



NEW ACCENTS

second edition

Formalism and Marxism

Tony Bennett

Tony
Bennett

Formalism and Marxism



To my father and mother, with thanks

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

No doubt a third General Editor's Preface to *New Accents* seems hard to justify. What is there left to say? Twenty-five years ago, the series began with a very clear purpose. Its major concern was the newly perplexed world of academic literary studies, where hectic monsters called 'Theory', 'Linguistics' and 'Politics' ranged. In particular, it aimed itself at those undergraduates or beginning postgraduate students who were either learning to come to terms with the new developments or were being sternly warned against them.

New Accents deliberately took sides. Thus the first Preface spoke darkly, in 1977, of 'a time of rapid and radical social change', of the 'erosion of the assumptions and presuppositions' central to the study of literature. 'Modes and categories inherited from the past' it announced, 'no longer seem to fit the reality experienced by a new generation'. The aim of each volume would be to 'encourage rather than resist the process of change' by combining nuts-and-bolts exposition of new ideas with clear and detailed explanation of related conceptual developments. If mystification (or downright demonisation) was the enemy, lucidity (with a nod to the compromises inevitably at stake there) became a friend. If a 'distinctive discourse of the future' beckoned, we wanted at least to be able to understand it.

With the apocalypse duly noted, the second Preface proceeded

piously to fret over the nature of whatever rough beast might stagger portentously from the rubble. 'How can we recognise or deal with the new?', it complained, reporting nevertheless the dismaying advance of 'a host of barely respectable activities for which we have no reassuring names' and promising a programme of wary surveillance at 'the boundaries of theprecedented and at the limit of the thinkable'. Its conclusion, 'the unthinkable, after all, is that which covertly shapes our thoughts' may rank as a truism. But in so far as it offered some sort of useable purchase on a world of crumbling certainties, it is not to be blushed for.

In the circumstances, any subsequent, and surely final, effort can only modestly look back, marvelling that the series is still here, and not unreasonably congratulating itself on having provided an initial outlet for what turned, over the years, into some of the distinctive voices and topics in literary studies. But the volumes now re-presented have more than a mere historical interest. As their authors indicate, the issues they raised are still potent, the arguments with which they engaged are still disturbing. In short, we weren't wrong. Academic study did change rapidly and radically to match, even to help to generate, wide reaching social changes. A new set of discourses was developed to negotiate those upheavals. Nor has the process ceased. In our deliquescent world, what was unthinkable inside and outside the academy all those years ago now seems regularly to come to pass.

Whether the *New Accents* volumes provided adequate warning of, maps for, guides to, or nudges in the direction of this new terrain is scarcely for me to say. Perhaps our best achievement lay in cultivating the sense that it was there. The only justification for a reluctant third attempt at a Preface is the belief that it still is.

TERENCE HAWKES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is my first book and, in writing it, I have learned – somewhat to my surprise – just how much of a collective undertaking a book really is. Whilst I must accept final responsibility for any errors of fact or interpretation that remain, I owe a real debt of thanks to those who commented on the book during the various stages of its production and, in so doing, helped me to remove at least some of its weaknesses.

I am particularly indebted to Professor Terence Hawkes of University College, Cardiff – first, for giving me the opportunity to write this book and, second, for the detailed and painstaking criticisms he made of my early drafts. If I have succeeded at all in communicating my thoughts in a relatively direct and easily accessible way, this is due in no small part to the extraordinarily active contribution which Professor Hawkes has made as the editor of the *New Accents* series.

Next, I should like to thank those friends and colleagues at the Open University who commented on earlier versions of the book: in particular, Janet Woollacott and Grahame Thompson. To my brother Michael I owe thanks for both his encouraging comments and for, as ever, spotting where I was skating on thin ice. I should also like to record my debt to Professor Graham Martin of the Open University: my book would be the poorer but for the benefit I have derived from discussing with him some of the questions raised within it.

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Finally, and above all, my thanks to Sue for all her help and understanding and to Tanya, Oliver and James for providing the distractions.

