Criticism and ideology
a study in Marxist literary theory

[New ed.]

Terry Eagleton.

Criticism and Ideology

A Study in Marxist Literary Theory

TERRY EAGLETON



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Introduction

Criticism and Ideology, unknown to its author, was first published on the crest of a profound historical change. The year in which the book originally made its appearance, 1976, marked a time when radical energies in the West were still robust, but when political history was already taking a decisive turn to the right, without the left yet being fully able to register this shift in fortunes. The sense of defeat is often as much a matter of retrospect as the taste of victory. Still exhilarated by the expulsion of the United States from Vietnam, the emergence of the modern women's movement, the historic achievements of civil rights activists, the flourishing of Eurocommunism, the Portuguese revolution and the dramatic overthrow of a British Conservative government by the miners, socialists could scarcely have foreseen that certain other currents of the early 1970s, not least those which took shape in the oil crisis, would by the end of the decade have driven the capitalist system into strident political reaction.

Beneath the still vibrant left politics, deeper economic trends presaged a gloomier future, as 1974 – the year of both the Portuguese upheaval and the fall of the Heath government – also marked the end of the prolonged post-war boom. A capitalism forced on the defensive is always both danger and opportunity for the left, and in this case it turned out to be considerably more the former than the latter. In the year that *Criticism and Ideology* was first published, Perry Anderson produced his magisterial *Considerations on Western Marxism*, whose prognosis for the left was by and large a hopeful one. The mid-1970s, Anderson claimed, marked a watershed between a Western Marxism which was largely the product of political defeat, and the resurgence of more concrete,

materialist forms of Marxist thought. Yet the reunification of Marxist theory and practice in a mass revolutionary movement, to which Anderson also looked in *Considerations*, conspicuously failed to materialise.

Seven years later, in *In The Tracks of Historical Materialism*, Anderson recorded this historical disappointment, and went on to excoriate a body of post-structuralist writing which, so he argued, signalled a political degeneration since the time of his earlier study. Paris, once the capital of student insurrection, was now the capital of European intellectual reaction. The Americans may have been pitched ignominiously out of South-East Asia, but the postwar era of anti-colonial revolution – the single most successful radical movement of modern times – had at that very moment more or less run its course.

Though the carnival of 1968 was over by the mid-1970s, its aftertaste lingered on with such freshness that few at the time would have suspected that utopia had come and gone like a ship in the night, leaving the way clear by the end of the 1970s for the long dark night of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Just as the dusk was gathering, the British working class launched the most militant action of its entire history in the form of the miner's strike of the early 1980s; but it was clear to some this time round, as it was not in the case of the miners' militancy of 1974, that what we were witnessing was the clamorous closing of an old epoch rather than the tumultuous birth of a new one. Workers were now engaged in rearguard actions to safeguard threatened conditions rather than moving militantly forwards. An aggressively reforming capitalism felt confident enough to pick a fight which, so it hoped, would see off the previous historical era once and for all; but like many an era it refused to go quietly, reserving some of its most spectacular effects for the moment of its passing.

The clash between a still-buoyant left vision in the mid-1970s, and the underlying course of history, is not without a certain theoretical interest of its own. For the Hegel of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the motor of history is the disjunction between the self-understanding of human subjects and their actual social and historical positions. This is also the gap or productive alienation between human intentions and the processes which those intentions set in motion, which necessarily outrun our knowledge.

Human self-understanding can grasp some of the truth of history, but will always ultimately be outflanked by it. We live forwards but understand backwards. The work of Jacques Lacan recasts this Hegelian opposition between knowledge and truth as one between the ego and the Other, or the Imaginary and the Symbolic, the former being understood as our inert, largely illusory presence to ourselves and to the objects of our desire, while the latter signifies that realm of Otherness which, as the site of the truth of the human subject, sets such consciousness in place but forever eludes its puny grasp. It is a characteristic insight of modernity that the self is unable to totalise or represent what constitutes it in the first place, but that its ceaseless efforts to do so are part of what keeps that history in business.

What was at stake at the turn of the 1970s was not just a shift of political climate, one of those predictable swings from left to right which belong to the surface rhythms of social life, but a far more deep-seated transformation from one form of capitalism to another. Capitalism's response to the end of the post-war boom was to reconfigurate global space, exploiting the revolution in electronic communications to export manufacture to the cheap labour of its peripheries, and progressively converting its heartlands into centres for the service, finance and communications industries. The industrial revolution was thrust into reverse gear. At the same time, the labour movement was bound and shackled by punitive legislation, unemployment allowed to soar, wage levels held down, welfare slashed and the market deregulated. In a few years time, even social democracy would seem a daringly radical option. In this de-industrialised condition, it seemed to some commentators that Marxism was now over because social class had finally disappeared, as though there was an ontological difference between working down a coal mine and working in a call centre.

One consequence of this social transformation was a theoretical sea-change. Marxism in the West continued to produce some major intellectual classics; but a mere five or six years after the first publication of this book it was already rapidly yielding ground to a politically sceptical post-structuralism, and then, as the 1980s drew on, to post-modernism. Many an Althusserian Marxist of the early 1970s passed through the swing doors of post-Marxism into the wastelands of the political right. Political criticism survived in the

form of feminism and post-colonialism, as it does to this day, but the latter was for the most part a heavily 'culturalist' critique of global capitalism, more enthused by questions of identity and ethnicity than by considerations of state, class-struggle, the new global division of labour and revolutionary nationalism. If it was 'post' the narrowly nationalist perspectives of some of the classic anti-colonialist movements, it was also 'post' their revolutionary fervour. By the time the 1990s heaved over the horizon, 'theory' as such was under siege from fresh forms of pragmatism, and the very word had vanished from the lexicon of many students.

