

Marxist Literary Criticism, Then and Now

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Neither is philosophy turning to advantage the approach of that professor who, in the pre-Fascist era, experienced an urge to rectify the ills of the times, and examined Marlene Dietrich's film, *The Blue Angel*, in order to obtain, at first hand, an idea of how bad things really were. Excursions of that kind into tangible realities turn philosophy into the refuse of history, with the subject-matter of which it is confused, in the manner of a fetishistic belief in culture per se.

Theodor Adorno
"Why Philosophy?"¹

"Traditional" Marxism, if "untrue" during this period of a proliferation of new subjects of history, must necessarily become true again when the dreary realities of exploitation, extraction of surplus value, proletarianization, and the resistance to it in the form of class struggle, all slowly reassert themselves on a new and expanded world scale, as they seem currently in the process of doing.

Fredric Jameson
"Periodizing the 60s"²

What has Marxism contributed to literary criticism? And what does its encounter with literature in the twentieth century mean for the directions that Marxist criticism might take in the twenty-first? These are huge questions — too large for a short paper; to answer them properly would require, to begin with, some assessment of the state of various Marxisms today (whatever existence they eke out here and there) as well as the situation in which the profession of literary criticism finds itself. Nevertheless, I thought it might be useful to take the subject head-on, however briefly — a sketch with inevitable gaps, but one that could offer a starting point to the project of filling in the bigger picture.

There is no such thing as *a* Marxist literary criticism: no established approaches, no clear methodology, no agreed-upon ideas about how to approach a text or what count as appropriate texts to read, or, indeed, no clearly established sense of why one might expend energy on literary analysis to begin with. It is difficult even to establish a core set of interests and commitments that mark it off from other forms of literary criticism. Marxist literary criticism need not make reference back to Marx (who liked Shakespeare but didn't discuss literature in relation to historical materialism); it certainly doesn't deal with a stock set of questions or topics — say, class or labour, in the way sometimes imagined in introductory texts on literary criticism. There are numerous modes of Marxist criticism related to one another through a theoretical family resemblance and perhaps a shared, general political outlook. The taxonomies of Marxist approaches offered by Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, and others not only differ from one another, but show enough internal variation as to leave things confused in the extreme. For the form of Marxist criticism which Eagleton, for instance, calls “economic” — a category including such things as the sociology of literature and book history — words in books don't really matter, or at least aren't the primary source of literature's social and political function and importance. But for the other forms of criticism he discusses, from social realism to *Ideologiekritik*, the marks on the page that are the typical focus of literary criticism are the main things to be assessed and analyzed.

There are, it seems to me, three primary forms or modes of intervention that Marxist literary criticism has taken, especially since the 1920s, beginning with the early work of Adorno, Benjamin, Bloch, Lukács, and others. These modes of Marxist criticism have changed in content, but less so in form — though the conditions under which they are practiced and carried out have changed, a fact not always reflected within newer practices of Marxist criticism, which make use of (say) the old insistence on the relation of literary form to social form even while the former has declined in importance and the latter has been reshaped in response to new forces and historical

circumstances. Hopefully, spelling out these three modes can help to show us where Marxist literary criticism stands today and what might be on the horizon.

In perhaps its most simple and basic form, Marxist criticism has taken the form of a series of methodological criticisms and challenges to existing forms of criticism. These are reminders of what to do or not to do — to “Always historicize,” for example, or to remember the centrality of class struggle and the determining role of the forces and relations of production to social life and to literary and cultural production. Such critical imperatives are meant to shape literary criticism as such, pulling it away from idealist forms of historicism and formalism and toward a commitment to the social character of literary writing. In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams remarks that “‘Marxist criticism’ and ‘Marxist literary studies’ have been most successful ... when they have worked with the received category of ‘literature’, which they may have extended or even revalued, but never radically questioned or opposed.”³ Adorno on Mann, Lukács on Scott, Jameson on Gissing, Schwarz on Brás Cubas: each of these analyses might introduce new insights into the objects and authors being studied, but they still largely take the form of learned commentaries of objects known in advance for being ones filled with significance and in need of study with the tools of literary analysis. Here, Marxism piggybacks on received definitions of literature and literary study in a manner that defines it as a theoretical approach to texts — one of a handful which can be substituted for one another depending on context or even an individual critic's analytic sensibilities.

