

Part I The Literary and the Aesthetic

Chapter One Severing the Aesthetic Connection

In introducing a selection of Marx's and Engels's writings on literature and art, Stefan Morawski cautions that 'we should distinguish the writings which explicitly and coherently elaborate a topic from the fragments which contain a thesis about a topic but which leave it undeveloped in part and thus rather unclear, and from the hasty or opaque comments which, as such, don't offer a reliable basis for a thesis' (Baxendall and Morawski, 1974: 7). Morawski goes on to note that, for the greater part, the themes clustered under the first of these categories concern the functional aspects of specific attributes of artistic structures. By contrast, he numbers the following among the themes associated with the second and third categories: the distinguishing traits of aesthetic objects and aesthetic experience; the recurrent attributes and enduring values of art; the distinction between science and art; and the hierarchy of artistic values.

The founding texts of Marxism thus seem to authorise, quite clearly and directly, the concerns of a historical and sociological approach to the analysis of artistic forms and functions. The degree to which they also authorise the concerns of a Marxist aesthetic, understood as a theory of a distinct mode of cognition or experience embodied in works of art, is less certain. Marx and Engels undoubtedly had views on such matters and interpolated them into their writings from time to time. Yet it is not clear how much reliance can be placed on these as indicative of the arguments they might have advanced had they given such questions their sustained attention. Moreover, even if this conundrum could be resolved, it would hardly be decisive. The considerable pains Marx devoted to establishing the existence of a separate Asiatic mode of production have had few binding consequences for the subsequent development of Marxist thought which, on balance, has judged this an unhelpful suggestion.

Unfortunately, these fragmentary writings are not always approached so circumspectly. They have rightly attracted a good deal of attention from scholars concerned to deepen and extend our understanding of the various tributary sources of Marx's and Engels's intellectual development. Margaret Rose's *Marx's Lost Aesthetic*

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is a recent case in point, offering a detailed and persuasive reconstruction of ‘what Marx’s aesthetic theory might have been’ by considering his stated views on art and literature in the context of contemporary aesthetic theories and artistic movements (Rose, 1984)¹. Difficulties arise, however, when such reconstructed accounts are used to justify the view that Marxist thought should ongoingly engage with the concerns of philosophical aesthetics. For the issues are distinct. The first is a historical matter concerning the biographical fullness of thought of a specific (although exceptionally richly) historically determined individual while the second concerns the current theoretical and political requirements of an intellectual tradition whose very commitment requires some degree of adaptability to changing circumstances.

I put the matter this way because I would hesitate to push too hard the contrary view that a concern with the traditional preoccupations of philosophical aesthetics cannot be reconciled with the analytical logic of Marxist thought. Indeed, empirically, the tradition of Marxist aesthetics is largely definable in terms of its attempts to effect such a reconciliation. Nor can there be much doubt that Marxism’s political vision has been profoundly – and often disastrously – affected by the influence of Romantic aesthetics on Marx’s conception of communist society as a vehicle for the full realisation of humanity. That said, my own view – argued more fully in the next chapter – is that the concerns of philosophical aesthetics *do* pull in an opposite direction from what is, for me, the most important and most lasting innovation of Marxist thought: its socialising and historicising logic – even though this, its ‘rational kernel’ so to speak, has often to be won from the particularity of Marx’s own formulations. If we compare the procedures governing the formation of objects of thought which Marx deployed in his social and economic analyses with those regulating the formation of objects of thought within philosophical aesthetics, then these do seem incompatible. Marx’s argument, in the *Grundrisse*, that the concrete is the concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations whose interaction can only be grasped by the violent abstraction of thought, thus embodies a methodological orientation that is precisely the reverse of that of philosophical aesthetics (Marx, 1973: 101). It suggests, for example, that questions relating to the effects of works of art require that the labour of theoretical abstraction be orientated to examining the modes of interaction of the complex concatenation of factors regulating the reception of such works. Within philosophical aesthetics, by contrast, the process of abstraction pulls in the opposite direction. Here, it embodies a procedure for disengaging works of art from the mundane particularities regulating their reception in different contexts in order to arrive at a conception of their effects as being always subject to the influence of an invariant aesthetic relation, itself rooted in an unchanging faculty of the subject deduced from a transcendental analysis of the constitutive properties of art in general.

Aspects of this tension were recognised by Georg Plekhanov in his insistence that, while Marxist categories could account for the socio-genesis of works of art, they could neither explain nor illuminate the nature of aesthetic experience as such. This is not to endorse Plekhanov’s view which left the sphere of aesthetic

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experience and judgement in a position of untouched transcendence. None the less, the point is worth making if only to recall that the alignment of Marxist approaches to art and literature with the concerns of philosophical aesthetics occurred at a relatively late point in the development of the Marxist tradition. The first work to propose such an alignment was Mikhail Lifshitz's *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx* (Lifshitz, 1974), first published in 1933 coincidentally with the first collection (co-edited by Lifshitz) of Marx's and Engel's writings on art. Lifshitz's work was inspired by the publication, a year earlier, of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, just as it, in turn, prompted Lukács to draw on the same source in elaborating his historicised man-centred aesthetics in which art is viewed as affording a specific mode of self-consciousness of the processes of man's historical self-making.²

