RAYMOND WILLIAMS

MARXISM AND LITERATURE

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Introduction

This book is written in a time of radical change. Its subject, Marxism and Literature, is part of this change. Even twenty years ago, and especially in the English-speaking countries, it would have been possible to assume, on the one hand, that Marxism is a settled body of theory or doctrine, and, on the other hand, that Literature is a settled body of work, or kinds of work, with known general qualities and properties. A book of this kind might then reasonably have explored problems of the relations between them or, assuming a certain relationship, passed quickly to specific applications. The situation is now very different. Marxism, in many fields, and perhaps especially in cultural theory, has experienced at once a significant revival and a related openness and flexibility of theoretical development. Literature, meanwhile, for related reasons, has become problematic in quite new ways.

The purpose of this book is to introduce this period of active development, and to do so in the only way that seems appropriate to a body of thinking still in movement, by attempting at once to clarify and to contribute to it. This involves, necessarily, reviewing earlier positions, both Marxist and non-Marxist. But what is offered is not a summary; it is both a critique and an argument.

One way of making clear my sense of the situation from which this book begins is to describe, briefly, the development of my own position, in relation to Marxism and to literature, which, between them, in practice as much as in theory, have preoccupied most of my working life. My first contacts with Marxist literary argument occurred when I came to Cambridge to read English in 1939: not in the Faculty but in widespread student discussion. I was already relatively familiar with Marxist, or at least socialist and communist, political and economic analysis and argument. My experience of growing up in a working-class family had led me to accept the basic political position which they supported and clarified. The cultural and literary arguments, as I then encountered them, were in effect an extension from this, or a mode of affiliation to it. I did not then clearly realize this. The dependence, I believe, is still not generally

realized, in its full implications. Hardly anyone becomes a Marxist for primarily cultural or literary reasons, but for compelling political and economic reasons. In the urgencies of the thirties or the seventies that is understandable, but it can mean that a style of thought and certain defining propositions are picked up and applied, in good faith, as part of a political commitment, without necessarily having much independent substance and indeed without necessarily following from the basic analysis and argument. This is how I would now describe my own position as a student between 1939 and 1941, in which a confident but highly selective Marxism co-existed, awkwardly, with my ordinary academic work, until the incompatibility — fairly easily negotiable as between students and what is seen as a teaching establishment — became a problem not for campaigns or polemics but, harshly enough, for myself and for anything that I could call my own thinking. What I really learned from, and shared with, the dominant tones of that English Marxist argument was what I would now call, still with respect, a radical populism. It was an active, committed, popular tendency, concerned rather more (and to its advantage) with making literature than with judging it, and concerned above all to relate active literature to the lives of the majority of our own people. At the same time, alongside this, its range even of Marxist ideas was relatively narrow, and there were many problems and kinds of argument, highly developed in specialized studies, with which it did not connect and which it could therefore often only dismiss. As the consequent difficulties emerged, in the areas of activity and interest with which I was most directly and personally concerned, I began sensing and defining a set of problems which have since occupied most of my work. Exceptionally isolated in the changing political and cultural formations of the later forties and early fifties, I tried to discover an area of studies in which some of these questions might be answered, and some even posed. At the same time I read more widely in Marxism, continuing to share most of its political and economic positions, but carrying on my own cultural and literary work and inquiry at a certain conscious distance. That period is summed up in my book *Culture and Society* and, in the present context, in its chapter on 'Marxism and Culture'.

But from the mid-fifties new formations were emerging, notably what came to be called the New Left. I found, at this time, an

immediate affinity with my own kind of cultural and literary work (in positions which had in fact been latent as early as the work in *Politics and Letters* in 1947 and 1948; positions which remained undeveloped because the conditions for such a formation did not then fully exist). I found also, and crucially, Marxist thinking which was different, in some respects radically different, from what I and most people in Britain knew as Marxism. There was contact with older work that had not previously come our way — that of Lukács and of Brecht, for example. There was new contemporary work in Poland, in France, and in Britain itself. And while some of this work was exploring new ground, much of it, just as interestingly, was seeing Marxism as itself a historical development, with highly variable and even alternative positions.

