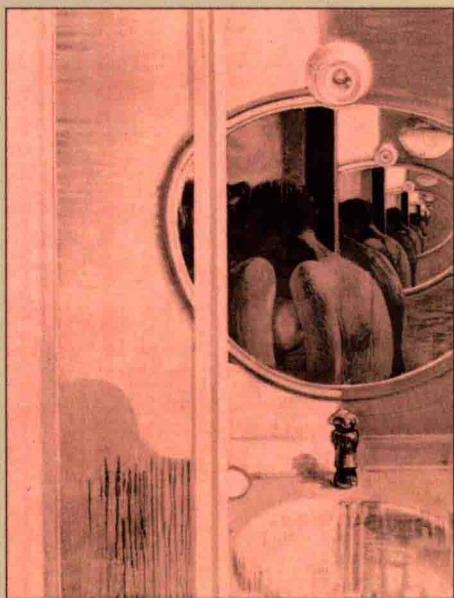

IMAGINARY RELATIONS

Aesthetics and Ideology in the
Theory of Historical Materialism



MICHAEL
SPRINKER

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V E R S O

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Ideology, then, is the expression of the relation between men and their 'world', that is, the (overdetermined) unity of the real relation and the imaginary relation between them and their real conditions of existence.

Louis Althusser, 'Marxism and Humanism'

In order for any political problem to be solved in reality, the way lies through the aesthetic...

Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*

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Preface

The itinerary charted in this book turned out rather differently from what had been anticipated when it was originally conceived several years ago. I expect this is a fairly common experience among authors, but in the present case the interest of the shift in terminology and concepts from portions of the earlier chapters to the later (in part attributable to their being written at widely separated periods), as well as in the trajectory which the project begins somewhat abruptly to follow after the sixth chapter, derives not only from its having been largely unforeseen, but also from its instancing much the same pattern which the book cites in the end as characteristic of aesthetic texts and empirical scientific inquiry alike. It is for others to decide whether the turn from a more or less straightforward critique of aesthetic ideology that is clearly in evidence in the opening chapters to a more accommodating position towards the aesthetic as a conceptual tool for materialist inquiry which emerges in the final chapters represents a plausible development in the argument of the entire book, or merely an antinomy on the order of Marx's notorious observations on Greek art posed at the outset.

Whatever else may be said about this aspect of *Imaginary Relations*, I should like to make it clear that on my reading the shift in focus and direction does not yet constitute an epistemological break with the problematic with which it opens. The questions that have traditionally vexed materialist aesthetics remain as much unresolved today as they were for Marx and Engels, and I have few illusions about having settled them unequivocally here. Georg Lukács once remarked that only with the disappearance of

capitalist social relations would the problem of the aesthetic be posed with full clarity and only then could an authentically materialist resolution be achieved. Setting aside the dubious historicism that underwrites Lukács's view, it would be in keeping with the drift of our argument to say that the social and political conditions of capitalist society have produced a spontaneous ideology of art inimical to materialist aesthetics. This book aims at no more than a preliminary clarification of terms and concepts and the creation of a theoretical space within which the problem can be rigorously interrogated.

Among the names and theories invoked throughout the text, none are more crucial to its argument than those of Paul de Man and Louis Althusser, the subjects of the two final essays. Since de Man's work is currently more familiar to (and more widely approved by) those who follow recent debates in literary theory and philosophy in the Anglophone world, no particular justification is required for invoking him repeatedly throughout the book. Althusser is another matter entirely. The eclipse of his authority both in France and in Britain has been widely remarked, even if the reasons for this development have not, to my mind, been adequately accounted for. The impact of Althusserianism in the United States has never been especially great, at least in philosophy and literary theory. If the present book has a single over-arching polemical purpose, it is to suggest the continuing importance of the project inaugurated by Althusser and his students to a broad range of inquiries in the human sciences, among which literary theory and aesthetics are surely to be numbered. To the extent that the current horizon of understanding in these disciplines is demarcated by the relationship between the aesthetic and the ideological, it can be said with justice that we remain determinately within the Althusserian problematic. Like Molière's ingenuous M. Jourdain, we have all been speaking the language of Althusserianism for some time without knowing it.