Even then, not everyone subscribed to the commitment, derived from this period, to establish a Marxist aesthetic which could rival – and, of course, surpass – the aesthetic theories of the nineteenth century in its capacity to offer alternative explanations of such enduring problems as the defining attributes of art, the hierarchy of artistic values and so on. As we shall see, Brecht didn't. But most of the theorists comprising Perry Anderson's tradition of western Marxism did, and wholeheartedly in the sense that such questions came to supply the organising centre of their inquiries into the spheres of art and literature. Work of this sort still goes on, of course. The cutting edge of most recent Marxist literary theory, however, has tended in the opposite direction, seeking to sever the aesthetic connection rather than to constrain inquiry within its confines and, in doing so, to bring a more thoroughgoing socialising and historicising logic to bear on questions which had previously been resolved abstractly or philosophically. While I argue that the structure of aesthetic discourse is incompatible with the socialising and historicising impetus of Marxist thought, I want first to resist a conclusion which is sometimes drawn from this: that the category of literature should be abandoned. To the contrary, I argue that it is vital, both theoretically and politically, that such a category should be secured – but only on the condition that its specificity is conceived non-aesthetically.

As a prelude to this argument, however, it will be useful to identify a number of linked problems which derive from the theoretical alignments the tradition of Marxist aesthetics has sought to effect. I shall focus on two such problems. The first concerns the tendency toward an idealist reductionism which, in spite of their socialising and historicising rhetoric, has characterised Marxist approaches to the question of aesthetic value. The second concerns the related tendency for the concepts and procedures developed to enable Marxism to address the concerns of aesthetics to be carried over into adjacent areas of inquiry – those concerning the social determination of works of art, for example – such that the issues pertinent to such areas of inquiry are subjected to a 'logic of aesthetic overdetermination'. The consequence, in both cases, is that the scope of social and historical categories of analysis tends to be restricted while also, through the way their application is conceived, being subject to an idealist inflection.

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An Idealist Reductionism

We could say then that art, like all autonomous, qualitatively distinct spheres, exists as such to the extent that it transcends the particularity of its social conditioning. This transcendence, which in essence resides in the very bowels of art, is the exact opposite of all sociological reductions. Consequently, if Marx's theory of aesthetics had no other objective than to explain art from the perspective of its social conditioning – expressed, in turn, by its ideological content – it would never amount to more than a sociology of art. (Vazquez, 1978: 97)

This argument might have been excerpted from any of the classic texts comprising the tradition of Marxist aesthetics. Here, it is Sanchez Vazquez speaking, but it could just as easily have been Lukács, Lifshitz, Goldmann, Lefebvre, Fischer or Althusser, or, more recently, Eagleton or Jameson.³ That Marxism is not a mere sociology of art is a constantly recurring trope within the tradition. Marxism respects art's transcendence of its social conditioning. Yet, at the same time, it is not content merely to register this fact or to posit, in the spirit of neo-Kantianism, a simple duality between a socio-genetic approach to art and the question of its value. Marxism both respects art's transcendence and seeks to explain it in terms of – and this is the central paradox of the tradition, a discursive contradiction which it can never entirely disguise – precisely its social and historical conditioning.

Viewed in this light, the argument forms part of a double disclaimer through which Marxist aesthetics, in telling us what it is not, has sought to negotiate a specific position for itself within the field of available discourses about art and literature. If the formulation of a Marxist *aesthetic* warns us that its concerns are not to be confused with those of a 'mere sociology', the fact that it is a *Marxist* aesthetic that is on offer also tells us that its concerns will not be subjective or formalist either. If Marxist aesthetics thus differs from the sociology of art in the attention it accords questions of aesthetic value and experience, it also differs from traditional aesthetics in rebutting the contention that the specific nature of the aesthetic experience consists in relations of mutual support between the abstracted form of the art-work and the constitution of a transcendental subject. In the more sophisticated versions of the argument, these two moments of differentiation are integrated by positing an ideological affinity between the subjective formalism of bourgeois aesthetics and the 'pseudo-objectivism' of sociology. Lukács, seemingly with Plekhanov in mind, thus accuses 'vulgar sociology' of adopting an abstract and entirely external approach to art which relinquishes the question of aesthetic experience to the hold of equally abstract subjectivist formulations:

And the social insights of 'sociological' literary criticism are on an even lower level and thus even more abstract and schematic than those of general sociology; this approach treats aspects of literature it sets out to illuminate as abstractly and formalistically and as much in aesthetic isolation as the non-sociological approaches to literature. The affinity of vulgar sociology to aesthetic formalism, often remarked

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upon, is not a speciality of those who distort Marxism. On the contrary, it is from bourgeois literary criticism that this tendency toward aesthetic formalism passes into the labour movement. One can discover this direct, inorganic mixing of abstract, schematic sociological generalisations with the aesthete's subjective approach to literary works in full bloom in such 'classics' of sociology as Taine, Guyau or Nietzsche. (Lukács, 1970: 198)

