiple temporalities of texts within complex sets of intertextual relations.

The theoretical framework and intent of the book is a nondogmatic and nonorthodox Marxism which I hope will require no apology. I work within an antihumanist, antihistoricist, and anti-Hegelian tradition, but am also intellectually close to the post-structuralism of Foucault and Derrida. The interplay and sometimes the strain between these traditions will be evident (I hope fruitfully) throughout the book.

My argument is Marxist above all in its commitment to the concept of class and class struggle and to considering the intrication of power in

symbolic systems. Chapter 1 seeks to situate this commitment politically and intellectually. I then borrow from Hegelian Marxism the device of prefacing a construction of theoretical categories with a reflection upon the prehistory of those categories. In the rest of Chapter 1 and in Chapter 2 I develop a selective genealogy by constructing what I take to be the problematics of historicist, structuralist, and post-structuralist Marxist literary theory. In particular, I elaborate a cumulative critique of the categories of representation and ideology, the epistemological categories which have been used diversely to explore the workings of literary discourse. In Chapter 3 I then propose an alternative model of discourse. The concept of ideology is thought, in nonrepresentational terms, as a *state* of discourse; and discourse itself is thought not through the Saussurean opposition of the systemic to the nonsystemic but as a structured regulation of practices. I draw here in particular upon the work of Bakhtin, Halliday, Pêcheux, and Foucault.

This reworking of the category of discourse affects the way in which literary discourse can be thought. In Chapter 4 I construct a second genealogical line, that of Russian Formalism, in order to lay the foundations for a workable concept of the literary system. What I have tried to redeem from Formalist theory is a category of system which is in principle capable of accounting both for the structuring role of discursive authority and for the constitutive function of change and discontinuity. Chapter 5 further explores the modes of temporality and the institutional status of the literary system. It constructs a model of the negative intertextual dynamic of the system, but seeks also to qualify the historical generality of the model.

Chapter 6 develops the concept of intertextuality, which is central to thinking relations of discursive authority and discursive transformation. Through a series of analyses I pose the question of how the interaction between code and message, system and text, which constitutes the abstract dynamic of literary change, works as a principle of textual construction and can be identified in a reading. In Chapter 7 the categories of text and reading are then moved from the level of specific entities and processes to the level of systemic categories. The text is defined as a relational structure which is variably constituted through its integration in particular historical systems; and reading is defined in terms of institutional organizations of interpretive interest.

Clearly one of the dangers this approach runs is that of objectifying the category of system. In the last chapter, Chapter 8, I take the system to be itself the product of particular processes of construction. Through readings

of an exchange between Derrida and Foucault and of Derrida's essay on the *parergon*, I raise the question of the possibility of setting limits to interpretation, of the real effectivity of limits, and of the function of limits and frames in the constitution of the literary as a historically specific discursive domain. These are, more generally, questions about the politics of reading.

I HAVE WORKED for the past ten years in the Comparative Literature program at Murdoch University. The structure of the program and the university's commitment to interdisciplinary work have made teaching there a consistently rewarding experience. Most of what I know I have learned from my colleagues and my students; Horst Ruthrof in particular has been constantly supportive.

A number of people have read and commented on all or part of the manuscript in its various stages. I owe particular thanks to Mayerlene Frow and Wolfgang Holdheim for their contribution to an earlier version of the text, and more recently to Anne Freadman, Wlad Godzich, Bill Green, Ian Hunter, Noel King, Meaghan Morris, Ian Reid, and Lesley Stern. Didier Coste and the Asociación Noesis generously provided me with shelter in which to complete the manuscript, and Cynthia Baker worked with great dedication to produce it in a final form.

Christine Alavi made the writing of the book possible.