Within a remarkably short time, then, the political and theoretical landscape from which Criticism and Ideology emerged had altered almost beyond recognition. Socialist struggle naturally continued, as did socialist intellectual work; but what one might call after Raymond Williams the whole structure of feeling of the early 1970s, the distinctive ambience and sensibility of that period, was now more and more a blurred memory. It was, to be sure, a sensibility already on the wane by the time this book appeared. When I taught with Fredric Jameson in the University of California, San Diego in the year of the book's publication, Herbert Marcuse was still to be seen on campus, and had played some part in the student uprising there in the late 1960s; but the new generation of students were now only vaguely aware of who this éminence grise actually was.

It was never the case that all of those involved in the earlier period were card-carrying Marxists. On the contrary, there were vigorous challenges to that creed, not the least from some sympathetic but sharply critical feminists and post-structuralists. What had been lost was rather a certain socialist common sense, however narrowly confined. A cultural climate prevailed at the time in which radical ideas, however hotly disputed, struck resonance because of their evident relevance to a history which was still in some turmoil. Ten years later, this was no longer the case. Marxism was now not so much out of answers as out of the question. It was one of the triumphs of neo-liberalism to make the very political movement which laid bare its own operations with the most ruthless realism appear as irrelevant as astrology.

The fading of this socialist culture was a pity, since the period during which Criticism and Ideology was being written was for me

personally the most productive, exhilarating episode of an intellectual career that has now spanned some forty years. Theoretically speaking, nothing that has happened since has remotely matched it. The standards of debate and analysis among students on the left were exactingly high - far more so than is generally to be found today. Those whose formal tasks as students were to investigate Alexander Pope or the Peloponnesian war were also impressively conversant with the minor works of Bukharin or the history of the Greek Communist party. In the turbulent wake of 1968, fresh bodies of theory - Brecht, Foucault, Kristeva, Habermas, Della Volpe, Macherey, Russian Formalism, semiotics, phenomenology, narratology, film theory, Tel Quel, hermeneutics, reception theory, Marxism-feminism, Soviet avant-gardism - came flooding in. Ten years before, at Cambridge, I had taken part in a seminar on the novel conducted by Raymond Williams, in which the only Marxist critic most of us had heard of was Georg Lukács. Now, under pressure of political developments, the canon seemed to be expanding almost monthly.

There was also a rash of new leftist journals – Screen, Red Letters, m/f, Ideology and Consciousness, the Working Papers of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University. The University of Essex launched an ambitious series of annual conferences on literature and society in which hundreds of teachers and students of literature took part. For the first time since the 1930s, the most path-breaking critical work was coming from the political left, and the metropolitan publishers were not slow to respond.

Among these various arenas for radical cultural work was a weekly seminar on Marxist criticism at Oxford which I launched shortly after I took up an academic post there in 1969. All ruling-class institutions breed their own clutch of internal dissidents, and my role at Oxford over those years turned out to be to provide a forum for those who were studying at the university, or passing through it in one capacity or another, but who wished to work beyond the limits of its structures and ideologies. Many of them, including myself, were also at the time political activists. Criticism and Ideology was the product of this background, and could not have been written without it. In that sense, it was a genuinely collaborative work. The elements of a general theory of Marxist

criticism lay to hand, and it was clear that they would need to be pulled together at some point into some more or less coherent shape.

As it happened, this task fell to me; but it is no false modesty or mere historicist flourish to claim that it was, so to speak, a job of work waiting to be accomplished – rather as a major revenge tragedy was waiting to be written around 1600, and that the question of who would actually get around to performing it was a somewhat secondary affair. In this sense, the production of the book was to some extent true to its own attempts to 'decentre' the individual author. To claim with Paul Valéry that every work is the work of many things besides an author, a proposition which I use as an epigraph to Chapter 2, is to claim in the case of this particular text that a whole hinterland of cooperative effort, not to speak of a whole political culture, lay behind it.

Criticism and Ideology, then, was the work of its historical moment, with both the strengths and limits that that entails. On the one hand, it had more than an individual force behind it; on the other hand, it remained caught within a certain theoretical ambience which it could not objectify, as one can now do more easily in retrospect. One way in which this comes through, I suppose, is in a certain excessive intellectual assurance, one which uses words like 'scientific' as though their meaning was quite unproblematic. Science is not in my view an empty term when it comes to historical investigation, and the 'culturalist' caricature of it as some purely objectivist form of inquiry says more about postmodern ignorance than scientific knowledge. Yet the book fails to see that all structural analysis is dependent on a prior moment of interpretation, one which is rooted in the life-world, which can never itself be fully formalised, and which is always open to contestation. The over-assurance also manifests itself from time to time in the tone of the writing. The tone is that of a political left which suspects that it has history on its side; and although that was by no means an unreasonable view to hold at the time, it imposes its own kinds of constraint.

It is not, I think, that the book is triumphalist. It is rather that, historically situated as it was, it could not have been aware that there are political gains to be garnered from failure as well as from success. The failure, to be sure, should not be exaggerated: millions

of men and women have turned out on the streets throughout the world in protest against US imperialism; and socialism, as I write, is spreading like a forest fire throughout a whole continent. Unlike today's younger generation, however, I was fortunate enough to grow up at a time when the left was visibly on the ascendancy, and reaped life-long faith and hope from an enthralling early experience of what might be politically possible. The negative side of that experience is a degree of purism and absolutism, an excessive readiness to look gift horses in the mouth, an impatience with 'bourgeois' thought, an off-handed way with ethics and metaphysics, an inflated estimate of minor disagreements within the left, and a general overestimation of the power of politics, however revolutionary, to put paid to the ills of humanity.