Having defined the field of discourses about art as being governed by an antinomy whose terms are ideologically complicitous, Marxist aesthetics defines its own function as that of overcoming the effects of this opposition. It will return to sociology a concern with aesthetic questions while simultaneously grounding such questions in the analysis of social and historical relations. In the classical statements of the position, this is accomplished by conceiving both aesthetic objects and the subjects of aesthetic judgement as being marked by the processes of their historical formation. While this avoids formalist conceptions of aesthetic transcendence and idealist conceptions of the givenness of the subject, it does so in such a way that subject and object are still regarded as the mutual supports of one another. For, in so far as the aesthetic relation between them is concerned, neither the subject nor the object is regarded as being unduly influenced by the immediate social and historical determinations which condition the forms of their interrelation in specific contexts. Rather, the historicisation of subject and object takes the form of their being written into a long and continuous history of the humanisation of the senses in which – incompletely at first but, once the alienating effects of the division of labour have been overcome, fully – the value inherent in the art-work which embodies this history is recognised by the subject which that history helps to produce. In this way, no matter what stage has been reached within these mutually supportive histories, the aesthetic relation between subject and object is represented as a relation of fundamentally the same type: one in which the subject recognises itself as the product of the processes of man's historical self-making processes which, in turn, the art-work embodies while also heralding their completion. Any examination of the differential structure of the varying social relations within which works of art are valorised, and of the different functions which their valorisation plays within those relations, is thus pre-empted to the degree that such relations are held to be ultimately elevatable to a general subject-object relation susceptible to a philosophical definition.

This idealist reductionism – a reductionism upwards, so to speak – is a consequence of the statute of limitation placed on socialising and historicising categories which results from their deployment *within the discursive field of aesthetics*. Yet the appearance of idealism which this orientation brings in its tow is avoided by the recurrent use of an argument which seems uncompromising, indeed excessive, in the role it accords history. This consists in the view that if art transcends its social conditioning, it is able to do so only by virtue of that social conditioning – by virtue of the fact that, as genuine art, its relations to history are deeply determined. Marked indelibly by the conditions of its production, the genuine work of art is

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able to rise above those conditions precisely because its value consists in and derives from its relations to them. It is only where the force of historical determination is weak – where a text is affected by history only shallowly or by its more superficial aspects, as popular fiction is often viewed within the tradition – that it proves also to be a limitation.⁴

There are many versions of this argument. Perhaps the most fully elaborated, however, is Lukács's theory of the vocation for universality which derives from the social typicality of the experience reflected in the art-work and the degree to which this experience represents the progressive tendencies of the historical epoch to which the work in question belongs. Through the application of these two criteria, Lukács is able both to construct a canon and effect discriminations within it. All those works of literature which give a shape and coherence to the experience of significant social classes have a place within world-historical literature. However, the place of literary texts within this most totalising of literary canons varies in accordance with the historical functions of the classes whose world-views they fashion. Where the class which provides a literary text, however indirectly, with its ultimately determining social base is of a limited significance within a particular mode of production and, accordingly, has only a tangential bearing on the central political and cultural tendencies of the epoch, then that text's capacity for universality is assessed as a limited one. The same is true of classes which have passed their prime and which, like the bourgeoisie after 1848, act as a halter on the forces of historical development rather than representing their progressive tendencies. If such classes support the texts which constitute the troughs of realism – still important components of world-historical literature, but not its highest achievements – the peaks are constituted by those texts which embody the world-views of those classes which represent the developmental tendencies of their epoch, with an exception clause (the Balzac clause) which allows declining social classes to enrich realist literature through their ability to supply a critical perspective on the development of capitalist social relations.

The internal consistency and elegance of this theory has often been remarked upon. It rests on a view of history as a continuous process – marked, of course, by the vicissitudes of the dialectic, but still pursuing its ever-onward course – in which literary texts can be assigned a definite relation to one another in terms of their relations to the objective tendencies of historical development. Yet this ordering of relations between texts requires that the process of history can be counted on to produce a subject capable of recognising – fitfully at first, but eventually fully – the respects in which both the troughs and peaks of realist literature offer a mediated reflection of the contradictory processes of that subject's self-making. As a consequence, Lukács's assignation of relative value and meaning to literary texts is dependent on an idealist conception in which their future value and meaning is allowed to overdetermine their past and present ones.⁵ In this way, the vocation for universality which derives from a text's relations to its conditions of production is, in the final analysis, subject to a future determination. For the way Lukács construes the relations between a text and the social and ideological conditions

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of its period is always informed by a prior conception of that text's relations to earlier and subsequent texts as specified by the degree to which its conditions of production enable it both to continue earlier realist tendencies and to anticipate later ones. The objective meaning and value of literary texts is thus determined by the place which their conditions of production produce for them within a meta-text of History which Marxism claims to know but whose final judgements – which can only be delivered once the process of History has been completed – it can only anticipate. Hence Lukács's constant insistence that the meaning of a period and its texts will become clearer to us the more distant we are from it – not just because, with time, perspectives settle, but because, with the unfolding of each stage of historical development, we move a little closer to the post-historical unified subject, Man, to whom the meaning of History and, therefore, that of each text within it will finally become luminously transparent.