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For Toby and Eleanor

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1

Introduction

ANY BEGINNING is determined by the exclusions it operates and the conclusions it repeats. A beginning is not an origin; there can be no founding or finding of first principles which would be prior to the working out of those principles in the course of an argument. The primitive categories of this book could be established only in an infinite regression, because they both constitute and are constituted in ramified processes of conceptual and political exchange. To begin is to interrupt these exchanges, to take a point in a series and disregard what precedes it. A beginning is always a coming between—an intervention, or a mediation.

This means on the one hand that a beginning is the more or less differential repetition of a series of other texts, that it is structured by its inscription within limits and within textual chains. But it is also, in Edward Said's sense, a point of departure, a determinate production of difference.¹ This is one of the theses about literary history that this book will attempt to argue: that textual events are not arbitrary in relation to the system which structures their occurrence. It is true that they are not contained by this system (they cannot be reduced to its terms since they may exceed them), but what makes them possible is *this* system, not any other. When texts are displaced into other literary systems, they are reconstituted in a more complex articulation which establishes a more complex limit on interpretation. Limits are not necessarily to be respected, of course. The patron god of hermeneutics, the bearer of messages from the greater gods, was also the god both of boundaries and of the crossing of boundaries, and the patron of a special mercantile class of what Homer called "professional boundary-crossers."² The kind of theory I want to develop will take note both of the determinacy of boundaries and of the need to transgress them, to be disrespectful of the limits of proper authority.

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The question of beginning, says Said, conceals four different questions: those of *training* (the institutional context of writing); of the *material* which is worked; of the intertextual *point of departure*; and of the *disciplinary specificity* of textual production.³ These are, again, essentially questions about limits—that is, about how discursive limits are imposed and particular objects of discourse delimited. But they are also about how beginning-interventions can interrupt these limits and transform discursive objects. I will pose them as the question of three distinct contexts and three distinct crises in which this book seeks to intervene.

The first concerns the context of literary criticism as an institution and as a set of institutionally regulated practices. To see the activity of literary criticism in this way is to reverse the traditional patterns of methodological reflection, which have been concerned with the epistemological protocols governing reading, and to tie the practice of reading instead to the procedures of an apparatus of disciplinary training. In recent years such a reversal has increasingly led to a recognition of the ways in which the constitution of Literature, as an apparently self-contained order of canonic texts, has been a function of the workings of this apparatus. The shift in attention involved here has been manifested unevenly across different national cultures. In France and Germany in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it took the form of proposals for reform of the university and of local pedagogic structures (for example, the two volumes of *Ansichten* and *Neue Ansichten einer künftigen Germanistik*) as well as of a critique of the role of the educational apparatus in the reproduction of class relations (such as the work of Pierre Bourdieu and of Renée Balibar). In the United Kingdom it has taken the form both of a prolonged battle against an entrenched and reactionary Leavisite orthodoxy and of analyses, following on the work of Raymond Williams, of the historical and institutional conditions of demarcation and maintenance of the Literary. In the United States the rapid installation of deconstruction as a new and depressingly depoliticized orthodoxy has been accompanied on the one hand by a pervasive sense of the “loss of the social value and vision of the humanities”⁴ and on the other by a sharpened awareness of the disciplinary status of the practices of literary study.

I use the word *discipline* in Foucault's sense of an organization of relations, techniques, and rules which is to be thought not as a repressive apparatus but as a machine for the production of specific behaviors and discourses. Stanley Fish has tried to theorize the concept of the profession in a similar way, arguing that there can be no transcendence of any par-