I began then reading widely in the history of Marxism, trying especially to trace the particular formation, so decisive in cultural and literary analysis, which I now recognize as having been primarily systematized by Plekhanov, with much support from the later work of Engels, and popularized by dominant tendencies in Soviet Marxism. To see that theoretical formation clearly, and to trace its hybridization with a strong native radical populism, was to understand both my respect for and my distance from what I had hitherto known as Marxism *tout court*. It was also to gain a sense of the degree of selection and interpretation which, in relation both to Marx and to the whole long Marxist argument and inquiry, that familiar and orthodox position effectively represented. I could then read even the English Marxists of the thirties differently, and especially Christopher Caudwell. It is characteristic that the argument about Caudwell, which I had followed very carefully in the late forties and early fifties, had centred on the question characteristic of the style of that orthodox tradition: 'are his ideas Marxist or not?'. It is a style that has persisted, in some corners, with confident assertions that this or that is or is not a Marxist position. But now that I knew more of the history of Marxism, and of the variety of selective and alternative traditions within it, I could at last get free of the model which had been such an obstacle, whether in certainty or in doubt: the model of fixed and known Marxist positions, which in general had only to be applied, and the corresponding dismissal of all other kinds of thinking as non-Marxist, revisionist, neo-Hegelian, or bourgeois. Once the cen-

tral body of thinking was itself seen as active, developing, unfinished, and persistently contentious, many of the questions were open again, and, as a matter of fact, my respect for the body of thinking as a whole, including the orthodox tradition now seen as a tendency within it, significantly and decisively increased. I have come to see more and more clearly its radical differences from other bodies of thinking, but at the same time its complex connections with them, and its many unresolved problems.

It was in this situation that I felt the excitement of contact with more new Marxist work: the later work of Lukács, the later work of Sartre, the developing work of Goldmann and of Althusser, the variable and developing syntheses of Marxism and some forms of structuralism. At the same time, within this significant new activity, there was further access to older work, notably that of the Frankfurt School (in its most significant period in the twenties and thirties) and especially the work of Walter Benjamin; the extraordinarily original work of Antonio Gramsci; and, as a decisive element of a new sense of the tradition, newly translated work of Marx and especially the *Grundrisse*. As all this came in, during the sixties and early seventies, I often reflected, and in Cambridge had direct cause to reflect, on the contrast between the situation of the socialist student of literature in 1940 and in 1970. More generally I had reason to reflect on the contrast for any student of literature, in a situation in which an argument that had drifted into deadlock, or into local and partial positions, in the late thirties and forties, was being vigorously and significantly reopened.

In the early seventies I began discussing these issues in lectures and classes in Cambridge: at first with some opposition from some of my Faculty colleagues, who knew (but did not know) what Marxism and Literature amounted to. But this mattered less than the fact that my own long and often internal and solitary debate with what I had known as Marxism now took its place in a serious and extending international inquiry. I had opportunities to extend my discussions in Italy, in Scandinavia, in France, in North America, and in Germany, and with visitors from Hungary, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union. This book is the result of that period of discussion, in an international context in which I have had the sense, for the first time in my life, of belonging to a sphere and dimension of *work* in which I could

feel at home. But I have felt, at every point, the history of the previous thirty-five years, during which any contribution I might make had been developing in complex and in direct if often unrecorded contact, throughout, with Marxist ideas and arguments.