Yet this future-structured conception of a text's meaning and value does not negate the fact that its vocation for universality is thought of as deriving from its relations to the conditions of its production. For it is still the history which flows into the text from behind it that, come the day of History's final hermeneutic reckoning with itself, is held to determine its relative value. As a consequence, the yet-to-be fixed past of the text is accorded a priority over the real history of its differential valuation and reception within different valuing communities. Indeed, this latter question is rendered devoid of any possible significance as an area of analysis. Discrepant systems of valuation of the same text simply don't count for much within this scheme. Their ontological weight is weak compared with that of the historical forces which prepare the judgements of empirical subjects for their eventual *rendez-vous* with those of Man. Foucault throws some light on this matter in contrasting the functioning of utopian representations within the classical and the modern *epistemes*. Whereas, in the classical period, utopias functioned as fantasies of origins, the development of historical systems of thought in the nineteenth century effects a transformation in the temporal orientation of utopic thought. Concerned 'with the final decline of time rather than with its morning', Foucault argues, the modern utopia projects a future situation in which 'the slow erosion or violent eruption of History will cause man's anthropological truth to spring forth in its stony immobility; calendar time will be able to continue; but it will be, as it were, void, for historicity will have been superimposed exactly upon the human essence' (Foucault, 1970: 262). Foucault's purpose in this discussion is to draw attention to the structural similarities which underlie Ricardian and Marxist economics in spite of their differing end-of-history scenarios – a confrontation with finitude and scarcity in the one case and a leap beyond it in the other. These similarities are precisely mirrored in the complicity between bourgeois and Marxist aesthetics. For in both the aesthetic sense is projected as a utopian condition that will mark the end of time and which, in so doing, will finally legislate the proper modes for the deployment of the faculty of judgement. To concern oneself overmuch with particular histories of valuation would, in this light, be merely vain labour given their impending engulfment within a general history of the formation of a unified subject of judgement.

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The Logic of Aesthetic Overdetermination

In *Criticism and Truth*, Barthes argues that the call to respect the specificity of literature ‘seems to be the last will and testament of old criticism, so religiously is it held to’ (Barthes, 1987: 53). Its advantage as a slogan, he suggests, consists in its pretension to establish literary studies as an autonomous science ‘which would at last consider the literary object “in itself”, without ever again owing anything to historical or anthropological sciences’ (Barthes, 1987: 57). Yet this ambition, he argues, can only place literary studies on a road to nowhere:

‘On the subject of the gods’, recommended Demetrius Phalereus, ‘say that they are gods.’ The final imperative of critical verisimilitude is of the same kind: on the subject of literature, say that it is literature. This tautology is not gratuitous: at first, they pretend to believe that it is possible to talk of literature and to make it the object of discourse; but this discourse leads nowhere, since it has nothing to say of this object other than that it is itself. (Barthes, 1987: 54–5)

Marxist literary theory has also found a way of saying this in its insistence that literature must be regarded as relatively autonomous: that is, as being characterised by specific formal and organisational properties which, in differentiating literature from other semiotic forms, are also the product of determinants unique to it. It is true, of course, that neither these determinants nor their literary effects are envisaged – as they are in Barthes’s ‘old criticism’ – as operating in isolation from other social and historical relations. To the contrary, when adequately formulated, the problem of relative autonomy in Marxist literary theory concerns precisely how to theorise the modes of interaction which characterise the relations between those determinations which are construed as specific to literature and the more general economic, political and ideological determinations which Marxist thought contends are relevant to the analysis of any practice.⁶ Yet, whatever their precise pattern in different circumstances, it is foreordained that such modes of interaction will give rise to the same result in supporting those attributes of texts’ formal structures which qualify them as instances of literature.

It is in such formulations of literature’s relative autonomy that the logic of aesthetic overdetermination most clearly manifests itself. For literature’s relative autonomy – its specificity – can be secured only if all texts counted as literary are deemed to be so in essentially the same way in spite of the manifold differences between them in other respects: whether they are texts produced for performance or for reading; the historical circumstances of their initial production and reception; their placement within particular genre systems, etc. Moreover, to specify and account for literature’s relative autonomy, analysis must orientate itself to differing historical relations of literary production precisely with a view to abstracting from these some recurring set of determining relations capable of accounting for the recurrence of an underlying commonality in formal structure which confers on

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such texts their literariness in spite of their differences in other respects. In thus setting out from the assumption that texts nominated as literary *must* have some underlying set of attributes in common, Marxist analysis is led away from the domain of social and historical particularity which it has always claimed as its own.

In these respects, Marxist concern with the question of literature's relative autonomy constitutes the locus of an attempted (but impossible) reconciliation of, on the one hand, an approach to the analysis of the composition and functioning of forms of writing in the contexts of the historical circumstances of their production and social deployment with, on the other, an immanent analysis of literature understood as a distinctive, trans-historical semiotic system. This tension was evident in one of the earliest, and still most influential, formulations of the problem: that developed by Medvedev and Bakhtin in their critique of Russian Formalism. Taking the Formalists to task for positing a division between the extrinsic (systems of patronage, literary markets, etc.) and intrinsic (formal) 'facts' of literature, and for denying the former any influence on the latter, Medvedev and Bakhtin seek to undercut this duality by insisting on the inherent sociality of any influence which literature exerts on itself. In so doing, they are able to deny any essential distinction between the extrinsic and the intrinsic, the social and the literary, studies of literature:

From within it [the literary work] is determined by literature itself, and from without by other spheres of social life. But, in being determined from within, the literary work is thereby determined externally also, for the literature which determines it is itself determined from without. And being determined from without, it thereby is determined from within, for internal factors determine it precisely as a literary work in its specificity and in connection with the whole literary situation, and not outside that situation. (Medvedev and Bakhtin, 1978: 29)

What, then, is the nature of this interior determination which allows literature to contribute to its own social determination? For Medvedev and Bakhtin, the answer consists in literature's differentiation from other semiotic systems as determined by the specific forms and devices through which it reflects and refracts reality:

Literature is one of the independent parts of the surrounding ideological reality, occupying a special place in it in the form of definite, organised philological works which have their own specific structures. The literary structure, like every ideological structure, refracts the generating socio-economic reality, and does so in its own way. But, at the same time, in its 'content,' literature reflects and refracts the reflections and refractions of other ideological spheres (ethics, epistemology, political doctrines, religion, etc.). That is, in its 'content' literature reflects the whole ideological horizon of which it is itself a part. (Medvedev and Bakhtin, 1978: 16–17)

