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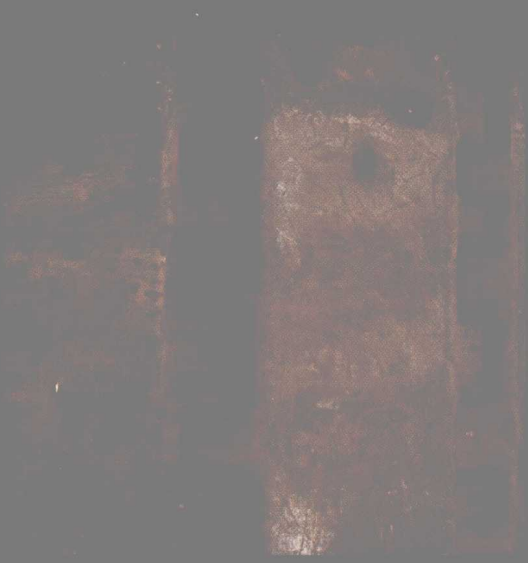

Marxist Literary and Cultural Theories

Moyra Haslett

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General Editor's Preface

> Transitions: *transition–em*, n. of action. 1. A passing or passage from one condition, action or (rarely) place, to another. 2. Passage in thought, speech, or writing, from one subject to another. 3. **a.** The passing from one note to another. **b.** The passing from one key to another, modulation. 4. The passage from an earlier to a later stage of development or formation ... change from an earlier style to a later; a style of intermediate or mixed character ... the historical passage of language from one well-defined stage to another.

The aim of *Transitions* is to explore passages and movements in critical thought, and in the development of literary and cultural interpretation. This series also seeks to examine the possibilities for reading, analysis and other critical engagements which the very idea of transition makes possible. The writers in this series unfold the movements and modulations of critical thinking over the last generation, from the first emergences of what is now recognised as literary theory. They examine as well how the transitional nature of theoretical and critical thinking is still very much in operation, guaranteed by the hybridity and heterogeneity of the field of literary studies. The authors in the series share the common understanding that, now more than ever, critical thought is both in a state of transition and can best be defined by developing for the student reader an understanding of this protean quality.

This series desires, then, to enable the reader to transform her/his own reading and writing transactions by comprehending past developments. Each book in the series offers a guide to the poetics and politics of interpretative paradigms, schools and bodies of thought, while transforming these, if not into tools or methodologies, then into conduits for directing and channelling thought. As well as transforming the critical past by interpreting it from the perspective of the present day, each study enacts transitional readings of a number of well-known literary texts, all of which are themselves conceivable as

having been transitional texts at the moments of their first appearance. The readings offered in these books seek, through close critical reading and theoretical engagement, to demonstrate certain possibilities in critical thinking to the student reader.

It is hoped that the student will find this series liberating because rigid methodologies are not being put into place. As all the dictionary definitions of the idea of transition above suggest, what is important is the action, the passage: of thought, of analysis, of critical response. Rather than seeking to help you locate yourself in relation to any particular school or discipline, this series aims to put you into action, as readers and writers, travellers between positions, where the movement between poles comes to be seen as of more importance than the locations themselves.

Julian Wolfreys

Acknowledgements

A book of this sort always contains many debts. Principal thanks must go to Julian Wolfreys, who, as general editor of this *Transitions* series, offered constant, transatlantic encouragement and was patient when the original deadline was exceeded. I am especially grateful for the many helpful comments he made on successive drafts and for his generosity of spirit and intelligence. I'd also like to thank Margaret Bartley, commissioning editor for this series, for her faith in the series, and in this book in particular; and my copy-editor, Keith Povey, for his care in reading and correcting the manuscript. Ruth Robbins read and discussed many of the ideas and interpretations presented here, particularly the chapters on Jane Austen and Oscar Wilde, and gave of her time – and library – generously. Students of 'Introduction to Literary Theory' at the University of Luton were unwitting guinea pigs for some of the material contained herein and so perhaps need apologies as well as thanks. Thanks also to my mother, Maisie Haslett, for her willingness to be an impromptu research assistant whenever I needed one. But the greatest debt of all is, as always, to John Brannigan, whose commitment to this book was equal to that of his own contribution to the *Transitions* series. The strengths of the book, such as they may be, are largely due to his continuing love and support and to our shared commitments, political and otherwise.