That individual history may be of some significance in relation to the development of Marxism and of thinking about Marxism in Britain during that period. But it has a more immediate relevance to the character of this book, and to its organization. In my first part I discuss and analyse four basic concepts: 'culture', 'language', 'literature', and 'ideology'. None of these is exclusively a Marxist concept, though Marxist thinking has contributed to them — at times significantly, in general unevenly. I examine specifically Marxist uses of the concepts, but I am concerned also to locate them within more general developments. This follows from the intellectual history I have described, in that I am concerned to see different forms of Marxist thinking as interactive with other forms of thinking, rather than as a separated history, either sacred or alien. At the same time, the re-examination of these fundamental concepts, and especially those of language and of literature, opens the way to the subsequent critique and contribution. In my second part I analyse and discuss the key concepts of Marxist cultural theory, on which — and this is an essential part of my argument — Marxist literary theory seems to me in practice to depend. It is not only an analysis of elements of a body of thinking; it explores significant variations and, at particular points and especially in its later chapters, introduces concepts of my own. In my third part, I again extend the discussion, into questions of literary theory, in which variants of Marxism are now interactive with other related and at times alternative kinds of thinking. In each part, while presenting analysis and discussion of key elements and variants of Marxist thinking, I am concerned also to develop a position which, as a matter of theory, I have arrived at over the years. This differs, at several key points, from what is most widely known as Marxist theory, and even from many of its variants. It is a position which can be briefly described as cultural materialism: a theory of the specificities of material cultural and literary production within historical materialism. Its details belong to the argument as a whole, but I must say, at this point, that it is, in my view, a Marxist theory, and indeed that in

its specific fields it is, in spite of and even because of the relative unfamiliarity of some of its elements, part of what I at least see as the central thinking of Marxism.

To sustain analysis, discussion, and the presentation of new or modified theoretical positions, I have had to keep the book in a primarily theoretical dimension. In many quarters this will be well enough understood, and even welcomed. But I ought to say, knowing the strength of other styles of work, and in relation especially to many of my English readers, that while this book is almost wholly theoretical, every position in it was developed from the detailed practical work that I have previously undertaken, and from the consequent interaction with other, including implicit, modes of theoretical assumption and argument. I am perhaps more conscious than anyone of the need to give detailed examples to clarify some of the less familiar concepts, but, on the one hand, this book is intended as in some respects a starting-point for new work, and, on the other hand, some of the examples I would offer are already written in earlier books. Thus anyone who wants to know what I 'really, practically' mean by certain concepts can look, to take some leading instances, at the exemplification of signs and notations in *Drama in Performance*; of conventions in *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*; of structures of feeling in *Modern Tragedy*, *The Country and the City*, and *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*; of traditions, institutions, and formations, and of the dominant, the residual, and the emergent in parts of *Culture and Society* and in the second part of *The Long Revolution*; and of material cultural production in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. I would now write some of these examples differently, from a more developed theoretical position and with the advantage of a more extended and a more consistent vocabulary (the latter itself exemplified in *Keywords*). But the examples need to be mentioned, as a reminder that this book is not a separated work of theory; it is an argument based on what I have learned from all that previous work, set into a new and conscious relation with Marxism.

I am glad, finally, to be able to say how much I have learned from colleagues and students in many countries and especially in the University of Cambridge; in Stanford University, California; in McGill University, Montreal; in the Istituto Universitario Orientale, Naples; in the University of Bremen; and in the Insti-

tute for the Study of Cultural Development, Belgrade. I owe personal thanks to John Fekete and, over many years, to Edward Thompson and Stuart Hall. The book could not have been written without the unfailing co-operation and support of my wife.

R.W.

I. Basic Concepts

1. Culture

At the very centre of a major area of modern thought and practice, which it is habitually used to describe, is a concept, 'culture', which in itself, through variation and complication, embodies not only the issues but the contradictions through which it has developed. The concept at once fuses and confuses the radically different experiences and tendencies of its formation. It is then impossible to carry through any serious cultural analysis without reaching towards a consciousness of the concept itself: a consciousness that must be, as we shall see, historical. This hesitation, before what seems the richness of developed theory and the fullness of achieved practice, has the awkwardness, even the gaucherie, of any radical doubt. It is literally a moment of crisis: a jolt in experience, a break in the sense of history; forcing us back from so much that seemed positive and available — all the ready insertions into a crucial argument, all the accessible entries into immediate practice. Yet the insight cannot be sealed over. When the most basic concepts — the concepts, as it is said, from which we begin — are suddenly seen to be not concepts but problems, not analytic problems either but historical movements that are still unresolved, there is no sense in listening to their sonorous summons or their resounding clashes. We have only, if we can, to recover the substance from which their forms were cast.