When it comes to identifying the exact nature of the specific mode of reflecting and refracting reality which the literary work effects, Medvedev and Bakhtin are somewhat vague. The most they offer is a restatement of the metaphor of the artist

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as seer in which this capacity is (partially) transferred from the personality of the writer to the impersonality of the literary structure:

Literature is capable of penetrating into the social laboratory where these ideologies are shaped and formed. The artist has a keen sense for ideological problems in the process of birth and generation. (Medvedev and Bakhtin, 1978: 17)

This penchant for theorising literature's specificity by means of metaphors of sight recurs in Althusserian Marxism, as does Medvedev's and Bakhtin's characterisation of literature as a secondary system of signification whose distinctiveness consists in its relations to other semiotic or ideological systems. For Althusser and Macherey, literature's specificity thus consists in its capacity to help us 'see', 'feel' or 'perceive' the ideologies to which it alludes and which provide the ground upon which it works – and works precisely to transform by rendering the occlusions and contradictions of those ideologies perceptible.

Two preliminary difficulties with this conception may briefly be mentioned. First, as must be the case, the relative autonomy of literature, and thereby its capacity to determine itself, is secured only by attributing to it an invariant function and effect. The argument, as Frow puts it, rests on the assumption 'that literature can be described as a distinct ontological realm with a specific difference from the realm of ideology and an invariant function, the demystification of illusion through its parodic formal reproduction' (Frow, 1986: 25–6). If this is so, the nature of the literary function and effect must elude the reach of social and historical analysis. As the 'literiness' of literature is held to consist in its invariant relation to ideology, the most such analysis can do is to identify the contingent factors which condition the specific modes in which such an invariant function/effect is realised in particular circumstances. The result is, indeed, an endless demonstration that literature is literature; or rather, and to propose a correction to Barthes's argument, an endless demonstration that literature isn't something else – in this case, ideology – and so must be itself.

The second difficulty relates to the assumption that literature is a second-order system of signification. Medvedev and Bakhtin thus argue not only that literature refracts social reality in its own way but also that it 'reflects and refracts the reflections and refractions of other ideological spheres'. Since this mechanism is not said to work in reverse – since, that is, literary refractions of reality are not said to be, in turn, subject to a further refraction in other ideological forms – the effect is to install literature as the queen of the superstructures, 'reflecting the whole of the ideological horizon of which it is itself a part'. Similarly, Eagleton, in a sub-variant of the Althusserian argument,⁷ contends that literature signifies history indirectly via its signification of ideological significations of history. History enters the literary text not as history but as ideological significations of history, these latter significations being transformed in the work so as to produce the distinctively literary effect: 'the literary text's relation to ideology so constitutes that ideology as to reveal something of its relations to history' (Eagleton, 1976: 69).

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Ideology here is conceived as a first-order system of signification with literature functioning as a second-order system of signification operating upon it within what seems, again, a non-reversible relation between them.⁸

It is clear that the terms of such arguments, and consequently the implied hierarchy of forms of which they form a part, can easily be deconstructed. There is no reason, for example, why the argument should not be simply up-ended by arguing that, in certain regions (criticism, for instance), history also does not enter into ideology directly as history but only as already signified by literature. In brief, when account is taken of the complex networks of reciprocal signification which characterise the relations between different semiotic systems, the distinction between first- and second-order systems of signification breaks down. All ordered systems of signs involve – and work by and through – their relations to other such systems, all of which, so to speak, are equally close to or distant from god so far as their relations to ‘history’ are concerned. If, in the Marxist conception, literature and ideology are placed in a hierarchical relation to one another, this is only made possible by the fact that the structure of that hierarchy is secured by the role accorded science. For it is science (= Marxism) which, in knowing history, can also know ideology’s relations to history. In sum, if literature is able to be represented as ‘queen of the superstructures’, it is because that place is secured for it by science’s functioning as the ‘king of the superstructures.’⁹

It can be seen from this how both problems coalesce and have their provenance in a broader set of difficulties: the pressure to theorise literature’s specificity in terms of its difference from ideology. Or rather, since this is only half of the story, the root difficulty with Marxist theorisations of literature’s relative autonomy is that this has to be conceived in relation to the places already occupied by science and ideology within the economy of the superstructure. Typically, then, literature is defined by means of a double differentiation: its specificity consists in the conjunction of those properties which allow it to be differentiated from ideology on the one hand and from science on the other. Nor is this true solely of Althusserian Marxism. While differing in content, the procedures deployed by Lukács and Goldmann to identify literature’s specificity are structurally identical – literature has in some way to be defined in relation to what are taken to be the already given and fixed poles of reference of science and ideology. As a consequence, Marxist conceptions of literature’s relative autonomy typically result in a proliferation of not-statements: literature is not ideology and it is not science, but it is not entirely not ideology either, since it is in some way connected to it by virtue of its function. Nor is it entirely not science for, depending on the formulation, it is either said to constitute a staging post on the royal road which leads the subject from the illusions of ideology to the truths of science (Althusser) or to offer a form of knowledge which, albeit organised differently, is as objective as that offered by science (Lukács).¹⁰