Contents

Introduction: The Politics of Intellectual Work

Marx: 'All I know is that I am not a Marxist.'
(Marx and Engels 1965, 415)

'... virtually all of [these various Marxisms] include within themselves a crucial denunciation of bad or "vulgar materialist" Marxisms: ... it has seemed impossible for any Marxism to define itself or to assert its identity without this internal exorcism of the "frère ennemi" or ghostly double which would be this bad or vulgar Marxism, the reductive one, what "Marxism" is for everybody else, for the non-Marxists; and this from Marx himself onward (whose "I am not a Marxist" probably no longer needs to be quoted).'
(Jameson 1995, 104)

'Marxism ... can best be thought of as a *problematic*; that is to say, it can be identified, not by specific positions (whether of a political, economic or philosophical type), but rather by the allegiance to a specific complex of problems, whose formulations are always in movement and in historic rearrangement and restructuration, along with their object of study (capitalism itself).'
(Jameson in Makdisi 1996, 19)

There are possibly more preconceptions and casual definitions of marxist literary theory than of any other theoretical approach. The marxist critic is largely perceived as obsessed with the economic context of the literary text, a context which he – and it usually is 'he' – understands only in a rigidly prescriptive manner. And because, it is thought, each individual is rigidly determined by the economic mode of production, the author becomes an anonymous class-representative who programmatically rehearses the ideas of his or her own class.

But this caricature hugely oversimplifies Marx's argument that men and women make their own history on the basis of anterior conditions, or the inextricably *social* dimension of the economic in marxist analysis.[1] Marxist theories are frequently criticised as reductive, deterministic, and suffused with a grand-narrative privileging of revolutionary class struggle. For example, in a recent attack on marxist aesthetic theories, Dmitry Khanin argues that the 'major underlying assumption' of marxism is that 'every utterance is related to the political interests of certain classes and is eventually relevant to the overriding cause of class struggle' (1992, 270). And because such perceptions have become almost commonplace, marxist theories frequently denounce those features others assume are intrinsically part of marxism. The shame is that those who caricature marxism in this way do not usually read marxist texts in any detail, if indeed they do at all.[2]

The perception of marxism as a monolithic theory is partly because the terminology 'marxist' implies rigid adherence to a founding father, Karl Marx, and a prescriptive political code which determines literary readings. In fact, marxist literary theories are diverse and marxist literary and cultural debate is marked by a considerable degree of contestation, not least of which are the debates as to how we should read Marx himself. Many marxist thinkers have argued over ways in which we might interpret Marx, while others claim that perceived differences with Marx's own writings are not inhibiting.[3] In *History and Class Consciousness* (1922), for example, Lukács defined marxism as a method, rather than an uncritical acceptance of Marx's arguments, however those might be interpreted (xxv). And while Lukács argued for the primacy of history over economics as the most significant element in the methodology of marxism, drawing inspiration from the 'early' work of Marx, Althusser, in his rereading of Marx, repudiated the early writings as 'not Marxist' and adhered only to the 'scientific' Marx of the later works (see Althusser 1984, 32).[4] One of my aims in writing this book is thus to argue that marxism itself is a text, not a code. For this reason I have chosen to refer to 'marxist' theories throughout this book, since the use of lower case illustrates diversity from any 'original' model and reminds us that we cannot fix marxist theories as easily as we might think.

Many predict the demise of marxist approaches in the wake of the collapse of communist regimes in the former USSR and Eastern Europe (1989), yet they forget that Western left disillusionment with

the Soviet Union occurred as early as the 1930s with the intense repression of the Stalinist years and became even more pronounced after the Soviet intervention in Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and with the rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland. Certainly the relationship between marxism and communism has always been problematic: marxist theories have been more complex and nuanced than the monolithic orthodoxy of Stalinism but this has been obscured by the misidentification of marxism with communist regimes. Many of the stereotypes of marxist theorists aptly describe 'orthodox' figures like Zhdanov, who infamously championed a propagandist 'social realism' as the only permissible form for socialist art. But Zhdanov never influenced or was part of Western marxism. Indeed 'Western marxism' is defined by its opposition to 'scientific', official Communist marxism. So while many commentators prophecy the death of marxism as a theory with the apparent demise of the Soviet revolution, there is no intrinsic reason, from within the theories which this volume considers, why this should be so. Western marxism is characterised by a turn to culture which itself has been interpreted as a consequence of political disappointment. After the First World War, the conditions for revolution among the working classes in Europe were perfect, according to all 'orthodox' marxist predictions. When revolution failed to materialise anywhere outside Tsarist Russia, itself not particularly auspicious as a site of revolutionary change according to orthodox marxist analysis, the incomplete nature of economic analysis was all too clear. This is the history which Perry Anderson sketches in explaining why Western marxism has consistently focused on culture rather than economics or politics (Anderson 1979) and why Lukács and Gramsci turned to cultural analysis in order to understand why revolution had failed to arise in Hungary or Italy. As Francis Mulhern argues: 'The long reign of party dogmatism, through the decades of Stalinism proper and beyond, was also a golden age of Marxist aesthetics' (Mulhern 1992, 9).