Since writing the above, I have received further comments on my book from Terry Eagleton of Wadham College, Oxford, and Stuart Hall of Birmingham University. I am grateful to both of them for the helpful and friendly spirit in which they offered their criticisms.

CONTENTS

GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE	vii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ix
PART ONE Formalism revisited	1
1 Criticism and literature	3
<i>Questions of language</i>	3
<i>Questions of literature</i>	5
<i>Questions of aesthetics</i>	8
2 Formalism and Marxism	15
<i>Russian Formalism: theoretical perspectives</i>	15
<i>Reassessing Formalism</i>	21
<i>Historical perspectives on Russian Formalism</i>	24
<i>New directions in Marxist criticism</i>	30
3 Russian Formalism: clearing the ground	36
<i>Linguistics and literature</i>	36
<i>The question of literariness: criticism and its object</i>	38
<i>The system and its elements: form and function</i>	41
<i>Against the 'metaphysic of the text'</i>	46
<i>The problem of literary evolution</i>	50

4	Formalism and beyond	53
	<i>The accomplishments of Formalism</i>	53
	<i>Saussure's magic carpet</i>	57
	<i>Bakhtin's historical poetics</i>	61
	<i>'Literature' as a historical category</i>	67
	PART TWO Marxist criticism: from aesthetics to politics	75
5	Marxism versus aesthetics	77
	<i>Formalism: a lost heritage</i>	77
	<i>Marxist criticism: aesthetics, politics and history</i>	80
	<i>Literature's 'non-said'</i>	86
6	Science, literature and ideology	90
	<i>On practices</i>	90
	<i>On ideology</i>	91
	<i>On science</i>	96
	<i>On art and literature</i>	97
7	The legacy of aesthetics	103
	<i>The lessons of Formalism</i>	103
	<i>A new idealism</i>	106
	<i>Criticism and politics</i>	111
8	Work in progress	116
	<i>The post-Althusserians</i>	116
	<i>Modes of literary production</i>	121
	<i>Literature and the social process</i>	127
9	Conclusion	137
	AFTERWORD	143
	NOTES	157
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	168
	INDEX	175

Part One

Formalism revisited

1

CRITICISM AND LITERATURE

QUESTIONS OF LANGUAGE

This study addresses itself to three related tasks. First, it sets out to introduce the work of the Russian Formalists, a group of literary theorists who made an extraordinarily vital and influential contribution to literary criticism during the decade or so after the October Revolution of 1917. Second, by arguing for a new interpretation of their work, it suggests that the Formalists should be viewed more seriously and sympathetically by Marxist critics than has hitherto been the case. Finally, as an undercurrent running beneath these concerns, it argues that many of the difficulties in which Marxist criticism currently finds itself can be traced to the fact that it has never clearly disentangled its concerns from those of traditional aesthetics. We hope, in part, to remedy this by proposing, on the basis of a critical re-examination of the work of the Formalists, a new set of concerns for Marxist criticism, a new concept of 'literature', which will shift it from the terrain of aesthetics to that of politics where it belongs.

Wide-ranging though these concerns are, they all revolve around the same set of questions: What is literature? By what methods should it be studied? Or, more radically: Is the category of 'literature' worth sustaining? If so, for what purposes? Much of our time will be taken up in

reviewing some of the different ways in which these questions have been answered and in examining their implications for the ways in which literary criticism should be conceived and conducted.

We must therefore be clear about what is involved in questions of this nature. For they are not questions which might be resolved empirically by generalizing from the similarities which those texts customarily regarded as 'works of literature' seem to have in common. They are, rather, questions about language or, more specifically, about the specialized theoretical languages or discourses of literary criticism and the functioning of the key terms, especially the term 'literature', within such discourses. Some understanding of language and of its implications for the nature of the discourses of literary criticism is therefore called for if we are both to put and respond to such questions in the appropriate terms.