To live through a political downturn, as the left has done since this book first appeared, is naturally not to be recommended. Yet like most negative experiences it has its positive side, breeding a certain degree of humility, a more intimate understanding of failure and breakdown, and a soberly realistic insight into the limits of the political. The years since the book was published have illuminated those limits in other ways too, turning the spotlight on certain intractable problems of humanity's relationship with Nature, of the relation between genders, and the tenacity of ethnic and national identities, none of which are to be dispelled at the mere touch of the dialectic.

Criticism and Ideology was widely seen at the time as an 'Althusserian' work of theory; and although as it happens I was never a particularly devout Althusserian, indeed had qualms about almost all of Louis Althusser's major doctrines, it is obvious that this, roughly speaking, was the theoretical stable from which the book emerged. A word about this background is therefore in order. Althusser was certainly the pre-eminent Marxist philosopher of the period in which the book was written; and although the influence of works like For Marx, Reading Capital and Lenin and Philosophy was felt across the range of intellectual disciplines, his work had a particular appeal to those like myself working in the humanities.

This, I believe, was because it seemed to combine a set of concepts which were peculiarly hospitable to cultural analysis with a theoretical rigour, unremitting anti-idealism and political trenchancy which had been on the whole foreign to such analysis. From

the Frankfurt School to the British New Left, 'culture' had seemed something of a soft option; one would not associate Theodor Adorno, Lucien Goldmann or the early Raymond Williams with revolutionary zeal, and the Leninist Antonio Gramsci could always be remoulded in the image of a polytechnic cultural studies lecturer. Althusserianism, by contrast, promised to sever the link between cultural theory and left-reformism — an alluring position at a time when culture (not least in the form of the nascent women's movement and the growth of media studies) was much to the fore on the left, but when political opportunities beyond left-reformism also seemed to present themselves.

Althusser, by contrast with such reformism, was nothing if not politically militant (Leninist and crypto-Maoist), a dissident figure on the left of the French Communist Party who was also celebrated for his theoretical stringency. Yet all this, which inevitably proved attractive in what was still an age of revolutionary activism, was allied in his writing, unusually enough, with a vigorous engagement with questions of subjectivity; and the somewhat intellectually starved left cultural thinkers of the time naturally found this a potent mix. The French philosopher's insistence on the autonomy of science or theory also came as welcome news to leftists who were professionally engaged with ideas, and who, tired of apologising to their more activist colleagues for their cerebral pursuits, could use this doctrine to justify their position. Yet this theoreticism, as some regarded it, sat cheek by jowl in Althusser's work with a most un-Communist Party-like insistence on the centrality of class struggle, political vanguardism and the state, which then satisfied the more combative side of such revolutionaryminded theoreticians.

There was, however, a considerable irony at stake here. For if Althusser laid claim in his work to the autonomy of theory, so that the science of historical materialism was to be meticulously distinguished from 'real' history, it was exactly in this self-sufficient way that his work was interpreted by many of those outside France who were unaware of its historical situation. It did not occur to some of his most zealous British acolytes that the doctrine of the autonomy of theory was itself a strategic political move in Althusser's running battle with his French Communist Party opponents, one designed to buttress his own authority as a leading

party theoretician and thus help to legitimate his own political stance within the party. Rarely has a claim to autonomy been less autonomous.

As it happens, there is a curious biographical link between Althusser and myself. Both of us were former Roman Catholics, and as the saying goes, it takes one to know one. The political party for Althusser is in some ways a version of the Roman Catholic church, ruled over by a priestly caste of theoreticians furnished with an infallible, self-validating brand of reason. This mode of rationality is not historical but eternal. Rather as the Roman Catholic church never alters its doctrine but instead moves from one state of certainty to another, so human beings for Althusser move from one historical structure or mode of production to another, while the passage between them remains obscure. Neither Catholics nor Althusserians place much store by the individual: for the French philosopher, the unity and coherence of the human subject is really a fictional affair. Whatever grandiose sense of self-importance it may have, the individual subject is really there to serve the reproduction of a set of social relations, rather as the individual for Catholicism is there to serve the greater glory of God.

Althusser's theory of ideology draws explicitly on the Catholic assumption that practice proceeds consciousness. If you engage in certain material practices, you will find yourself believing. It is a counterblast to what one might call the Protestant-inwardness notion of ideology, for which individual hearts and minds are allimportant. Yet there are also some more positive aspects of this unholy alliance between the rive gauche and the Vatican, which were no doubt part of what attracted me to Althusser's work in the first place. Those who are brought up as Catholics are likely to find themselves at odds with the Anglo-Saxon liberal suspicion of rigorous conceptual analysis, a rigour which has always seemed to middle-class liberals somewhat sinister and life-denying. The reverse side of Catholic dogmatism is a respect for reasoning, one which is unlikely to impress those who are privileged enough not to need to seek out knowledge. Catholics are also likely to show some grasp of the inherently institutional nature of human life, rather than viewing institutions in the spirit of the liberal individualist as necessarily inert and oppressive. There is a materiality about their faith which, as in Althusser's theory of ideology, emphasises what one does more than what one feels. They are unlikely to regard the ideas of authority and tradition as inherently malignant, unlike the naïve liberationist; and they regard the individual as drawing his or her significance from the corporate life of the church, rather than having a reality prior to and distinct from this communality. If Althusser was in conflict with orthodox French culture as an Algerian, then, so was he as a Catholic; and something of the same could perhaps be said of my own skewed relation to conventional English orthodoxy, as one brought up in a provincial Irish Catholic setting.