The fall of statist regimes is potentially a moment of 'liberation' for marxist theories too, in that it provides an opportunity for the many other varieties of marxism to disassociate themselves from the kinds of thinking which have been mistakenly attributed to them. Indeed, marxism as an allegiance is now more necessary than ever, at a time when capitalism's alleged triumph is global, and no alternative economic systems seem possible.[5] The nature of contemporary capitalism has certainly changed enormously since the work of the first

marxists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the dominance of finance capital, for example, means that speculation is a more appropriate term than production, and culture becomes increasingly significant as commodification penetrates throughout a global market. Culture has become a business while the economic and commercial spheres have become cultural. Marxist critiques of postmodernism point to the ironies in contemporary culture's refusal of marxism, for marxist theories are accused of totalising at a time when advanced capitalism penetrates into culture, nature and social life. While the crisis of marxism is invoked as a commonplace topic of discussion, the recurrent structural crises of capitalism are overlooked, or make no theoretical impression. (With the stock market crash in Asia in 1998, we can see that predictions that Japan would be the centre of capitalism in the twenty-first century may have been mistaken.) And while marxism's strengths are underestimated, we are losing the opportunity, not just of opposing, but of understanding capitalism. Ellen Meiksins Wood mimics the political defeatism of current commentators when she argues that: ' ... if we can't really change or even understand the [capitalist] system (or even think about it as a system at all), and if we don't, and can't, have a vantage point from which to criticize the system, let alone oppose it, we might as well lie back and enjoy it – or better still, go shopping' (Wood 1997, 9).

One of the saddest ironies is the disappearance of class as an issue from contemporary commentaries. Social class continues to be relevant to the structures of advanced capitalism and yet it has been eclipsed as a category from all but marxist theories. Among the most exciting theories currently practised are those which define and read difference, including, and in diverse ways, feminist, postcolonial, and poststructuralist readings. It is hardly surprising that marxism has contributed greatly to these approaches, since it has always been concerned with the difference of social class, but despite this antecedent, many of these theories have countered marxism's legacy in such a way that class itself is in danger of being forgotten (see Coole 1996). The current occlusion of class as an issue is partly due to marxism's own blindness to other categories in the past. While marxism, feminism and postcolonialism share many of the same approaches and ideals, they have also developed as competing theoretical and political claims. Co-operative work has been hampered in the past by often rather futile arguments about the prioritisation of

categories, so that debates have centred around 'which-comes-first' (class, race, gender or sex). And marxist theories have largely been responsible for these missed opportunities. One of the most significant problems with marxist theories has been their insistence on the primacy of socio-economic class at the expense of other forms of social division.[6] In too many marxist theories this has led to an omission of other categories of social differentiation such as ethnicity, race, gender and sexuality. Many of the marxist theorists I discuss and esteem *did* ignore issues of gender and race and this is comprehensible – though not justifiable – when we recall the periods in which they lived and wrote. To repeat their errors today would be inexcusable. But it would also be wrong to deny that their work has any value for us, despite these absences.