This is only apparently a digression. For linguistics, once a somewhat recondite area of inquiry, now occupies a central position within the social and cultural sciences. At the level of method, techniques of analysis deriving from Ferdinand de Saussure's pioneering work on language have substantially influenced all areas of inquiry where the role of language and culture is seen to be central.¹ Similarly, at a philosophical level, the widening influence of linguistics has produced a heightened awareness of the role played by language in the process of inquiry itself. Especially important here is the light linguistics has cast on the relationship between the specialized theoretical languages or discourses of the various sciences and the 'objects' of which they speak.

For the moment, it is the latter of these influences which concerns us. Baldly summarized, Saussure's central perception was that language signifies reality by bestowing a particular, linguistically structured form of conceptual organization upon it. What the signifiers of language – the sound structures of speech and the notations by which these are represented in writing – signify, Saussure argued, are not real things or real relationships but the concepts of things, the concepts of relationships, each signifier deriving its meaning from its relationship to other signifiers within the system of relationships mapped out by language itself. The 'objects' of which language speaks are not 'real objects', external to language, but 'conceptual objects' located entirely within language. The word 'ox', according to Saussure's famous example,

signifies not a real ox but the concept of an ox, and it is able to do so by virtue of the relationships of similarity and difference which define its position in relation to the other signifiers comprising modern English. There is no intrinsic connection between the real ox and the word 'ox' by virtue of which the meaning of the latter is produced. The relationship between the signifier and signified is arbitrary: that is, it is a matter of convention.

This is not to deny that there exists a real world external to the signifying mantle which language casts upon it. But it is to maintain that our knowledge or appropriation of that world is always mediated through and influenced by the organizing structure which language inevitably places between it and ourselves. Oxen exist. No one is denying that. But the concept of an 'ox' as a particular type of domesticated quadruped belonging to the bovine species – a concept through which, in our culture, we appropriate the 'real ox' – exists solely as part of a system of meaning that is produced and defined by the functioning of the word 'ox' within language.

The difficulty is that, although bestowing a signification, a particular conceptual organization on reality, language constantly generates the illusion that it reflects reality instead of signifying it. The organization of the relationships between objects in the world outside language appears to be the same as the organization of the relationships between the concepts of objects within language and, indeed, the latter appears to be the mere mirroring of the former.

QUESTIONS OF LITERATURE

What has been said about language in general applies just as much to the specialist languages or discourses of literary criticism. These, too, are significations of reality and not reflections of it: particular orderings of concepts within and by means of language which entirely determine the ways in which written texts are accessible to thought.

Thus, if we put the question: 'What is literature?' this can only mean: what concept does the term 'literature' signify? What function does it fulfil and what distinctions does it operate within language? Everything depends on the context within which the term is used. At the most general level, it simply denotes 'that which is written' and

refers to all forms of writing, from *belles lettres* to graffiti. In a second and more restrictive usage, it refers to the concept of fictional, imaginative or creative writing, including both 'serious' and 'popular' genres, as distinct from, say, philosophical or scientific texts.

According to its most distinctive usage within literary criticism, however, 'literature' denotes the concept of a special and privileged set of fictional, imaginative or creative forms of writing which, it is argued, exhibit certain specific properties that require special methods of analysis if they are to be properly understood. It is this concept of 'literature' that we find reflected in the concerns of aesthetics. I shall henceforward represent this concept as 'literature' throughout the remainder of this chapter. If literary criticism has to do with the elucidation and explanation of those specifically 'literary' qualities which are felt to distinguish a selected set of written texts within the field of imaginative writing in general, then clearly such a practice requires a legitimating 'set of rules', an aesthetic, which will propose criteria for distinguishing between the 'literary' and the 'non-literary' in this special sense.

When we speak of 'literature' in this way, we are not speaking of some objective and fixed body of written texts to which the word 'literature' is applied merely as a descriptive label. We are rather speaking of a concept – the concept of a circumscribed set of texts felt to be of special value – which exists and has meaning solely within the discourses of literary criticism. This is not to say that the actual texts to which this concept is applied – the commonly received 'great tradition', say – exist only within such discourses. What is in dispute is not the material existence of such texts but the contention that, in any part of their objective and material presence, they declare themselves to be 'literature'. Written texts do not organize themselves into the 'literary' and the 'non-literary'. They are so organized only by the operations of criticism upon them. Far from reflecting a somehow natural or spontaneous system of relationships between written texts, literary criticism organizes those texts into a system of relationships which is the product of its own discourse and of the distinctions between the 'literary' and the 'non-literary' which it operates.