The second mode of Marxist criticism builds on the impulse of this first, but extends it significantly. Here, the received category of literature around which institutional practices such as professional organizations and university departments are organized is scrutinized and placed into question. Marxism has at the core of its theory and practice the analysis of history and of the shifts that take place within it; it assumes that the economic is (“in the last instance”) of prime importance in how human social life is organized. With respect to literature and literary criticism, it thus tries to understand the existing social and political function of these practices by mapping out the manner in which they have developed and changed over time — that is, both how these practices themselves have changes *and* shifts in their social and political function. This is a form of metatheory: a view of the status and practice of the literary in general which focuses more on social form than on aesthetic content; it is something akin to a history of ideas traced out within materialist philosophy. Williams and others remind us that literature developed into “an apparently objective category of printed works of a certain quality” out of something more inchoate, something once linked to reading

ability and not limited to creative or imaginative works defined by taste or sensibility.⁴ But beyond this acknowledgment of definitional shifts with the category of literature is an insistence on the politics of literature in relation to larger social developments: “*Literature* and *criticism* are, in the perspective of historical social development, forms of a class specialization and control of a general social practice, and of a class limitation on the questions which it might raise.”⁵

If the first mode of Marxist criticism introduces more complex forms of literary analysis into existing forms of criticism, the second aims to shatter the self-certainties of literary analysis by insisting on the ways in which culture and power are necessarily bound together, perhaps especially so in the constitution of literary criticism as a practice. Terry Eagleton has written that “Nobody is much bothered by materialist readings of *Titus Andronicus* ... but a materialist theory of culture — a theory of culture as production before it is expression — sounds, in the spontaneously idealist milieu of middle-class society, something of a category mistake or a contradiction in terms.”⁶ The most important intervention made by cultural criticism in the twentieth century — and not just in Marxism, but in the work of scholars from Thorstein Veblen to Pierre Bourdieu — was to desacralize and demythologize ideas of literature and culture, highlighting the social and political violence which shaped the consecration of these categories into practices immediately associated with transcendent value; the insistence on culture as always already a form of production is only the beginning of this effort. While political reflections on the category of literature and culture itself have contributed to the practice of literary criticism, they have just as frequently pushed critical analysis in other directions — towards sociological approaches to literature and culture (the latest of which is exemplified by the work of Franco Moretti) or to the study of numerous other modes of cultural expression and practice. Challenges to the institutions of literary analysis make it — or at least should make it — hard to continue with criticism as usual.

“Culture for Marxism is at once absolutely vital and distinctly secondary: the place where power is crystallized and submission bred, but also somehow ‘superstructural’, something which in its more narrow sense of specialized artistic institutions can only be fashioned out of a certain economic surplus and division of labour, and which even in its more generous anthropological sense of a ‘form of life’ risks papering over certain important conflicts and distinctions.”⁷ This tension lies at the heart of most forms of Marxist criticism that deal with culture as opposed to economics, politics, or the social. Culture is an object of suspicion as a result of its structural function and, indeed, its very existence, but is also a field which requires critical study

— and not just because of its ideological function (to which Eagleton points here), but because it is also imagined as a space in which the crystallization of power can be interrupted or halted, and submission turned into autonomy and genuine self-expression. If literature and culture were simply the space of ideological expression, if ideology was simply false consciousness or a blunt substitute for religion, they wouldn’t create such headaches and problems for Marxist criticism. Rather, culture is also imagined within Marxism as a space of political possibilities and alternative imaginings — not “politics by other means” in any simple and direct way, but also not ultimately separable from politics.

