

MARXISM, IDEOLOGY & LITERATURE

CRITICAL
SOCIAL
STUDIES

CLIFF SLAUGHTER



Marxism, Ideology and Literature

Cliff Slaughter



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To the memory of my father

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1

Introductory

A confrontation between Marxism and the sociology of literature is long overdue. This is especially so because sociologists so often assume that what they take to be Marxist insights into literature can be grafted on to their sociology. A critical survey of the results of this misapprehension might be interesting, but it would contribute little to demonstrating any unity in the subject matter, and would consist of no more than a series of more or less interesting individual essays. An introductory glance at three texts, in many important ways very different from each other, will help to clarify the need to go beyond such an essentially abstract and academic manner of presentation.

In his book *Goethe and his Age*¹ Georg Lukács showed how the ideas on art and beauty as well as the literary practice of the great writers and thinkers of the flowering of German culture (Lessing, Schiller, Goethe, Hegel, Schelling, Hölderlin) could not be understood simply in terms of their consistency and applicability to specific works or schools of art, nor as 'ideological reflections' of class interests, but rather as the highest peaks of the struggle (a struggle forced by the backwardness of German economy and politics into a concentrated philosophical and artistic development, as Marx and Engels had long ago pointed out) to grasp the essence of emergent capitalist forms of life, with all their implications for the nature of mankind. When these German writers paid so much attention to the classical models of Greek art and literature, it was in the service of a struggle to overcome the hostility of the capitalist division of labour and separation of public from private life to any integral development of human individuals. This was understood to be at the same time a struggle

to understand and so take the first step beyond the limits imposed by modern society on art, the true function of which is to express this integrity of human life, men's conscious mastery and development of their own nature through the purposive activity of transforming the natural world. Lukács was surely right to assert (echoing Goethe himself) that *Faust* was the summit of this particular development, and was a work which could not serve as a model for the future: its meaning was that society had entered a necessary phase which excluded henceforth such a combination of drama and epic. *Faust* was the very self-consciousness of the transition to this new epoch, in literature and art as well as in social relations. Lukács's political positions prevented him from drawing from this work all the conclusions so obviously relevant for the critique of Stalinism and its policies on art and literature, but within the limits of his purely 'historical' treatment of the German Enlightenment he was able to illustrate the insights of Marx and Engels on these matters. This is in general characteristic of the 'orthodoxy' affected by Lukács.

Trotsky, writing about a historical turning point even more decisive, the opening up of the epoch which followed the October Revolution of 1917, was not restricted in the same way. On the contrary, his writings on art and literature of the 1923-6 period (the best-known of which is *Literature and Revolution*²) are only comprehensible as an inseparable component of the historic struggle which he led for the continuity of Marxism against the rise of Stalinism. Behind Stalinism was the state bureaucracy, strengthened immeasurably by its role as policeman in the conditions of economic and cultural backwardness in the isolated Soviet state. Its influence worked first, and fatally, through what Trotsky called the 'theoretical corrosion' of the Bolshevik Party, whose reduction to pragmatism and empiricism soon produced a series of blunders and betrayals after which the bureaucracy, more and more free from control from below, struck out to liquidate physically all opposition, especially the revolutionary generation of 1917 and all those who rallied to it. Trotsky's analysis of post-revolutionary Russian literature stands at the beginning of this process.