* * * * *

Without wishing to preempt the reader's privilege in deciding where and how to enter this text, it may nevertheless be useful at the outset to project the structure of the chapters as they are presently organized. We have all come to be properly suspicious of an author's *post festum* thoughts about his work, in particular when these appear in the guise of a prefatory essay. My own

account of how *Imaginary Relations* is constructed constitutes but one story among many that might be told of it. Readers can judge for themselves whether it be convincing or not.

Opening with the dilemma posed by Marx in the Introduction to the *Grundrisse* concerning the relation between the historical determination and the permanent aesthetic value of Greek art, the text turns to a series of readings in bourgeois aesthetic theory: the concept of imagination in Ruskin; the ideology of art proposed in Henry James's preface to *The Golden Bowl*; the limits of aesthetic formalization in a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins and in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. In each case, the attempt to harmonize contradictory elements in a closed, unified totality which reflects a classical notion of poetic or aesthetic form fails to resolve the semantic, conceptual complications immanent in the structure of the artifacts themselves. The concept of the aesthetic that emerges from this highly selective survey of bourgeois writings on art thus proves more recalcitrant to definition and control than has often been assumed, both by Marxist critics of the supposed idealism inherent in bourgeois aesthetics and by bourgeois ideologues of art.

For Marxism, of course, the problem of art and its relation to ideology turns on the historicity of the artifact. In chapters 4 through 6, Marx's fragmentary ruminations over this question are extended via consideration of several contemporary attempts to square the circle of poetic structure and historical contingency. These chapters are unified by their focus on the comparatively narrow problem of literary history. The difficulties besetting this now almost moribund discipline are addressed differently in the work of Jauss and *Rezeptionsästhetik*, by the Prague School, and by Michael Riffaterre. What unites them, however, is a tendency towards teleological totalization in their concept of historical structure. What Jauss specifically calls the 'ongoing totalization of the past through aesthetic experience' is at work in the deepest strata of the theoretical projects of all these thinkers, in the attempts to reconstruct the bases of literary history in the later work of R.S. Crane (the subject of chapter 5), and, somewhat surprisingly, in recent efforts within historical materialism itself to rethink such axial notions as determination and totalization.

The burden of chapters 6 through 8 is to show how Marxism has by no means achieved a permanent epistemological rupture with the historicist problematic of bourgeois historical writing. Chapter 6 takes up the project of Fredric Jameson, while chapter 7 compares the differing concepts of history underwriting the work

of Sartre and Althusser. It is there for the first time in the present text that Althusser's significance for the theory of historical materialism emerges, although the exposition of his texts is in the first instance mainly defensive and polemical. The chapter attempts only to establish that the political objections often raised against Althusserian theory are misplaced, when they are not simply scurrilous, and that the break Althusser achieved with notions of teleology and historical totalization remains a more viable option for theorizing materialist political practice than the ultimately poetic concept of history developed in Sartre's *Critique*. Chapter 8 develops this same line of argument, defending Althusserianism against charges of unmitigated political betrayal during the 1970s, while arguing for the continuing relevance of Althusser's major innovations in Marxist theory (especially in the area of ideology) for the research program of historical materialism. The foil for these reflections is provided by Perry Anderson's most recent book, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*.

Chapter 9 would seem at first an inexplicable detour in our itinerary, since it intervenes between the polemical defense of Althusserianism, mounted in chapters 7 and 8, and the exposition of Althusser's scattered writings on art which brings the book to a close. How, one might legitimately ask, does Paul de Man's life-long meditation on language contribute to the project of a materialist aesthetics? The question itself is expressed in somewhat different form by the various opponents of deconstruction, for whom Terry Eagleton here stands as a typical instance. While Eagleton is quite right to point to the 'steady, silent anti-Marxist polemic running through de Man's work', he is certainly wrong to attribute to de Man a naively idealist conception of language and its functioning. Eagleton's own view of Walter Benjamin, for example, overlaps considerably with de Man's, while the latter's account of Rousseau's political theory is largely compatible with Althusser's exposition of the ideological operations that govern the march of the argument in the *Social Contract*. The limits of de Man's own insight into the parallel paths he and Althusser pursued ought not to prevent our recognizing that one of the principal vectors of deconstruction follows the path of what Marxism has traditionally identified as the theory of ideology. That the ideological features of literary and philosophical texts are manifested in their linguistic and conceptual structure will hardly come as a surprise to Marxists, but the 'quite specific relations', as Althusser would say, between art and ideology are often enough

occluded in the familiar forms of ideological critique which remain a staple of much Marxist literary criticism. De Man's inquiry into language and the structure of texts marks the horizon from which materialist aesthetics will perforce have to advance.