As we shall see, this contention is fully substantiated by the history of the term 'literature' which finally achieved the range of meaning

discussed above only during the nineteenth century, side by side with the consolidation of literary criticism and aesthetics as autonomous and academically entrenched areas of inquiry. Meanwhile, it is important to note that the particular meaning attributed to the word 'literature' may vary to the extent that schools of literary criticism frequently differ with regard to their conceptions as to precisely what the distinguishing features of 'literature' are and, accordingly, the methods required to elucidate them. Thus it may be argued, as in idealist aesthetics, that a particular type of sensibility uniquely distinguishes the genuinely 'literary' text and that the discernment of this sensibility is achieved through empathy or intuition. Or it may be argued, as did the Russian Formalists, that the uniqueness of 'literature' consists in its tendency to 'defamiliarize' experience and that the true concern of literary scholarship should be to analyse the formal devices by means of which such an effect is achieved. Finally, this time in the camp of Marxism, it may be argued, as Louis Althusser, Pierre Macherey and Terry Eagleton have done, that 'literature' is uniquely defined by its capacity to reveal or rupture from within the terms of seeing proposed by the categories of dominant ideologies. The concern of Marxist criticism, according to this definition of 'literature', thus becomes that of understanding the formal processes through which literary texts work upon and transform dominant ideological forms.

Different criticisms, then, propose different concepts of 'literature', although all agree that 'literature' is to be defined as, in one sense or another, a special type of writing which needs to be dealt with by a special level of theorizing. In so doing, they also produce their own concerns in relation to such 'literary' works: their own constructions of the essential tasks of criticism and of the means by which these should be pursued. Ultimately, the 'literature' with which different critical traditions deal is not the same 'literature'. Even where there is broad agreement about precisely which texts are to be regarded as 'literary', these may be held to be 'literary' in quite different ways and may, accordingly, be approached and studied from quite different perspectives with often radically different aims in view.

It is tempting, faced with such competing definitions of 'literature' and of the critical task, to ask: 'Which is correct?' But, if what has been

said so far holds true, there can be no way of answering this question. For there is no such 'thing' as *literature*, no body of written texts which self-evidently bear on their surface some immediately perceivable and indisputable literary essence which can be invoked as the arbiter of the relative merits of competing traditions of literary criticism.

In place of asking which is correct, then, we need to examine how these different concepts of 'literature' function within the critical discourses of which they form a part and to assess them in terms of the lines of inquiry they open up. There is, however, from a Marxist perspective, a more primary set of questions that need to be asked: Does Marxism need a concept of 'literature' at all? Does it need an aesthetic? Can it have the one without the other?

It is to a preliminary consideration of these matters that we now turn. In doing so, however, it should be borne in mind that such questions are not resolvable with reference to what literature is but depend on what the term 'literature' *signifies*, or might be made to signify, as a term within Marxist theory.

QUESTIONS OF AESTHETICS

If the line of argument pursued so far gives rise to difficulties, this is in part because it runs contrary to the empiricist assumptions of the dominant forms of English and American criticism according to which written texts are held to sort themselves spontaneously into the 'literary' and the 'non-literary'. Let me be clear, then, about what I am and am not saying. I am not maintaining that those texts which, by common agreement, are referred to as 'literature' do not exist. To the contrary, such texts have an objectively verifiable material presence as texts, and it is important not to lose sight of this. Nor am I maintaining that the particular types of writing associated with those texts display no special properties which would justify or make useful their designation as a distinctive set of texts within the sphere of imaginative writing in general. Indeed, this is the central point I wish to debate. What I am maintaining is that the designation of such texts as 'literature' is not a response to a property that is internal or natural to them but a signification that is bestowed on them from without by the practice of criticism.