Marxism may be “deeply suspicious of the cultural, which it views as in the end the offspring of labour, as well as, often enough, a disownment of it,” but it also can’t give up on culture or literature.⁸ The longstanding anxieties within Marxism about what Herbert Marcuse called “affirmative culture” or what others name as “instrumental culture” aren’t meant to close down the horizon of possibility offered by culture, but to show the enormous difficulties for criticism in addressing culture without participating in its reification and instrumentalization. Adorno’s worries in “Cultural Criticism and Society” and elsewhere echo those of Marcuse: both worry about the tendency of criticism to be interested in culture because of its links with the spiritual and the transcendent.⁹ “Man does not live by bread alone; this truth is thoroughly falsified by the interpretation that spiritual nourishment is an adequate substitute for too little bread”; and Marcuse again: “The culture of souls absorbed in a false form those forces and wants which could find no place in everyday life.”¹⁰ The challenge for Marxist criticism has been to name or identify alternative or antagonistic forms of life expressed in culture, while keeping the lie also named by culture firmly in mind. A difficult task: playing with and against the false autonomy of culture established by bourgeois social life since the late eighteenth century. The criticism of the past several decades, whether looked at individually or as a whole, has taken this challenge up with more or less rigor, but without any coherent plan of attack. With respect to literature, some forms of criticism have sought to separate out reified forms of culture from other, more revolutionary forms; in many cases this has reflected existing taxonomies, with (say) mass culture being seen as the most ideological, and forms of experimental or explicitly political literature being seen as having escaped instrumentalization and so having special significance (Jameson speaks of modernism in this fashion, even if at other points he insists on the opposite point). Marxist criticism which places wagers on the utopian dimension of this or that novel or genre — “serious” science fiction, for instance — seems to forget the second mode to which I’ve pointed concerning the political and economic conditions of

possibility of literary writing *and* criticism, with the effect being a curious, uncritical acceptance of (for instance) writerly aims and intentions, and of the category of the literary more generally.

More interestingly, other forms of Marxist criticism have imagined that it is “possible to find the material history which produces a work of art somehow inscribed in its very texture and structure, in the shape of its sentences or its play of narrative viewpoints, in its choice of a metrical scheme or its rhetorical device.”¹¹ This is to use symbolic responses to an objective historical situation as a way to read back through to those circumstances, whether in a direct, unmediated form, or perhaps with the added bonus that inscribed in symbolic forms is some hint of the Real or the social unconscious of a given historical period. The most powerful of these approaches is found in the work of Fredric Jameson, who famously views literature as a symbolic practice that provides imaginary and ideological solutions to unresolved sociopolitical contradictions. In Jameson’s “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” the divide between mass and high culture is collapsed; each is now seen as a different way of managing the same set of social contradictions, thus providing materials valuable for critics who want to better understand the ways in which culture is reified.¹² It is the “utopian” content of mass culture that most readers of Jameson’s essay seize on, the idea that a latent element of any form of cultural expression casts doubt on the fixity of the political present and its self-certainties. Here, the hope that culture yields political tools and insights (if not transcendence of an older, spiritual kind) is tied together with a more sociological, institutional approach: one gets the rewards of literary criticism while approaching things from a Marxist perspective. What’s still left out of the picture is how and why certain forms of culture might be seen to escape the instrumentalization that worried the Frankfurt School. If everything has a utopian content (even if perhaps only in the minimal sense outlined by Williams: “*No mode of production and therefore no dominant social order and therefore no dominant culture ever in reality excludes or exhausts all human practice, human energy, and human intention*”), then there’s no need to make distinctions about what to study as especially significant forms of culture.¹³ Literature is displaced from the center of Marxist critical concern, but in the process culture becomes a space of study primarily for what it reveals about conditions and developments at other, more socially significant levels.

If one way of addressing the crisis that affirmative culture introduces into Marxist criticism was to divide culture into serious work and junk, avant-garde modernism and mass culture, Jameson manages this problem (in part) by considering different zones of capitalism in which “culture” takes different forms. The utopia which is supposed to go hand-in-hand with

reification is divided spatially, with utopia being displaced from the West to the rest. Already in the “Reification” essay we find him introducing the idea that revolutionary cultural expressions can be found only in those places whose conditions of possibility — formal, but not yet real, subsumption into global capital — allow for forms of cultural production that don’t obey the inexorable logic of affirmative culture. This spatial move is also a temporal one — it suggests (questionably) that literature and other cultural forms once lived out the political promise of their semi-autonomy from social life, before collapsing into the undifferentiated murk of instrumentality. For Jameson, the phenomenon called “globalization” seems to have eliminated this possible political opening in the gap between formal and real, so that now what we read in his work and that of other Marxist critics is an insistence on the fact that everything is now cultural — an assertion whose implications have been difficult to ascertain or to properly make sense of, perhaps especially so when it comes to the question of what it is one imagines one is doing in engaging with this or that literary text from a Marxist perspective. Everything is cultural: should we take this as a further intensification (or even dialectical transfiguration) of the drama of the spectacle to which Guy Debord alerted us, or as announcing a welcome social immanence whose outcome can be nothing other than the multitude and the commons described by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri?