Society, economy, culture: each of these 'areas', now tagged by a concept, is a comparatively recent historical formulation. 'Society' was active fellowship, company, 'common doing', before it became the description of a general system or order. 'Economy' was the management of a household and then the management of a community before it became the description of a perceived system of production, distribution, and exchange. 'Culture', before these transitions, was the growth and tending of crops and animals, and by extension the growth and tending of human faculties. In their modern development the three concepts did not move in step, but each, at a critical point, was affected by the movement of the others. At least this is how we may now see their history. But in the run of the real changes what was being put into the new ideas, and to some extent fixed

in them, was an always complex and largely unprecedented experience. 'Society' with its received emphasis on immediate relationships was a conscious alternative to the formal rigidities of an inherited, then seen as an imposed, order: a 'state'. 'Economy', with its received emphasis on management, was a conscious attempt to understand and control a body of activities which had been taken not only as necessary but as given. Each concept then interacted with a changing history and experience. 'Society', chosen for its substance and immediacy, the 'civil society' which could be distinguished from the formal rigidities of 'state', became in its turn abstract and systematic. New descriptions became necessary for the immediate substance which 'society' eventually excluded. For example, 'individual', which had once meant indivisible, a member of a group, was developed to become not only a separate but an opposing term—'the individual' and 'society'. In itself and in its derived and qualifying terms, 'society' is a formulation of the experience we now summarize as 'bourgeois society': its active creation, against the rigidities of the feudal 'state'; its problems and its limits, within this kind of creation, until it is paradoxically distinguished from and even opposed to its own initial impulses. Similarly, the rationality of 'economy', as a way of understanding and controlling a system of production, distribution, and exchange, in direct relation to the actual institution of a new kind of economic system, persisted but was limited by the very problems it confronted. The very product of rational institution and control was projected as 'natural', a 'natural economy', with laws like the laws of the ('unchanging') physical world.

Most modern social thought begins from these concepts, with the inherent marks of their formation and their unresolved problems usually taken for granted. There is then 'political', 'social' or 'sociological', and 'economic' thought, and these are believed to describe 'areas', perceived entities. It is then usually added, though sometimes reluctantly, that there are of course other 'areas': notably the 'psychological' and the 'cultural'. But while it is better to admit these than neglect them, it is usually not seen that their forms follow, in practice, from the unresolved problems of the initial shaping concepts. Is 'psychology' 'individual' ('psychological') or 'social'? That problem can be left for dispute within the appropriate discipline, until it is noticed that it is the

problem of what is 'social' that the dominant development of 'society' has left unresolved. Are we to understand 'culture' as 'the arts', as 'a system of meanings and values', or as a 'whole way of life', and how are these to be related to 'society' and 'the economy'? The questions have to be asked, but we are unlikely to be able to answer them unless we recognize the problems which were inherent in the concepts 'society' and 'economy' and which have been passed on to concepts like 'culture' by the abstraction and limitation of those terms.

The concept of 'culture', when it is seen in the broad context of historical development, exerts a strong pressure against the limited terms of all the other concepts. That is always its advantage; it is always also the source of its difficulties, both in definition and comprehension. Until the eighteenth century it was still a noun of process: the culture *of* something—crops, animals, minds. The decisive changes in 'society' and 'economy' had begun earlier, in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; much of their essential development was complete before 'culture' came to include its new and elusive meanings. These cannot be understood unless we realize what had happened to 'society' and 'economy'; but equally none can be fully understood unless we examine a decisive modern concept which by the eighteenth century needed a new word—*civilization*.

The notion of 'civilizing', as bringing men within a social organization, was of course already known; it rested on *civis* and *civitas*, and its aim was expressed in the adjective 'civil' as orderly, educated, or polite. It was positively extended, as we have seen, in the concept of 'civil society'. But 'civilization' was to mean more than this. It expressed two senses which were historically linked: an achieved state, which could be contrasted with 'barbarism', but now also an achieved state *of development*, which implied historical process and progress. This was the new historical rationality of the Enlightenment, in fact combined with a self-referring celebration of an achieved condition of refinement and order. It was this combination that was to be problematic. The developmental perspective of the characteristic eighteenth-century Universal History was of course a significant advance. It was the crucial step beyond the relatively static ('timeless') conception of history which had depended on religious or metaphysical assumptions. Men had made their