ticular professional system since even alternative or oppositional practices are internal to the system.⁵ The argument is, I think, compelling; what is less attractive is the tendency to which it gives rise to conflate an argument for the givenness of the professional system with an argument for acceptance of the actual state of this system. The discussion of professionalism has been much more useful when it has opened the concept out to a comparative study of the historical constitution of professionalism. Samuel Weber, for example, following Bledstein, has outlined the ideology by which from the late nineteenth century onward the "professional" defined the services he rendered as incommensurable with and irreducible to commodity relationships. In order to sustain this ideology, that is "in order for the authority of the professional to be recognized as autonomous, the 'field' of his 'competence' had to be defined as essentially self-contained, in accordance with the 'natural' self-identity of its 'objects.'"⁶ Fields are constructed by an initial attention to the borders which demarcate them; but the visibility of limits then tends to be replaced by the detail of rules derived from the founding principles.⁷ Said similarly argues that the professional elaboration of the interior of a field tends to block off critical methodological considerations: "A principle of silent exclusion operates within and at the boundaries of discourse; this has become so internalized that fields, disciplines, and their discourses have taken on the status of immutable durability."⁸ In particular, the formation and monumentalization of a canon acts as "a blocking device for methodological and disciplinary self-questioning."⁹ This process has very direct political consequences, which Said spells out elsewhere: literary critics' "passive devotion to masterpieces, culture, texts, and structures posited simply in their own 'texts' as functioning yet finished enterprises, poses no threat to authority or to values kept in circulation and managed by the technocratic managers."¹⁰

A Marxist intervention in the discipline of literary studies cannot hope to escape the disciplinary constraints which enable the production of theory, but it can claim to be able to turn back upon these constraints, to indicate the political consequences of boundaries, and to formulate strategies for change. To reflect upon the institutional conditions of constitution of theoretical categories is at once to perform a critique of and to be complicit with the functions of a discipline. These functions can be schematically summarized as the organization and closure of a body of knowledge; the establishment of a canon and a set of methodological paradigms; the administration of forms of accreditation and exclusion; the

controlled transmission of knowledge to "disciples"; the establishment of hierarchies of authority; and the definition of appropriate positions of utterance. Building the disciplinary position of enunciation into the theory—without which the effects of this position remain an uncontrolled and uncontrollable secret¹¹—is therefore a methodological and tactical necessity; but it is also a way of qualifying any claim of Marxist theory to critical exteriority.

The second context in which this book is situated is directly political. A first version of the book was written in the United States at the end of the Vietnam war. It is rewritten today in a world in which the extermination of the human race is a present possibility. The time between these two writings has witnessed a global crisis of capitalism which has produced massive unemployment and shifted the balance of financial power even further against the Third World; the installation of reactionary regimes in most major Western nations; the extension of the power of U.S. imperialism, both through the increasing control exercised by transnational corporations, the international monetary organizations, and the state-sponsored trade in arms, and through direct military intervention, concentrated most recently in Central America and the Caribbean; the increasingly specular identification of the Soviet Union and the United States; the invasion of Afghanistan and the suppression of the Solidarity movement in Poland; the moral failure of the Cultural Revolution in China and the political failures of Eurocommunism; the political demoralization of large sections of the Western intelligentsia; and, overshadowing everything else, the building up of the arsenal of nuclear weapons to an apparently uncontrollable extent, together with the strengthening of the state and its powers of repression and surveillance to which this gives rise. None of these processes is my immediate concern, but they are my *ultimate* concern. While I insist throughout this book that the study of literary discourse must be nonreductive and must attend to the specificity of literary structures and systems, I also insist that the study of literary texts cannot and should not be separated from ordinary political struggle. Certainly, as Bernard Sharratt writes, "it is too easy to argue for a chain of connections linking one's academic or cultural 'interventions' in England to some putative global strategy of liberation, an alliance at a distance or a sectoral solidarity,"¹² just as it is equally facile to be dismissive of academic theorization. Connections between practices are never given but have to be constructed, with great difficulty and great possibilities of waste. But what is always given is that the practices of literary study are political through and through.