Where are we then left? The first mode is inadequate; the second, reductive; and the third, confused by the movement between the repudiation of culture as an ideological category and a belief in its potential redemptive and/or political possibilities — a politics grounded in older critical ontologies and epistemologies, even if these are troubled by Marxist categories. How, then, do we relate these approaches to literature and its potential end(s)? Literature always has a truth value of some kind. Even if its slow marginalization as a social practice has made it tempting to insist more strongly on its class basis and social untruth, it would be a mistake for Marxism to think that it is done with it once and for all. Literature still provides cognitive, utopian, or aesthetic insights, and writing itself remains a political practice — “one of the most transgressive and most easily exchanged cultural forms through which dissidence can be articulated, not least because the material prerequisites of pen and paper” — or the keyboard and the wireless connection — “are relatively easy to acquire.”¹⁴ But this persistence of literature (a persistence which finds analogs in the figures of excess animating poststructuralist philosophy or Deleuzian politics) doesn’t find an easy counterpoint in Marxist literary criticism, much of which seems to me to continue to work within one of the three modes I’ve just outlined, if (to be ungenerous) with an increasing lack of purpose and direction. What

other path could it follow? To a large degree, literary criticism has absorbed Marxism's methodological pointers and grasps the implications of its larger critique of literary institutions, even if it hasn't acted on them (here, the institutional instinct for self-preservation kicks in). As for its own attempts to grasp the strands of culture that slip out from under affirmative culture, this seems to have brought Marxist criticism back to a sense of culture as pure ideology *or* as pure political possibility, without a clear sense of which situation holds where or when, convinced of neither outcome, but energized by these breaks, gaps, and incompletions.

To get a sense of why this might be the case — and what might come next — we need to think about the historical conditions of Marxist criticism itself. More than thirty years ago, Perry Anderson diagnosed a paradigm shift in Marxism — a shift away from political practices intimately connected to the activities of parties and unions to a phenomenon he named “Western Marxism,” which roughly comes into being with the work of the Frankfurt School. For Anderson, the “first and most fundamental of its characteristics has been the structural divorce of this Marxism from political practice.”¹⁵ In Western Marxism, the divide of theory and practice isn't something to be actively engaged, but has become affirmed as a given, with energies thus devoted entirely to theory at the expense of practice. Marxism shifts towards philosophy, and becomes an “ever increasing academic emplacement”; its central focus is on culture and aesthetics, particularly of the bourgeois kind; and it becomes “Western,” which is to say, “utterly provincial and uninformed about the theoretical cultures of neighbouring countries.”¹⁶ For Anderson, this strain of Marxism is also characterized by a consistent pessimism as it develops “new themes absent from classical Marxism — mostly in a speculative manner.”¹⁷ “Where the founder of historical materialism moved progressively from philosophy to politics and then economics,” Anderson writes, “the successors of the tradition that emerged after 1920 turned back from economics and politics to philosophy.”¹⁸

Anderson's characterization of Western Marxism is meant to sound alarm bells about the draining of energies from what he would have understood (in 1976 at least) as a “proper” form of politics. He writes that “the hidden hallmark of Western Marxism as a whole is that it is a product of defeat.”¹⁹ This criticism comes at a moment in which actually-existing socialisms — even given their very real flaws and their distance from Marxist theory — presented a viable alternative to forms of liberal democratic capitalism and unionism remained a strong movement across the world. In the context of our circumstances, it is easy enough to see the depth of this defeat as something we are still in the process of coming to understand. Many of the points that Anderson makes with respect to Western

Marxism seem characteristic of Marxist criticism today: it is largely divorced from political parties or even from social movements (though perhaps not at its anarchist edges); its practitioners are primarily university-based and generally accepted there as one variant of a multiplicity of critical approaches; and they are interested in philosophy more than in (say) the nitty-gritty of re-establishing an international party operating above and beyond parochial nationalisms. These points are, of course, directed at Marxist criticism in general and not just at Marxist *literary* critics, who were in relatively short supply before Lukács (despite Plekhanov and Lenin and Trotsky's writings on art and literature).