It is in regard to this definitional issue that the logic of aesthetic overdetermination has borne most consequentially on the concerns of Marxist literary theory, introducing a quite radical ahistoricity into its most basic procedures. For there are

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no reasons, apart from those derived from epistemology, to assume that literary texts should stand constantly in the same relation to other texts nominated as ideological or scientific. The concern to so argue clearly derives from, as it can now be seen, a historically and theoretically contingent pressure to install literature in an acceptable niche within Marxist variants of the triadic conceptions of the mental economy of the subject inherited from classical epistemology. Indeed, the history of Marxist aesthetics consists largely of competing attempts to map such triadic conceptions of the economy of the subject onto a triadic conception of the organisation of the superstructure: why else, indeed, should it be thought that the superstructure's economy should necessarily be triadic? In consequence, the possibility of examining historically differing sets of relations between different intellectual practices is radically curtailed: science, ideology and literature – these are always there (at least once art and science have been differentiated from magic),¹¹ and they always exist in the same relation to one another just as each always induces in the subject an invariant mode of mental relation to reality. Viewed from this perspective, differences within the Marxist tradition – between its Althusserian and Lukácsian components, for example – are of quite minor significance. Indeed, virtually the only point at issue between them concerns which pre-Marxist epistemology and aesthetic (Kantian, Hegelian, Spinozan, etc.) should govern the terms in which the relations between ideology, science and literature are to be conceived.

That aside, the problems inherent in this definitional procedure are apparent. They are, in effect, variants of those generated within the sociology of genres by the attempt to characterise genres in terms of a definite positivity. For, as we have seen, that positivity always turns out to be relationally conceived as a set of differences from the properties of other genres whose defining attributes, while assumed as given for the purposes of defining the genre in question, are similarly theorisable only as sets of differences from other genres. This, in turn, means that such genres cannot function in the manner required of them if they are to serve as stable points of reference in relation to which the specific differences of other genres might be defined. The whole ground of inter-generic relations is too slippery, fluid and mobile to allow the process which this procedure of genre definition requires to be initiated: namely, that a particular genre, definable solely in terms of its self-identity, might be abstracted from these relations and so serve as a fixed point around which a series of negatively defined generic differentiations might rotate. To the degree that Marxist characterisations of literature's positivity are dependent on the series of not-statements which govern the process of literature's definition – literature is not science and it is not ideology – then so, similarly, that positivity turns out to consist of a set of negatively defined relational attributes subjected to a misleading ontologisation.

Consideration of a more closely related analogy – the Russian Formalists' attempt to theorise the specificity of poetic language in terms of its differentiation from practical language – may help make the point. The result of this endeavour, Medvedev and Bakhtin argue, was an entirely negative definition of poetic language (its capacity to defamiliarise the automatism of practical language) whose cogency

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depended on an unwarranted ontologization of an arbitrarily selected set of differences between poetic and practical language. In being called on to serve the purpose of providing a standardised form of communication in relation to which the *differentia specifica* of poetic language might then be theorised, practical language was able to fulfil this function only because it was itself subject to an arbitrary definition. In focusing purely on narrowly technical forms of utterance in which the communicative function is dominant, Medvedev and Bakhtin argue, the Formalists suppressed those aspects of practical language which included a de-automatising propensity. Once such attributes are included as a part of practical language use and, accordingly, of its definition, then they are clearly unable to serve as criteria whereby practical and poetic language might be differentiated as ontologically distinct realms.

Similarly, then, if literature is to be defined negatively in relation to both science and ideology, these latter must be capable of being defined on their own terms and in a definite relation to one another. There are now more than sufficient grounds for doubting this to be the case. Quite apart from the difficulties associated with the concept of ideology in its own right – its assumption of the attributes of the subject it is supposed to account for, for example, as well as its conventional association with a dualistic ontology of the social, divided between ‘the real’ and its representations¹¹ – the very organisation of the epistemological space in which ideology is theorised as the opposite of science has been tellingly called into question in recent debates.¹² Frow, reflecting on these criticisms and urging the need for the category of ideology to be redefined to take account of them, suggests this might be achieved if ideology, rather than being ontologised as a particular kind of discourse, is thought of ‘as a *state* of discourse or of semiotic systems in relation to the class struggle’ (Frow, 1986: 61). This ideological state of discourse, he further suggests, consists in ‘the tactical appropriation of particular [discursive] positions by a dominant social class’ (Frow, 1986: 62).

While this avoids many difficulties, others remain. Two might usefully be singled out here: first, the arbitrary restriction of the category to the sphere of class relations; second, the equally arbitrary reservation of the term for those tactical appropriations of discourse associated with the dominant class. The effect of these two considerations taken in combination is to equate ideology with dominant ideology, thereby attributing to it the function of reproducing relations of class power via the organisation of consent, and to envision, as its opposite, not truth but resistance. Frow is careful not to ontologise the terms of this distinction. Resistance, like ideology, is, for Frow, a specific use of discourse rather than discourse of a particular kind. Thus understood, he argues, resistance is ‘the possibility of fracturing the ideological from within or of turning it against itself... or of reappropriating it for counterhegemonic purposes’ (Frow, 1986: 63–4). None the less, the dichotomous organisation (domination/resistance) he proposes for the field of discourse seems unlikely to account for the full complexity of the different states in which discourse is appropriated and mobilised in the context of different fields of political and power relations.