This is surely not the place, nor am I the proper person, to assess the outcome of the final chapter of *Imaginary Relations*. I have already suggested that the turn in this chapter towards a concept of the aesthetic as an empirical rather than a formal moment may itself simply be a return to the antinomy with which the book began. What can be stated with a certain degree of confidence is that the purview of the aesthetic as a category within historical materialism is considerably greater than has generally been supposed, extending beyond the relatively confined subject-matter of the fine arts to economic (and other) theory, thus to the very mechanisms of knowledge production itself. My own path to this conclusion has proceeded via Althusser's writings on art, but there would be other possible routes to follow.

While I am somewhat wary of projecting the future trajectory of my own work — indeed, to do so unequivocally would run counter to the drift of the argument developed in this book — two projects seem to me immediately to follow from the inquiry pursued in *Imaginary Relations*. First, the standard account of aesthetics as a region within the theory of historical materialism requires revaluation. One of the lessons I have been able to draw from the essays incorporated here is that the Marxist theory of art has for the most part not been extended beyond the horizon of classical aesthetic theory. The genealogy of Marx's own thought suggests that Kant, Schiller, and Baumgarten were as integrally important to the emergence of historical materialism as Hegel or Ricardo. Nor is it clear that Marx, however strenuously he labored to overcome the historicism and humanism of his youthful writings, achieved a definitive break in all the theoretical regions that fall within the continent of history. As Althusser has continually reminded us, no epistemological rupture is ever permanent, and this because ideology is so. The history of Marxist aesthetics should be subjected to the kind of 'symptomatic reading' Althusser devoted to the texts of Marx. Among its many silences, one is likely, I suspect, to hear the name of 'Kant' sounded fairly often.

A second line of inquiry follows from some of the remarks hazarded in the closing pages of this book. The epochal debate in Marxist literary criticism that raged during the 1920s and 1930s over realism and modernism remains as much alive in

contemporary theory and criticism as ever. The apparent shift in terrain to modernism versus postmodernism should not obscure the fact that the real agenda in both cases involves concepts of history and art linked to determinate forms of social existence and the relative value these latter have in relation to each other. My own sense is that the entire debate is at least partly misdirected in its premature valorization of certain aesthetic forms. The judgment of superiority (modernism over realism, or vice versa) is usually made prior to any careful exposition and analysis of the particular relations between the specific historical (i.e., primarily ideological) determinations that are manifested in individual texts and the aesthetic forms characteristic of the era. Generally absent from this type of historical criticism (for instance, from Lukács's several attacks on modernism as aesthetically and socially regressive) is an account of the contradictory position of modernist art in relation to the overall social project of the Euro-American bourgeoisie. It follows that one must chart with some precision the historical trajectory of the bourgeois social formations (themselves unevenly developed, as Marx and Engels were among the first to point out), at the same time that the artifacts of high modernism need to be mapped in their aesthetic and ideological effectivity against different moments in this trajectory. One place to begin is with the apparently contradictory phenomenon of the manifest hostility among the great bourgeois modernists from Flaubert to Proust, Henry James, Thomas Mann, and Faulkner towards most aspects of bourgeois society. If modernism is the art form of a conquering and confident bourgeoisie, it remains to be explained why many of its highest achievements (produced by writers who were for the most part themselves of bourgeois origins) represent scathing critiques of bourgeois forms of social life. The key to this historical investigation lies, I think, in the early Althusserian concept of overdetermination. It would be imprudent for me to speculate any further at present.

* * * * *

The debts owed to numerous colleagues, friends, and even a few intellectual (I hope not personal) foes are too extensive to be acknowledged individually here. Most will be evident from the notes or, in some cases, in detailed engagements with previous work with which I have found it productive in pursuing my argument to disagree. There are, however, some institutional