Althusser's influence on this book is perhaps most obvious in Chapters 2 and 3, where I try first to lay out the elements of materialist critical procedure, and then to outline a method of close textual analysis. The concept of a literary mode of production, which I develop in Chapter 2, is not without its difficulties; but it nudges the book in the direction of what Raymond Williams would later call cultural materialism. Williams, whose stance towards 'theory' was always interestingly ambiguous, and who to my knowledge never actually used the word, was one of the few critics to recognise that a good deal of the so-called materialist criticism of the 1970s was still firmly focused on the text, and to that extent reflected the very kind of analysis it was seeking to oust. It was not that Williams disbelieved in so-called 'closereading'; it was rather that the very word 'text' - another term significantly absent from his writing – struck him as inferior to the idea of a 'work', with all the practical, social resonances which that word carries.

Williams's concern, in short, was not simply to provide new methods of reading, but to shift the whole problematic of literary criticism away from so-called 'ideology critique' onto a more material, historical terrain. In his later work, from Marxism and Literature to Writing in Society and The Politics of Modernism, he was interested in literature as a diverse set of social practices and relations — in the composition of audiences and the historical basis of genres, the material infrastructure of theatre and the power of cultural technologies, the geopolitics of modernism, the role of literary markets and the social history of languages. In comparison with this pioneering work, Criticism and Ideology is indeed a text-centred work; but there are aspects of the second chapter

which gesture beyond those limits. The book says too little of the effects of literary works in changing historical circumstances, though its final chapter, with its reflections on the act of reading, touches on this question.

If the idea of production is used literally in Chapter 2, Chapter 3, 'Towards a Science of the Text', deploys it metaphorically as a way of accounting for the relations between the literary work and its ideological environs. This particular issue, one positively bristling with epistemological problems, was not one which especially preoccupied Williams, who took only a passing interest in philosophical matters. But it is a recurrent theme of Western Marxist criticism from Lukács and Sartre to Goldmann and Adorno. The Hegelian bent of that heritage means that the problem usually crops up as one of mediations: how is one to relate work, ideology and material history without conflating them? The idea of complex mediation is a sophisticated rejoinder to the vulgar-Marxist model of the work as passively 'reflecting' its history; but it is not without its difficulties either, and it seemed to me that the concept of production, which I borrowed from Althusser and his colleague Pierre Macherey, might throw some original light on the issue.

I also allude here, though too briefly, to Freud's theory of the dream-work; and lying behind this whole chapter is what still strikes me as the suggestive notion of the literary work as a problem-solving strategy, in which ideological contradictions are 'processed' by aesthetic devices in ways which then throw up new problems for the text, and so on in a continuous process of interaction. What this model seeks to avoid is a simplistic opposition between the aesthetic and the ideological, or, in an older register, 'form' and 'content'. Instead, it tries to account for the fact that aesthetic modes and forms are already in some broad sense of the term ideological, and that ideological conflicts never come to the text 'raw', but, to adopt a phrase of Macherey's, in the form of their potential resolution. This leads the book into some tortuous formulations, which today I would have tried to frame more lucidly. I still think, however, that they are worth grappling with.

Macherey, who might be described as the first Althusserian critic, and whose *Towards a Theory of Literary Production* created something of a stir on the British cultural left, is another major

influence on the book. His work brings together certain Althusserian concepts, which it applies for the first time to literary analysis, with some motifs of Russian Formalism, not least the notion of estrangement. The idea of the literary work as distancing, objectifying or estranging its own ideological content seemed a fertile one in some respects, though the book is not uncritical of it. In the end, the theory ascribes too much weight to the idea of form, and fails to recognise that form itself is always ideologically signifying.

In the book's final chapter, I turn to this idea for the basis of a materialist theory of value - a bold move at the time of writing, since the concept of value was in low repute among literary leftists and was suspected as being of no more than 'ideological' significance. I am even rash enough here to raise the question of morality, a move which would have been quite enough to convince some of my more tough-minded comrades that I was still writhing helplessly in the toils of bourgeois ideology. I would not now unreservedly defend the theory of value which this chapter sketches: it assumes, for example, that all ideology is somehow inert and degraded, effective in a literary work only when it is thrown into a certain productive disarray. But not all great art is ideologically oppositional. Even so, there are remarks here about the nature of literary value which I think survive the theory from within which they were produced. Those theorists at the time who disdained the whole question of value, yet who were on the political left, never quite noticed the contradiction in which they were caught - the fact that for the common people of whom they claimed to be champions, valuing of one kind or another, including the valuing of cultural works, is an integral part of everyday social existence. The real question was never whether we should formulate literary value-judgements, which is rather like asking whether we should breathe, but a matter of the historical grounds of such evaluations.

Traditional critics are usually to be found clamouring for what they call 'concrete applications' of theoretical analysis, a demand which usually reflects a thinly veiled hostility to it. There is, in fact, no reason why theory should be thought justifiable only if it illuminates a specific object. The work of Michel Foucault is not to be valued only because of the light it might throw on the internal

regime of a particular prison. Literary theory is not just the hand-maiden of literary criticism. Those who complain that there are people who seem more interested in theory than in literature itself have a point; but they forget that, say, Freud is indeed vastly more interesting than the poetry of Kingsley Amis.