Literature and Revolution is sometimes grudgingly praised in passing by liberal critics as a work which is more generous and tolerant to writers, more ready to recognise the merits of pre-revolutionary literature, than was Stalinism. This type of comment misses the point. Trotsky in fact takes the discussion of 'proletarian culture' on to a level much more fundamental than that of labels and prescriptions for literary products. He argues against Stalin and others that the proletariat is not the bearer of some new society conforming to its special nature as a class, which is that of an exploited, oppressed and revolutionary majority. It is, on the contrary, engaged in a struggle to abolish itself along with the bourgeois society it must overthrow. The period during which this revolution is completed and during which the conditions are created for a future 'truly human' culture is a lengthy transitional one, transcending the national boundaries of the first Soviet state. In this transitional period the vast majority of men and women will for the first time have any chance to appropriate the cultural heritage of all past societies. What 'proletarian culture' could there be, particularly in the conditions of the Soviet Union of 1923-4, which revived every day 'the struggle for individual existence', and with it 'all the old crap' (Marx)? Trotsky knew that to dress up the cultural products of this period as 'proletarian culture' was an imposition of the interests of a bureaucracy. When the spokesman of the bureaucracy a few years later hailed as 'socialist realism' the insufferable banalities of 'illustrative literature', it was then a conscious and deliberate cultivation of works which accorded with the bureaucracy's own definition of the achievement of socialism in the USSR. That this phase coincided with the purge trials and liquidations (including the deaths of many writers) was a striking confirmation of Trotsky's analysis of 1924.

In the same book Trotsky drew the conclusions for policy from his analysis. The literary tendencies in Russia were the products of the relation of the various classes, sections of classes, and their 'spokesmen', to the revolution. In cultural policy the 'fellow-travellers' among Russian writers should be appraised and encouraged from the standpoint of their artistic contribution to the future 'truly human' culture, and not according to some abstract yardstick deemed the

cultural equivalent of the revolutionary nature of the proletariat. Within all these tendencies, as well as in those which opposed the revolution, Trotsky analysed the disintegration of that celebration of individuality which had inspired literature since the Renaissance.

The critic René Girard attacked the problems of literature³ in a context and manner quite foreign to those of Trotsky or indeed Lukács. And yet, despite his sarcastic and embarrassingly ill-informed asides about Marxism, certain of his remarks about Proust and Stendhal bring to the foreground something which is implicit in the main points extracted from Trotsky and Lukács and fundamental to a critique of the 'sociology of literature.' Marxists have suggested⁴ that sociology's basic concept of 'role', far from being 'value-free', is an ideological reflection of and apologia for the division of labour and alienation of capitalist society, and not a scientific notion for grasping that society. The particular emphasis of Girard's work on 'mediated desire' helps to crystallise the implication of this criticism of sociology in the field of sociology of literature: sociology must be dealt with not merely as an adversary to be debated with about interpretation of the novel or drama, but as itself a specific product, of course under definite conditions and by a different path, of the same class, its relation to other classes, its reactions to the class struggle, and its characteristic forms of consciousness, as the novel itself.

Proust calls 'Selves' the 'worlds' projected by successive mediations. The Selves are completely isolated from each other, and are incapable of recalling the former Selves or anticipating future Selves.

The first signs of the hero's fragmentation into monadic Selves can be seen in Stendhal.⁵

Stendhal had sought the fulfilment of the French Revolution's promise of individual liberty and fraternity, the happiness which was to have resulted from the removal of absolutism and obscurantism, and forced himself in his novels to show how the individual must surrender integrity and happiness to the demands of bourgeois, post-revolutionary reality. Proust, three-quarters of a century later, did not flinch from the truth

of the reduction of the bourgeois individual in Paris to a chameleon-like existence of successive impotent surrenders to the absurd requirements of snobbish conformity to a decayed 'nobility'. And he demonstrated in his own perverse way the necessity of the artist's sacrificing any real mutual being with his fellow men in order to carry out the work of facing up to this truth, through the struggle, in memory, to rescue experience from its falsifications and rationalisations.