The third relevant context in which this book intervenes is that of Marxist theory and the so-called crisis of Marxism. The crisis is in the first place political and has to do with the possibility of Marxist intellectual work in the absence of a credible mass movement informed by Marxist principles; with the transformation of Marxism in the Soviet Union into an ideology providing legitimation for new forms of class domination;¹³ and with challenges mounted, above all by the women's movement, against the monolithic and authoritarian tendencies in Marxism. But this political crisis shades off into a theoretical crisis, caused above all by the inability of the Althusserian paradigm to sustain its momentum or rework itself in the face of criticisms from both its opponents and its adherents. For all its failings, this paradigm was the one current in contemporary Marxist thought with the potential for drastically rethinking the aporias of classical Marxism. The various humanist or culturalist or dogmatic Marxisms which survive it—and this includes most of the Hegelian Marxisms prevalent in the United States—are intellectually moribund and politically sterile.

The political and theoretical radicalism of Marxism can no longer be taken for granted. Nor can it be assumed to be a united whole with its core categories surviving intact (but this means as well that it is not the imaginary monolith constructed by its enemies). Anyone now working with and committed to Marxist theory will have to use concepts which are insecure, tentative, exploratory; will have to recognize the need to draw upon bodies of thought elaborated outside Marxism, and often this will demand an arduous process of reworking alien categories; will have to be deeply suspicious of some of the central categories of Marxism itself. This book is nevertheless an essay *in* Marxist literary theory. I mean by this to claim a position in relation both to a theoretical tradition and to socialist practice. *Marxist* designates not a belief system but a tool which should be discarded when it no longer works adequately. My present judgment is that it can be made to work and that, together with feminism (a problematic "together"), it is the only body of thought capable of giving theoretical guidance to socialist practice (and this includes guidance in the struggle against the repressive regimes of state capitalism and authoritarian party structures). In particular, it is a compelling alternative to the various forms of liberal humanism which in their indefinite deferral of political positioning have been able to offer no serious resistance to the depredations of a power which is neither liberal nor humane.

THE POSSIBILITY of a Marxist literary theory is given in the promise and the ambiguity of the central Marxist metaphors relating the symbolic

order to the total social process. The promise is that questions of signification and epistemology can be shifted to a different plane, where they would be reconstrued as questions about the relations between levels or moments of social structure and within a hierarchy of social practices. The ambiguity lies in the initial distinction between levels of the real and between the real and the symbolic. This distinction can either be abolished in a dialectical reintegration of the symbolic order in the real, and the recognition that the real is itself constantly produced and reproduced, or it can be perpetuated as a more powerful unilinear model of causality which relegates the symbolic order to the status of a determinate effect.

Classical Marxist literary theory (from Plekhanov and Mehring, through such disparate writers as Caudwell, Lukács, Fischer, and Sanchez Vasquez, to the official proponents of the doctrine of realism—Weimann, Träger—or heterodox aestheticians like Morawski) has shown a surprising unity in its conception of literary signification; and this unity is provided by its acceptance of the metaphor of the determination of the superstructure by the economic base as an ontological model. The mode of this determination has been thought in radically different ways (as reflection, correspondence, interaction, homology, analogy, affinity, expression, testimony, modeling), but the structure of the terms involved is relatively constant. In its simplest and most mechanical acceptance, the metaphor implies a division of reality into two parts, one of which is more real than the other; the literary text belongs to the superstructure and so has a purely epiphenomenal status with respect to the socioeconomic base. This is, however, no more than a starting point for classical Marxist theory. The originality of the tradition lies in its grafting of this division onto the structure of literary discourse, so that rather than the text's being a purely determinate and secondary phenomenon, it internalizes the division between base and superstructure and superimposes it on the traditional dichotomy of form and content.

Let me illustrate this with a passage from Henri Arvon's exposition of the matter:

Marxist aesthetics . . . is forced to admit the priority of content, which then creates the need for an appropriate form . . . The relations between content and form correspond to the more general relations between the economic base and the ideological superstructure; content is the governing factor and though form in the final analysis is always necessarily subservient to it, it is not thereby shorn of all autonomy whatsoever.¹⁴

Content is "prior" because it is, or is the representative of, reality *within* the work. But this leads to a profoundly ambivalent ontology of the text. Insofar as content is more real than form, it is both a literary fact and a nonliterary fact (it is reality itself); it is both inside and outside the text, and so the text straddles two realms, two distinct orders of being—reality and fiction. The signified of the text lies outside the sign; or more precisely, the literary sign incorporates the referent into itself, since the content is grasped as both signified and referent.