Even so, Chapter 4 of the book makes some concessions to these champions of the concrete by offering a series of analyses of individual nineteenth-century writers, each of which is little more than a set of notations for further development. A linking theme here is a critique of the idea of the work of art as an organic whole, an assumption which has proved astonishingly tenacious all the way from Aristotle to I. A. Richards. One of the most attractive features of the work of Althusser and Macherey was that it inherited a suspicion of so-called 'expressive totalities' from the Soviet and Weimar avant-gardes. Just as Althusser dismantled the social formation into so many semi-autonomous 'regions', so Bakhtin and Brecht, Eisenstein and Piscator, did the same with the work of art, thus helping to strip it of its fetishistic aura.

Much the same is true of Walter Benjamin, who true to his Judaic roots regarded the restoration of wholeness as a matter for God alone, and the organic or complete work of art as a disastrously premature version of this redemption. Benjamin rejoiced in ruins, detritus, salvaged fragments, broken allegorical signifiers, while his colleague Theodor Adorno denounced the harmonious work of art as an intolerable piece of bogus historical consolation. The work of Pierre Macherey springs from a very different lineage, yet there are aspects of it which are in tune with this critique of totality, and which I found useful when writing this book.

Edward Said speaks in his early work *Beginnings* of the need for an author to displace and subvert a tradition in making his or her own start. The critic Harold Bloom casts the same point in psychoanalytic terms, writing of an author's need to clear a space for himself with respect to the otherwise overwhelming influence of a strong precursor. It is perhaps no accident, then, that the book begins with a chapter in which I settle my debts with my own British precursors, not least my teacher, friend and colleague Raymond Williams. There were those at the time who found this rather sharp critique of his work somewhat scandalous, and I have already apologised in print for its occasionally acerbic tone. Yet the chapter also

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lavished praise on Williams's work, a fact which some of its critics either forgot (negative criticism being more memorable than the positive variety) or chose to overlook. It also happens that Williams himself agreed with some of my criticisms of his writing, though I was never able to establish exactly which ones.

How, then, does the book look, glancing back over a gap of thirty years? It is a young man's book - tight-lipped, rather puristic, a touch high-minded, a little too sure of itself here and there, owing more to conceptual analysis than political experience. Today, the idea of writing a book without any jokes in it would strike me as decidedly eccentric. Readers of this work in 1976 would have been astonished to know that its author would be lambasted some twenty or thirty years later as no more than a stand-up comedian. If I have changed in some respects, however, I have remained consistent in others. The political beliefs expressed in this book are ones I still hold today, even if I might not express them now exactly as I do here. I was never quite able to understand why the fact that the capitalist system had become more globalised and aggressive meant that socialism was suddenly irrelevant, rather than - as would seem the more reasonable conclusion to draw - more relevant than ever. Criticism and Ideology brings with it into the present the style and air of a different era, and readers will naturally sense the distance between it and themselves. Yet it was a period from which we still have much to learn; and I hope that this new edition of the book might help us to do so.

T. E. Dublin, 2006

Preface

Any English Marxist who tries now to construct a materialist aesthetics must be painfully conscious of his inadequacies. It is not only that so many issues in this field are fraught and inconclusive, but that to intervene from England is almost automatically to disenfranchise oneself from debate. It is to feel acutely bereft of a tradition, as a tolerated house-guest of Europe, a precocious but parasitic alien. The essays which follow labour under these embarrassments. They are perhaps most marked in the final chapter on the problem of literary value, which seems to me little more than a provisional clearing of the ground on which a genuine discussion of these matters could be conducted; but they are also apparent in the excessively cryptic and elliptical language of Chapter 4 (a revised and expanded version of an article which first appeared in New Left Review), which in trying to compress a complex span of literary history into a single framework lapses inevitably into inexact formulation, metaphorical gesture, partial and reductive reading. I should add that this was the first section of the book to be written, and that it stands to some extent under the judgement of the two preceding chapters, where (undoubtedly at the cost of schematism and simplification) I have striven for more rigorous formulations. But I have felt it best to let the book stand as it is, replete with errors and omissions which are both the result of my own limitations and, perhaps, inevitable in a work which has little as yet in England to support it.

I am deeply grateful to a number of people who have given me valuable advice and encouragement in writing this book. I must thank in particular Perry Anderson, Francis Barker, Mike Ewart, John Goode, John Harrison, Quintin Hoare, Francis Mulhern,

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Paul Tickell, Alan Wall and George Wotton, all of whom have generously spared time from their own work to criticise the manuscript. I also have a long-standing debt to the many past and present members of the Marxist criticism collective in the University of Oxford, who in an improbable institution have pioneered a context within which this kind of discourse has become continuous, absorbing and productive. It is certain that without their devotion to the problems of a materialist criticism, this book would never have been written. There are similar groups and individuals throughout the country with whom I have discussed these issues, and to whom I also owe thanks.

In Memory of My Father FRANCIS EAGLETON

What we do best is breed Speech to dispel the fear Which blinds men to their need,

Be to the mute a tongue, Become the living voice Of comrades quelled by wrong.

Mutations of Critical Ideology

It is difficult to see criticism as anything but an innocent discipline. Its origins seem spontaneous, its existence natural: there is literature, and so - because we wish to understand and appreciate it - there is also criticism. Criticism as a handmaiden to literature - as a shadowing of literature, a ghostly accomplice which, to adopt a phrase from Four Quartets, prevents it everywhere. Yet 'prevents' bears upon us here in its common as well as its classical meaning. If the task of criticism is to smooth the troubled passage between text and reader, to elaborate the text so that it may be more easily consumed, how is it to avoid interposing its own ungainly bulk between product and consumer, overshadowing its object in the act of obediently 'ghosting' it? It seems that criticism is caught here in an insoluble contradiction. For if its task is to yield us the spontaneous reality of the text, it must permit no particle of its own mass to mingle with what it mediates; such mingling would signal the unspeakable crime of 'appropriation'. Yet how is it to do this without consigning itself to that mode of natural existence which is the life of a parasite? How is it to avoid that form of self-transparency, that humble conformity to the life of the text, which is mere self-abolition? All criticism should confess its limitations; but bourgeois criticism rarely seems more confident than when it speaks of its own redundancy - when it insists, self-laceratingly, on the partial, intrusive, provisional nature of its own propositions. Subtle and delicate though they may be, such propositions are finally as straw before the inexhaustible godhead of the text itself. Yet it is one thing to parade the superfluity of one's discourse, and another thing to keep silent. Criticism may be a crippled discourse, but it is too late for it simply to dismantle itself; there is too much at stake, materially and academically, for that.