In an important sense sociology of the twentieth century is related to the truth of the great realist novels of the last century in the same way as vulgar economics is related to the classical economists of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The great novelists, like Smith, Ricardo, Ferguson and Millar in political economy, discovered and presented decisive truths about the fundamental tendencies of bourgeois societies, within the limits of a bourgeois individualist world outlook (specifically, they could not attain the level of comprehending — in the one case scientifically, in the other in images — the historical significance of the rise of the organised working class). Vulgar economics was a mere apologetics, rejecting the conquests of the classical economists. Sociology, instead of negating and integrating on a higher level the philosophical, economic, political and historiographical attainments of bourgeois culture, falls below them, just as it throws away the insights into human relations under capitalism which had been achieved by the realist novelists. Sociology reduces social life to the interaction of 'roles' or 'social personalities', Any reality higher than the interplay of these fragments of humanity is endowed with an entirely mystical nature (Durkheim's '*le social en soi*', Parsons' 'central value system', etc.). The great novelists' impassioned struggle against the alienating results of the capitalist division of labour is replaced, in sociology, by the acceptance of men's fragmentation into 'roles' as the 'facts' of which society is composed, to be classified, quantified, categorised, subjected to tests of significance, rendered 'operational', made fit for consumption by a well-behaved computer, which will turn out to be that of the state power or the international corporation. Of all the social functions announced by this pseudo-science, only that of sociology itself is crystal clear. What the novelists combated as the

destruction of true individuality and true community through alienation and 'mediation', the sociologists celebrate as the positively given data of 'orientation', 'internalisation', 'role-conflict', 'cultural conditioning', 'socialisation', and a hundred other plangent barbarities. That a book could appear with the title *Sociology as an Art Form*⁶ only goes to show the extent of the destruction achieved.

The problem is therefore to make some contribution to rescuing literature from sociology. For a Marxist this means proceeding with the understanding that defending mankind's literary heritage depends upon success in the struggle to free humanity from the oppressive, historically outplayed society of which sociology constitutes one of the ideological defences. Sociology regards such statements as mere 'ideology'. There is no meeting point. It is necessary, in considering the Marxist view of literature, to make a critical appraisal of the development of the theory and practice of Marxism itself, within which views of literature have evolved. A book like the present one can hardly claim to do more than make an exploratory redefinition of the problems for future research.

These introductory remarks might thus help to explain why it has been thought possible to treat in one volume matters which may be considered by sociologists properly to belong to the separate disciplines called history, literary criticism, philosophy, sociology and political science. Historical materialism does not substitute itself in some mysterious way for the detailed work of investigators in specialised fields, but it does reject those a-historical divisions between the different social sciences and between social sciences and humanities which obstruct a critical and materialist analysis of society and culture. Literary criticism has suffered no less than history and sociology from these divisions, but the problem cannot be overcome merely by piecing together the products of the separate disciplines. The questions need to be formulated in new ways. We may begin with a familiar example from Erich Auerbach's outstanding work⁷ in breaking down the traditional divisions between literary and historical-social studies.

The contrast between the story of Abraham in the Old Testament and Homer's *Odyssey* has its source in the contrast between two societies and their cultures. Auerbach shows

how Homer finds it natural to describe actions and details in a 'uniformly illuminated' landscape. The introduction of a new character or element in the story, with necessary digression to explain whence it comes, is done in leisurely fashion, without a trace of concern about losing tension in the development of the overall action. This 'epic' mode is not found in the Old Testament. Details of time, place and background are omitted or enter only in the direct service of the moral and religious order whose reaffirmation is the sole purpose of the story. The Israelites live by the word of God. Meaning attaches to what they do and say only through God. Every experience, every object of this experience, is approached and absorbed only in terms of the Almighty and the powers attributed to him. Objects, events and actions merit description only if such description is necessary to indicate the divine purpose. This jealous God can permit no freedom, no individuality which experiences the world just as it presents itself naturally to the senses of the developed human being. For the Greeks of the Heroic Age there is the beginning of freedom, and not yet the presentiment of the new unfreedom which the future contains. For a time men feel themselves able to confront the world in a 'natural' manner, where the meaning of life is not more than that one lives to enjoy the sense of how the whole man feels in finding his place in the world, a world in which he sets out with his purposive activity. Auerbach points to the consequences for 'realism' of the Israelite contrast:

What he [the Biblical narrator] produced... was not primarily oriented toward 'realism' (*if he succeeded in being realistic, it was merely a means, not an end*); it was oriented toward truth. Woe to the man who did not believe it! [Emphasis added]⁸

While the life of the Greeks of the Archaic and Classical periods produced a consciousness which fought free of the religious authoritarianism exemplified by the Old Testament, the feudalism of medieval Europe was later certainly able to find in it a suitable ideological form. That the Greeks who constituted Homer's audience did not understand anything of the contradictions within private property, the beginnings of

commodity production, and the dire social consequences of the escape of the product from the producer's control, is not relevant at this point. This very naivety proves positive, from the point of view of what it was able to produce in literature and sculpture, not only for the Greeks but for all subsequent generations. For this historically short space of time, men's feelings were fashioned and expressed in a way which could anticipate, for the men and women of future millennia, the striving to transcend the limitations of the social division of labour in class societies, of oppression and ignorance, of alienation and the split between public and private lives, of the feeling of powerlessness and meaninglessness induced by the development of capitalism. When later generations, or the writers and artists who wrote and acted and painted for them, returned to the Greeks for inspiration, it was because the creative work done in the Archaic and Classical periods was able to make genuine discoveries, genuine conquests in the arts as paths to freedom, upon which every artist of subsequent generations must build. One reason was that the language of the people had not yet been separated from 'literary' language.⁹

Marx, as Prawer¹⁰ in particular has noted, was not inclined to separate 'creative' from other literature. He viewed his own journalistic work in the 'revolutionary democracy' of Germany in 1843 from the standpoint of a definite conception of the heritage of antiquity, interesting for the present discussion:

The self-confidence of the human being, freedom, has first of all to be aroused again in the hearts of these people. Only this feeling, which vanished from the world with the Greeks, and under Christianity disappeared into the blue mist of the heavens, can again transform society into a community of human beings united for their highest aims, into a democratic state.¹¹

Even Brecht, seeking a theatre which dissociated the audience from the everyday ideological prison of experience, reaches back to 'epic', with its atmosphere of a 'uniform illumination'. His aim is to 'make strange' the individual

events and persons by prising them from their familiar relations one to another and to the subject, thereby forcing on the audience's attention a different possible relation between universal and individual. By this means he strives to present the possibility of freedom, first by giving the audience the chance to think differently and feel differently. Even if not one of his plays was successful, this conscious attempt and its influence, which is only in its beginning, mark out Brecht as a great innovator.

Every revolution brings with it euphoric and even ecstatic moods, expressive of the hope that the day of freedom is at hand. Marx declared that the heroism necessary to achieve the bourgeois revolutions would have been impossible without such illusions: the promise of exploitation through the appropriation of surplus value and the creation of a mass of propertyless wage-labourers would hardly have inspired the revolutionary deeds of the 1640s or 1789. And there was a degree of truth, of 'necessity', within the illusion, in that the step forward taken from feudalism to capitalism was the only one possible for humanity at that stage of development of the productive forces and social relations of production (a foundation of culture still hidden from the actors, who conceived of history and progress in terms of individuals and the satisfaction of their needs, or of divine will, or a combination of both). The flowering of individualism, in its Romantic or its utilitarian and rationalistic forms, was characterised by Marx as a 'historically justified' illusion, because it reflected the contemporary necessity of progress through individual appropriation and enterprise as well as serving the necessity of the great struggles to overturn the feudal order. While it was true that the individuals who carried through this struggle, and their descendants, must be differentiated into exploiters and exploited, yet individuals had to be freed from feudal ties if modern industry and the modern proletariat, the prerequisites of a social revolution which could end class society and provide the material conditions for true individual liberty, were to be created.

In the resultant bourgeois society the novel came to predominate as a literary form. To all outward appearances the novel is the equal of epic in so far as we consider only the