While many marxist theories are not nearly so intolerant of other approaches as this criticism would imply, most marxist theorists do believe that their approach is more comprehensive than others, and thus is the more explanatory. This is a matter of firmly held political belief: that marxism as a theory has a political priority in that its aim is to change the world, not interpret it (here paraphrasing Marx's famous argument concerning the role of the philosopher) and that its transformative ambitions must be defended. While few marxist theories today would claim to reveal absolute truths, they do assert a *situated* argument of what is true or false, for that specific historical moment. For example, marxism argues that all viewpoints are socially determined, but that does not entail that all viewpoints are equal in value. A prisoner is more likely to recognise the oppressive nature of a particular juridical system than a judge. (In classical marxist terms, the working classes will recognise the injustices of capitalism rather than the capitalists.) All marxist theories continue to assert that certain inequities – such as class exploitation and poverty – will always be 'wrong', and marxist literary theories continue to assert that these issues are not unrelated to literature. Marxist approaches to culture believe that they have a commitment to argue on behalf of those social classes which suffer under capitalism: not only the working classes, but those non-working classes, the unemployed, travellers, single parents, the elderly poor whose place in capitalist society is far from comfortable. While this commitment makes marxism appear pious and humourless to its detractors, it is also a necessary reminder that there is a world beyond the academy to which we are inescapably connected:

> Men and women do not live by culture alone, the vast majority of them throughout history have been deprived of the chance of living by it at all, and those few who are fortunate enough to live by it now are able to do so because of the labour of those who do not. Any cultural or critical theory which does not begin from this single most important fact, and hold it steadily in mind in its activities, is in my view unlikely to be worth very much. (Eagleton 1983, 214)

There is a grim irony in the fact that, while class begins to be seen as an 'outmoded' category for current cultural analysis, simultaneously we have witnessed considerable growth in the numbers of working poor, unemployed and homeless and in slave labour, insecure and part-time labour. The international structure of capitalism has escalated and has put most 'developing' countries into permanent poverty so that the direct exploitation of the labour forces has moved from the West into the Third World. Contemporary capitalism relies upon the structurally unemployed. (André Gorz, 1982, for example, has theorised the ways in which the 'non-class of non-workers' has taken the place of the proletariat, despite their absence from rather than their situation within relations of production.) So, while class relations in the 'West' have certainly become more and more complex, this does not mean that they no longer exist. Most commentators today – marxist and non-marxist – would agree that the end of the twentieth century has been marked in the West as a time of political quietism. Marxist commentators warn that we are in danger of forgetting not just to act but to think in resistance to capitalism.

A book on 'marxist literary and cultural theories' justifies its incorporation into a series like *Transitions* because of the enormous influence they have exercised over the growth and development of a range of other theories. Marxist concepts and arguments have certainly influenced other theoretical approaches to an unprecedented degree, whether we think of Freud as a materialist thinker or trace the origins of new historicism and cultural materialism or the very discipline of cultural studies. Indeed, many writers who would refuse the title and precise commitments of marxism still work in close affinity with it. But to think of marxism in these terms is to reduce marxism to historical interest only. At the heart of this book, then, resides my own continuing commitment to marxism as a current practice. Marxism will always be a political rather than a literary choice, so that my

choice of marxist literary theories is both a conviction that the historicist and materialist perspectives involved in studying literature are the most worthwhile, but also the most politically enabling and ultimately self-aware. For one of the most appealing, and disarming aspects of a politicised criticism – marxism, black studies, feminism, queer studies, postcolonialism – is its openness. These approaches do not attempt to hide or deny the ideological nature of what they do, they do not pretend to an 'impartiality' or 'objectivity' which is increasingly seen as impossible. My own work attempts to marry marxist approaches with those of feminism and postcolonialism, especially as my research includes special interests in women writers and Irish writing.

Thus because marxism is an obviously political philosophy and activity, it is not vulnerable to charges of self-deception which might be levelled at other, ostensibly 'neutral' readings. Is an ideologically 'neutral' or 'impartial' mode of reading possible? In *Formalism and Marxism,* Tony Bennett argues that reading is inevitably a positioning:

> The literary text has no single or uniquely privileged meaning, no single or uniquely privileged effect that can be abstracted from the ways in which criticism itself works upon and mediates the reception of that text. In this sense, literature is not something to be studied; it is an area to be occupied. The question is not what literature's political effects *are* but what they might be *made to be.* (Bennett 1979, 137)

Marxism and literary and cultural studies

While diversity is true of all marxist theories, it is especially so of marxist literary and cultural theories. While Marx and Engels frequently refer to literature in their writings, and Marx intended to devote himself to a study of Balzac once *Capital* was completed, their brief discussions do not form a comprehensive system of literary theory. Additionally, marxist approaches to culture have always dissented from orthodox, or 'vulgar' marxisms by virtue of their interest in literature, art and music alone. Unlike deterministic marxisms, marxist cultural theories are rarely in danger of ignoring the non-economic. Despite their own diversity, however, marxist cultural