The radical self-doubt of criticism is such that it is not even able to say whether it is an 'amateur' or 'professional' pursuit. It cannot, surely, be professional, for nothing is more natural than reading. It is simply a matter of turning the pages until you get to the end turning them, naturally, with a peculiar attentiveness, but an attentiveness which, though it can be nurtured and informed, cannot ultimately be taught. Yet it cannot be amateur either, for it is unthinkable that the labour-intensive industry of literary enquiry schools, University faculties, publishing houses, literary bodies - turns on a mode of cognition more akin to wine-tasting than chemical experiment. When English literary studies were first academically institutionalised in Britain, this dilemma was 'resolved' by a judicious blending of the two modes. English literature was a nonsubject in a palpable sense: the English gentlemen who occupied the early professorships at the 'ancient' Universities no more needed a course of specialised training in how to read their own literature than they needed a course of training in how to give orders to their domestic servants. Yet they were, after all, professors of English, and the cavalier frivolity they displayed towards their calling could not go wholly undisguised. The simple solution available to them was to study English literature but to pretend that it was something else - to systematically mistake it for the 'classics'. No more professionally reputable cloak could have been discovered. One had, naturally, one's private opinions about Crabbe as one had about Catullus, but the study of English letters could not conceivably consist in vulgarly airing one's private predilections in public. Such public airing, as Yeats remarked, belonged to shopkeepers - as it happened, historically, to the son of a shopkeeper, F. R. Leavis. 'Amateur' predilections were preserved, but preserved in isolation from the professional business of knowing about literature - a traditional combination of positivism and subjectivism still potent in contemporary criticism.

Such a posture inevitably provoked its reaction. Academically powerful but historically superannuated, the aristocratic and hautbourgeois 'pioneers' of a discipline they palpably disbelieved in were ripe for dislodgement by the ideologies of a social class entering the 'ancient' Universities for the first time, able to accomplish the objective tasks set for criticism by contemporary history as their ideologically bankrupt predecessors could not. A petty-bourgeois

liberal humanism, academically dispossessed and subordinated yet in intellectual terms increasingly hegemonic, occupied the bastions of reactionary criticism from within as a dissentient bloc. Vehemently radical in its onslaughts on the 'academic establishment', the unity of whose aesthetic and ideological assumptions they trenchantly exposed, this petty-bourgeois nonconformist humanism installed itself as the champion of precisely those literary mutations which the ideological moment demanded, and undauntedly rewrote the whole of English literary history in its image. No more militant, courageous and consistent project is to be found in the history of English criti-

Yet we are not dealing here with a simple clash of 'class-ideologies'. What is in question, rather, is the contradictory mode of insertion of the Scrutiny ideology into the dominant aesthetic and ideological formations. To designate the movement 'petty-bourgeois' is not in the first place to refer to its social origins, for they (though they have a certain relevance) were inevitably diverse; it is rather to denote the contradictions of its ideological universe. 'Radical' and occasionally populist in its formulations, feared and mocked by the ruling academic caste, Scrutiny's historic function (complex and changing though it was), was at one level reasonably plain: it was to bring about that drastic reconstruction of forms, values, discourses and lineages within the aesthetic region of ideology which, at a point of serious historical crisis, would play its part in revitalising and reproducing the dominant ideology as a whole. Indeed, it was much more than a question of merely refashioning the aesthetic region of ideology: it was a matter of effectively substituting that region for ideology as such. The ideological vacuum occasioned in English society by the partial collapse of certain traditional sub-formations (notably religion), and the historically determined absence of others (notably a fully-fledged sociology), demanded filling; and it was this task which, in the tradition of Matthew Arnold, Scrutiny attempted. Like Arnold, then, it was at once 'progressive' and 'reactionary' vigorously alert to the moment of the 'modern' and its new ideological demands, but able to meet them only with pathetically obsolescent and idealist 'solutions': the 'organic community' of a mythicised English past, the 'University English school' as the spiritual essence of the social formation. It is hove, precisely, that one index of the essentially petty-bourgeois character of Scrutiny is

evident. For if that puritan, nonconformist tradition was (in the determinate absence of a revolutionary heritage) the only possible force which in its moral combativeness, intellectual seriousness and social realism could 'progressively' refashion the structures of a stagnant, socially irrelevant academicism, it was by the same token a subordinate, historically disinherited lineage, driven back onto nostalgic 'artisanal' images of a pre-capitalist past, embracing the 'modernist' (The Waste Land) but also repulsing it (Ulysses) from a 'traditionalist' standpoint. Scrutiny 'progressively' revaluated literary traditions, but did so because it saw such traditions as the privileged repository of 'human' values brutally overridden by the development of contemporary capitalism. It acted, accordingly, as the impotent idealist conscience of a capitalism in the process of definitively transcending its liberal-humanist phase.