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If these difficulties are to be avoided, and the conditions Frow specifies be met, my own view is that the term ideology must be accorded a much looser and more general function. Capable of specifying neither a particular kind of discourse nor a state of discourse produced by specific forms of its political appropriation, it serves a useful purpose in suggesting that discourse can never be neutral with regard to power relations. To refer to discourse as ideological is thus not to attribute specific properties to it but serves rather as a way of indexing that it is to be examined with a view to disclosing its functioning as a component of the rhetorical strategies through which particular forms of power – and not solely those associated with class relations – are organised or opposed. This is by no means saying nothing; the risk of trying to pin the concept down more tightly, however, is that this seems invariably to result in theoretically arbitrary restrictions of the term which obscure its value at this more general level.

What is certain, however, is that if we cannot fix ideology as a particular kind of discourse defined in terms of an identifiable set of properties which exhibit a definite and unchanging relation to science, the very attempt to define literature in terms of its differences from these two categories collapses. It is important to be clear about the nature of this objection. For it applies not merely to this or that Marxist theory of literature's specificity or autonomy. How, in any particular version of the argument, the box of 'literature' happens to be filled is contingent to the objection which concerns, rather, the very procedure of theorising literature's specificity in terms of an epistemologically derived triadic conception of the economy of the superstructures. The objection also applies to those instances where the procedure of defining literature in relation to ideology is uncoupled from the assumptions of epistemology and deployed in historically limited terms. *Formalism and Marxism* offers an instance of this approach in its suggestion that the capacity of literary texts to estrange or defamiliarise ideology should be regarded not as an invariant effect of literature, conceived as a trans-historical category, but rather as true only of historically specific forms of writing associated with the formation of the bourgeois literary system. It is clear, however, that this attempt to operate with a historically limited category of literature whose specific formal attributes might then be grounded within historically specific relations of literary production offers less a way round the classical Marxist procedure for defining literature's literariness than its last ditch. For the structure of the argument remains the same: literature's specificity consists in its relations to ideology which the analysis must take as a given in order to secure a point of reference in relation to which literature's literariness can be defined.¹⁴

There are, of course, other difficulties with Marxist theories of literature. Not the least of these concerns a strong tendency toward conventionalism when it comes to determining which writings should fall under the category of literature. With isolated exceptions, this question is usually resolved by duplicating the hierarchy of forms posited by bourgeois criticism. So far as its empirical determination is concerned, literature always – or nearly always¹⁵ – turns out to comprise the

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self-same works which it is conventionally thought to include (the Great Tradition) while also excluding the broader field of fictional writing from which it is conventionally distinguished: popular or mass fiction.

The difficulties with this procedure are now sufficiently well known not to require further rehearsal. The consequences which follow from it, however, have been less remarked upon. At root, these stem from the fact that the procedure sits ill at ease with that through which the category of literature is defined *as a category*. So far as this is concerned, as we have seen, literature's definition is governed by the statements that it is not science and not ideology. However, when it comes to the empirical task of *filling that category*, a different system of not-statements is brought into play: literature is not popular fiction or mass fiction. There is an obvious procedural inconsistency here. In defining the category of literature, it is a matter of fitting it into the space mapped out for it within the already-determined triadic structure of epistemological reasoning. However, the terms in which that category is then empirically fleshed out derive from the quite different system of distinctions posited by a culturally relative hierarchy of forms. The result, not surprisingly, is a series of contradictions and torsions at the points where these different systems of not-statements meet and, since they cannot entirely be reconciled, mutually abrade one another.

The most obvious casualty of this abrasive collision consists in Marxist theorisations of popular fiction. For since, in the second system of not-statements, popular fiction is distinguished from literature, there is then no way in which this system can be reconciled with the first, in which literature is distinguished from science and ideology, except to argue that, as popular fiction isn't literature and as it clearly isn't science either, it must fall under the category of ideology. The endless reiteration of this argument, in other words, is entirely the effect of a definitional necessity. If the literature/popular fiction distinction is to be inserted into the already mapped-out set of epistemological distinctions between science, literature and ideology, then there is literally nowhere else that popular fiction could be placed except under the category of ideology which would not call into question the terms in which the category of literature has already been theorised.

As a consequence of these contradictory definitional procedures, Marxists have been constrained to approach popular fiction as merely a disguise system for the reproduction and relay of ideology. The effects of this can best be seen by contrasting the procedures deployed in Marxist approaches to literature with those characterising Marxist analyses of popular fictions. In the former, to take the Althusserian version of the argument, the study of literature is an occasion for demonstrating its non-coincidence with ideology. Attention thus focuses on the functioning of those formal devices specific to literature which initiate a process of ideological distancing through which the contradictions of particular ideologies are rendered perceptible. The Marxist analysis of literature thus offers us a knowledge of the way literary texts work to nudge into our field of vision those aspects of their relations to history, as known by Marxism, which ideologies occlude or

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repress. When it comes to the study of popular fiction, however, this double relation is denied or, if admitted, rendered inconsequential: since, for definitional reasons, popular fiction cannot be differentiated from other ideologies, its relation to these is one of simple duplication.