Content is thus the presence of an absence, signifying the absent presence of reality, and the text is torn between the phenomenality of the signifier and the quasibstantiality of the signified. Substance enters the text through the presence of content, but it is absent insofar as content is also an absence (that is, insofar as it also belongs to the order of literary discourse). This implies, further, that it is only this ambivalently external/internal factor which is fully historical. Historicity is denied to the *structure* of the text (the "form" which is "subservient" to content) and is displaced onto that absence which manifests itself as a ghostly concreteness. Hence the inevitable disjuncture between a formal analysis of the text, which can apprehend only the inessential, and an analysis of content, which can come to terms with the essential historicity of the text only by basing itself on that which is not the text (the writer's grasp of reality). The categories of traditional bourgeois aesthetics—the opposition of inside/outside, the text as a stasis outside of time—are thus covertly reintroduced. Since content, which is prior and determinant, is never really contaminated by its immanence within the formal organization of the text (the shell which encloses it without touching it, or the transparent veil through which we glimpse, in a more or less distorted fashion, "reality"), there can be no structural connection between the two moments. This means that the social determination of the text can be formulated in a general manner, but that it "would not be extended to the *intrinsic* structure, nor therefore to the detailed scientific *analysis* of the work."¹⁵ The text is merely set in motion by an external force, and thereafter becomes totally autonomous.

The complicated paradox by which the text is seen as a superstructural moment which itself internally reproduces the opposition of base/superstructure should perhaps be taken as an attempt to redeem the literary text from its purely derivative status. But such an attempt can never be completely successful so long as the linkage between the signifier and the signified is continually broken and the signified is displaced to a position

outside the sign, where it merges with the referent. In this process the content, as a *formal* component of the text, must necessarily remain a surrogate, the sign of a reality which is *other* and which is *elsewhere*. The text can imitate this reality, can try to annihilate itself as artifice in order to draw into itself some of the properties of this nature, but it will always remain tainted by the original sin of its illusoriness. Mechanical materialism, which is never more than a reversal of idealism, reproduces a problematic which is still essentially metaphysical. The complex of forces and relations of production which constitutes the "base" takes on the overtones of a primal matter, and is set in opposition to the immateriality of the superstructure. The literary text cannot be considered a constitutive moment of the social but only a simple expression of it, the subjective reflex of a self-sufficient objectivity.¹⁶

The central problem of Marxist aesthetics becomes, then, that of the mediations between these two radically distinct poles. In most cases the solutions proposed have depended on a kind of alchemical transsubstantiation of economic into superstructural factors, and so, by extension, of the order of reality into the order of fiction. The text is a direct or mediated reflection of the structure of the material base, and its value is guaranteed to the extent to which it can create the illusion of substantiality. (Thus, in an extreme case, Zhdanov can claim that "socialist realism is the highest form of art known because of the reality which it paints.")¹⁷ Mediation is effected, in other words, through a confusion of the two orders, through a sleight of hand by which reality itself permeates the literary text. But this failure to distinguish rigorously between the real and the fictive, to exclude the "real" from the order of fiction, has also been a failure to conceive of the fictive as part of the real (as a social practice with real effects). Even where a relation, not of direct determination but of homology between the base and the superstructure, is proposed, this still fails to take account of the function of discursive practices within social relations of production, and still subordinates textual structure to an originary structure of which it is the expression. Nor is it a sufficient solution to have recourse to the marked card of an unspecified interaction between base and superstructure (with the "determination in the last instance by the economic" always hidden in the deck). This formula remains empty as long as it is merely concessionary, as long as literary discourse is still theorized within the framework of a substantialist ontology.

The further consequence of the base/superstructure metaphor which is