The historical marginality and 'spiritual' centrality of Scrutiny resolve themselves in a single category: élitism. Here, once more, the petty-bourgeois character of the movement is revealed. For élitism, as Nicos Poulantzas has argued,1 is a structural trait of the petty bourgeoisie. Committed by its nuclear social and economic conditions to a framework of overarching authority, to 'standards' and 'leadership', the petty bourgeoisie rejects at once the democratic 'anarchy' it discerns below it and the ineffectualness of the actual authority posed above it. This was precisely Scrutiny's situation. Though empirically decentred, largely excluded from the ruling academic caste, it nevertheless laid claim to be, spiritually, the 'real' élite. On the one hand, Scrutiny was a progressive vanguard thrown into militant conflict with the academic establishment - a conflict for which it mobilised elements of the 'radical' and liberal ideologies of subordinate groups and classes. It effected what Raymond Williams has called, in another context, a 'negative identification' with such social forces,2 to the point where at an early stage it even entertained (in speculative, academic fashion, naturally enough) the 'desirability' of 'some form of economic communism'.3 But the 'vanguard' was also, notionally, the 'élite', already disseminating standards from its spiritual power-positions within the literary establishment. That confusion of 'vanguard' and 'elite' was the precise effect of Scrutiny's inherent contradiction, as an ideological force locked in complicity with the very society it spiritually castigated.

It was, indeed, that complicity which notoriously prevented Scrutiny from formulating the theoretical bases of its critique. Scrutiny's naive sensuous empiricism, epitomised in the act of 'practical criticism', was a 'progressive' testing of aesthetic categories against the immediacies of lived experience - a dissolution of generalities in the 'lived' as ideologically potent as Eliot's dislocation of articulate meanings into poetic concretion. But it was, on the other hand, the confession of a mere incapacity: the blankness of a critique ideologically prohibited from achieving the potentially more subversive level of theoretical discourse. To combat 'ideology', Scrutiny pointed to 'experience' - as though that, precisely, were not ideology's homeland. Yet the 'philosophy' of Scrutiny went beyond sensuous empiricism, and necessarily so. Just as, for Eliot, such empiricism proved ideologically insufficient, demanding its sublation into doctrinal Christianity, so Scrutiny stood in objective need of a metaphysic whose intuitive force was in inverse proportion to its theoretical articulateness. Such a metaphysic was provided by the work of D. H. Lawrence. Lawrence's idealism did not undercut sensuous empiricism: on the contrary, it lent it nothing less than ontological status. Furnished with this metaphysic, then, Scrutiny was able to lambast the varieties of utilitarian empiricism from the standpoint of an absolute idealism, while at the same time assaulting 'absolutist' systems (including, naturally, Marxism) from the viewpoint of a thoroughly 'English' liberal empiricism. The position was invulnerable in direct proportion to its irrationality. Since the metaphysical underpinning slipped by definition through the net of language (so that to demand its demonstration was to reveal oneself in that very act as unregenerate) it was shielded from scrutiny; but it was, by the same token, theoretically sterile. All one could do was point to which phenomena represented 'life', and which did not; there was by definition no possibility of real development within the case, self-limiting and self-referential as it was. It could only be a matter of restating that case again and again, each time with gathering stridency and abstraction, as the liberal-humanist values of a particular phase of industrial capitalism entered into deeper contradiction with that capitalism's developed forms. The logical

^{1.} See his Fascism and Dictatorship (London, 1974), pp 254-5.
2. Culture and Society 1780-1950 (Harmondsworth, 1963), p. 178.

^{3.} Scrutiny, March 1933.

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upshot of this contradiction was then a transvaluing of liberal humanism itself, into the banalities of tory reaction.

Scrutiny's monumentally significant critical achievement produced, in turn, its reaction. That criticism was a pursuit which engaged questions of fundamental value came as an attractive, intuitively valid proposition to students concerned to relate 'literature' to 'life'; yet some of the claims entailed by that buoyant humanism, when pondered in the small hours of the morning, seemed slightly grandiose. There was the question, for example, of those individuals who had no access to the supremely civilising discipline of literature - individuals who certainly formed the social and historical majority, but who were not remarkable for their readiness to rape and plunder, or who, if they were, could not confidently be said to be thus disposed because of their ignorance of Henry James. And there was the even more disturbing question of those individuals who, while undoubtedly deep in literary culture, seemed to find no incompatibility between that and such activities as superintending the murder of Jews. The liberal humanist vision accordingly brought to birth its own negation, tied to it as its very shadow - the rhetorical disillusionment of critics who, sharing the very structure of its assumptions, had nowhere to move on its partial collapse but into postures of patrician reaction masquerading as bleak historical realism. With the partial breaching of the bourgeois humanist fortress, criticism is increasingly driven to transcend its empiricist, intuitionist practices and adopt some 'long perspective' - some problematic which, while more or less compatible with empiricism, is less vulnerable to pious hope and errant subjectivism. Genre, stylistics, theology, psychoanalysis, structuralism: tentative though these projects are in contemporary England, the system-building is now on.

And, of course, historical materialism. There is no doubt as to the ideological determinants of the resurgent interest in Marxist criticism which we have witnessed in the West at least since 1968. It is the task of Marxist criticism (as indeed with all the critical methods I have briefly listed) to recognise its own historical determinants, but to demonstrate that its validity is not identical with them. In the case of Marxism, however, this demonstration is especially difficult. For historical materialism stands or falls by the claim that it is not only not an ideology, but that it contains a scientific theory of the genesis, structure and decline of ideologies. It

situates itself, in short, outside the terrain of competing 'long perspectives' in order to theorise the conditions of their very possibility. This, doubtless, seems a somewhat unfair, deftly convenient advantage to claim over the adherents of such alternative methods. Nor is Marxist criticism rendered any more popular by its simple incompatibility with empiricist and intuitionist techniques; it is less pliant than other 'long perspectives' to the sideways insertion or separate preservation of those ideologically paramount values.