The intervening thirty years and the end of state socialism have brought about new geopolitical configurations within which Marxisms circulate, and, as such, new criteria with which to assess their political possibilities. Western Marxism looks like a defeat if one imagines politics to have to take a certain form — that which characterized Marxist and socialist movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The political and historical terrain has altered so much in the global era that it would be a mistake to measure success or failure on these grounds (a point made repeatedly since at least Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*).²⁰ Anderson laments the break of Western Marxism with an international party and criticizes its parochialism. While there remains nothing like a new international socialist party, the palpable sense of having to frame one's political imaginings and activities in a global context ensures that the “Westernness” of Western Marxism has now dissipate — though, in part, this is because of the global circulation and re-purposing of Western Marxism in places around the globe (university-based Marxists even in Russia, Eastern Europe, and China are Western Marxists in terms of the archives they draw upon and their broad interest in culture over politics and economics). Nor does culture hold the attention of Marxist criticism as it once did, and, where it does capture critical attention, the focus is certainly not bourgeois culture alone. If anything, the shift from economics to philosophy that Anderson describes seems to have been reversed in recent years. The very absence of the socialist world (at least on its former scale) has brought the structuring force of economics to the surface in a way that has rendered its foundational role apparent to everyone: political economy is back in style. One of the real limits of Western Marxism was that despite its best intentions to do otherwise, it, too, tended to treat culture as in the end semi-autonomous from politics, and so as a space necessitating a careful mapping by those whose political commitments demanded a search for alternative social forms and imaginings. Anderson writes that while Gramsci dealt extensively with Italian literature in the *Prison Notebooks*, he “took the autonomy and

efficacy of cultural superstructures as a *political* problem, to be explicitly theorized as such — in its relationship to the maintenance or subversion of the social order.”²¹ In this sense, we are all Gramsci now, with the difference being that the political problem with respect to culture today is, in fact, its *lack* of autonomy and efficacy, its equivalence with the political in a manner that leaves conceptions of its function as ideological or anti-ideological unhelpful and beside the point.

Western Marxism’s focus on culture generated contributions to literary criticism that have been productive even for those who don’t understand themselves to be Marxists. However we might assess the status of its activities — a distraction from real politics or a contribution to understanding the complexity of social signification and meaning-making without which there can be no politics — we are in new historical circumstances that have pushed Marxist criticism towards new objects of study and modes of intervention. This is an ongoing process; the three approaches to literature or culture that I described above continue to describe much of what is done under the name of Marxism. But the changed political circumstances of the present moment — one which finds capitalism under question, widespread expressions of anxiety about ecological futures, and so on — have pushed critical energies in other directions, and will continue to do so. One of the only positive things that Anderson says about Western Marxism is that it proved to be unexpectedly immune to reformism. Marxism is a theory of social and political transformation — of revolution, not evolution, since it understands that no amount of amelioration of existing political and economic frameworks will address the broad social injustices that capitalism produces. At the moment, studies of literature within universities may not be the main site for such transformations to be better understood, or actualized — which isn’t the same as saying that such studies don’t have any value at all.

Notes

- ¹ Theodor Adorno, “Why Philosophy?” in *The Adorno Reader*, edited by Brian O’Connor (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) 53.
- ² Fredric Jameson, “Periodizing the 60s,” in *The Ideologies of Theory, Essays 1971-1986*. Vol. 2 (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1988) 208.
- ³ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977) 53.
- ⁴ Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 48.
- ⁵ Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 49.
- ⁶ Terry Eagleton, “Introduction Part I” in *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader*, edited by Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne (New York: Blackwell, 1996) 14.
- ⁷ Eagleton, “Introduction” 7.
- ⁸ Eagleton, “Introduction” 6.
- ⁹ See Theodor Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” in *Prisms*, translated by Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: MIT P, 1997) 17-34.
- ¹⁰ Herbert Marcuse, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, translated by Jeremy J. Shapiro (London: Free Association Books, 1988) 109 and 110.
- ¹¹ Eagleton, “Introduction” 11.
- ¹² See Fredric Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture.” *Social Text* 1 (1979): 130-48.
- ¹³ Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 125.
- ¹⁴ Drew Milne, “Introduction Part II: Reading Marxist Literary Theory,” in *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader*, edited by Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne (New York: Blackwell, 1996) 27.
- ¹⁵ Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: New Left Books, 1976): 29.
- ¹⁶ Anderson, *Western Marxism* 49 and 69.
- ¹⁷ Anderson, *Western Marxism* 93.
- ¹⁸ Anderson, *Western Marxism* 52.
- ¹⁹ Anderson, *Western Marxism* 42.
- ²⁰ See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, New York: Verso, 1985.
- ²¹ Anderson, *Western Marxism* 78.