Criticism is not an innocent discipline, and never has been. It is a branch of Marxist criticism to enquire into the history of criticism itself: to pose the question of under what conditions, and for what ends, a literary criticism comes about. For criticism has a history, which is more than a random collocation of critical acts. If literature is its object, it is not its sole point of genesis; criticism does not arise as a spontaneous riposte to the existential fact of the text, organically coupled with the object it illuminates. It has its own relatively autonomous life, its own laws and structures: it forms an internally complex system articulated with the literary system rather than merely reflexive of it. It emerges into existence, and passes out of it again, on the basis of certain determinate conditions. Not all literature needs criticism to prevent it; but there may come a moment, nevertheless, when poetry has to be apologised for. In constructing the history of criticism we are not tracing the exfoliation through history of a linear, if irregular, process: it is the history of criticisms which is at issue. We are seeking the determinants of the particular historical 'spaces' which make the emergence of such an object possible in the first place, and which determine its relations to other synchronous discourses. The science of the history of criticisms is the science of the historical forms which produce those criticisms criticisms which in turn produce the literary text as their object, as the 'text-for-criticism'.

The moment when a material or intellectual practice begins to 'think itself', to take itself as an object of intellectual enquiry, is clearly of dominant significance in the development of that practice; it will certainly never be the same again. What thrusts such a practice into self-reflexiveness is not merely an internal pressure, but the complex unity it forms with adjacent discourses. Writing history,

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criticising or psychoanalysing, studying political economy, falling bodies or acts of promising are not 'natural' activities, the random upshot of 'human curiosity'. They occur within historically determinate spaces of self-reflexion, spaces whose mutual conjuncture marks out the possible objects of knowledge, and so of control, of an ideological formation. This is not, need one say, to reduce all such practices to the ideological: the validity of gravitation is not relative to the ideological structure of eighteenth-century England. It is, rather, the product of a scientific discourse produced from within ideology, and plays its role within that ideological formation. Such self-reflexive moments do not necessarily mark the birthplace of a science. When history begins to 'think itself' as historiography, material production as political economy, quotidian behaviour as philosophy or psychology, the rupture thus established between thought and reality is not the guarantee of a knowledge, though it is the pre-condition of one. It may well be a merely 'provisional' rupture, an opening through which the practice unites more intimately with itself. That this is so, indeed, is particularly evident in the case of criticism. For criticism's self-separation from its object is a kind of feint - a mere prelude to reuniting with it more completely. Its analytic distantiation of its object is the parody of a knowledge - a means of 'possessing' it more closely, dissolving itself into oneness with it. The end of criticism is to efface itself before the text, vicariously naturalising its own troubled 'artifice' by its power to elicit the 'naturalness' of the text itself. In a spiral of mutual reinforcements, the literary text naturalises experience, critical practice naturalises the text, and the theories of that practice legitimate the 'naturalness' of criticism. As a meta-literary practice, a metaphor of the text, criticism writes large the text's inability to think the conditions of its own possibility, reproducing that incapacity under the guise of a knowledge. Under the form of an illumination, criticism renders natural the text's necessary self-blindness. The formal relation between criticism and text resembles the relation between the tribal bard and the king to whom he recounts historical victories, or the relation between bourgeois political economist and capitalist manufacturer. In each case, the 'separation' between discourse and reality is the mere ghost of one: the function of the discourse is to be no more than the self-consciousness of its historical situation. This, precisely, is the function of criticism - to furnish the terms in which the text can know itself, rather than the terms in which what the text does not and cannot know can be disclosed.

The point where poetry has to be apologised for arises classically in English literary history with Sir Philip Sidney's Apology for Poetry. The poetry which Sidney defends is, of course, an institution inseparable from explicit ideological values - the values of a courtly classical humanism hostile to such lapses of taste as the mixing of social classes in drama. Literature for Sidney is a potent ideological instrument for inculcating those virtues appropriate to the hegemonic class of which he is spokesman; it is for this reason above all that it must be protected from the criticisms of an assertive bourgeois puritanism. Sidney's text marks a fading moment of ideological buoyancy, an achieved synthesis of courtly and puritan elements; but the incipient pressures which call forth an apology for poetry will erupt soon afterwards, in the economically unstable, religiously fraught 1590s, to call that ideological synthesis into increasing question. It is only after that eruption has grown to revolutionary crisis and subsided on the other side of civil war that the next major criticism, the so-called 'neo-classical', is called into being. Once more, criticism becomes a crucial ideological instrument - but now in the struggle to stabilise an ideological formation which will seal the contradictory unity of those social classes which compose the hegemonic bloc. In the drive for order, proportion and propriety, the demand for socially cohesive categories of Nature and Reason, the need to reduce and systematise social life to a series of ordered practices, history once again selects criticism as both paradigm and instrument of such a project. In the need to incorporate new classes and fractions of classes into cultural unity, to establish a consensus of social taste, construct common traditions and disseminate uniform manners, criticism becomes one fulcrum of a whole set of ideological institutions: periodicals, coffee-houses, aesthetic and social treatises, classical translations, guide-books to manners and morals. Again, it is only with the gradual erosion of this formation, in the revolutionary turmoil which closes the eighteenth century, that a distinctive corpus of criticism once more emerges into prominence. In the 'emancipated', egalitarian, populist and individualist aesthetics of Romanticism, criticism once more becomes a privileged terrain on which the class-struggle is ideologically conducted. It is equally important in the shaping of a new conservatism, as the later work