An early essay by Roger Bromley, written from within an Althusserian framework, offers a convenient illustration of this argument.¹⁶ Popular fiction, Bromley suggests, 'should be regarded as a specific ideological practice within an ideological apparatus (publishing, communications, media, etc.), and as such participates in the permanent insertion of individuals and their actions in practices governed by ideological apparatuses' (Bromley, 1978: 42). The specificity of popular fiction, however, consists entirely in its secondariness: popular fiction 'is not a primary site of ideology (cf. the educational system) but is one of the secondary areas where ideological components are represented and reinforced....' (Bromley, 1978: 40) This secondariness, however, is one without specific consequence since its only effect is to do again what ideology, in its own definition, does to and for itself: represent itself as a natural horizon. Popular fiction thus functions complicity with ideology, assisting it to pass unnoticed, 'uniform, unambiguous and non-contradictory' (Bromley, 1978: 39).

The task of Marxist analysis, accordingly, is to read through popular fictions in order to identify the ideologies they transmit and for whose transmission they serve as otherwise empty vehicles. Extrapolating from a discussion of late nineteenth-century romance fiction, Bromley thus suggests that popular fictions are typically characterised by a system of absences and presences:

<i>Absent</i>	<i>Present</i>
The current relations of production.	Personal relations.
The bourgeoisie (the real ruling class) as personified in economic categories.	Aristocracy (fraction offered at the level of style and code as <i>real</i> ruling class).
The working classes, defined in relation to capitalism as economic personification of <i>labour</i> . That is to say: Capital and Labour in its fundamental relations of antagonism under capitalism.	The petit-bourgeoisie personified in the <i>woman</i> particularly (and in authorial ideology).
Exchange relations in the economy.	Marriage: non-antagonism. House as property, self-owning and self-growing.
Division of labour.	No divisions other than natural.
Society.	Nature Self-consciousness. (Bromley, 1978: 204)

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It is clear, here, that the master-text governing the left-hand column is none other than *Capital* and that the effect of the analysis is to demonstrate that popular fiction does not represent social relations in the same way that Marxism does: in other words, that it is *not* Marxism (science) but *is* ideology. What is most important to note, however, is the absence of a third column charting the fictional modes in which the ideological themes comprising the second column are represented. For this absence is a definitional requirement if it is to be demonstrated that popular fiction is, indeed, ideology, and, thereby, the terms of its own differentiation from literature can be reconciled with the contradictory terms in which literature is differentiated from ideology.

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To summarize: the purpose of the foregoing has been to query not merely this or that Marxist theory of literature but the logic governing the procedures through which, however it may be formulated, a conception of literature's specificity is arrived at. The central problem, I have suggested, thus concerns less how the space of literature is filled within any particular theory than the way in which this space itself is conceived. The inherent instability of the science/ideology couplet undermines the ground necessary to secure a conception of literature either as a form of writing that is invariantly distinct from ideology or as a historically specific form of writing whose differentiation from ideology is the effect of a specific configuration of the field of ideology in general.

Does this mean, then, that there can be no such thing as a theory of literature? Terry Eagleton takes this view. After reviewing the difficulties associated with attempts to differentiate literature from other semiotic systems so that it might serve as a bounded object of knowledge for a specific science, he concludes that the logic of 'recognising that literature is an illusion is to recognise that literary theory is an illusion too' (Eagleton, 1983: 204). Given the impossibility of securing the boundaries of the literary, Eagleton argues, the point is not to counter conventional theories of literature with a Marxist theory. Rather, it is to rethink the study of literature as part of a larger intellectual project concerned with the study of discursive or signifying practices, a project which would include analysis of those texts conventionally called 'literature', albeit that the ways in which these would be investigated in being viewed in this wider context would be significantly transformed.

While in general agreement with this conclusion, it is none the less important to insist that, within this broader project, there should be reserved a place for a theory of literature – but for a non-literary theory of literature which will theorise its object as a set of social rather than formal realities and processes. For that there may not be a *literary* theory of literature does not rule out the possibility of there being *other* kinds of theory of literature. The significance of the distinction I have in mind here can perhaps best be clarified by looking more closely at Eagleton's reasons for issuing literary theory/theories of literature with their obituary notices.

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The root objection to literary theory, he argues, is that ‘the one hope it has of distinguishing itself – clinging to an object named literature – is misplaced’ (Eagleton, 1983: 204). Since there is no such thing as literature, there can be no literary theory nor any theory of literature except as discourses which deal entirely with their own self-generated problems.

Stephen Heath, pointing to the respects in which this still leaves Eagleton with the practical difficulty as to how, then, to negotiate his own relation to the literature which he has declared non-existent, but which still so obviously supplies the condition for his activity, argues he pays a high price for this iconoclastic gesture. Unable to offer a *political* retheorisation of literature – that is, one in which literature is not argued away as non-existent but is rethought as a non-essentialist ensemble of textual articulations of language and experience – Heath suggests that Eagleton’s options are reduced to those of reviving old forms of criticism (rhetoric) or contriving new and ever more radical readings, thereby, in either case, leaving literature in much the same place that it was before issued with its obituary: ‘an academic object for the oldest criticism or the newest readings’ (Heath, 1987: 310). A further difficulty with Eagleton’s argument consists in its empiricism. Christopher Norris, commenting on the application of a related argument to the more general concerns of aesthetics, usefully identifies its shortcomings. To dismiss the concerns of aesthetics as being ‘wholly self-induced by the discipline which sets out to explain or resolve them’, he argues, runs the risk of missing the point that ‘the same is true to some extent of any branch of knowledge that defines its subject area by singling out questions of especial theoretical interest’ (Norris, 1985: 123).

It should be noted, in the light of these considerations, that my critique of the logic of aesthetic overdetermination has not rested on the empiricist argument that there is no such thing as literature or art. Rather, it has rested on a demonstration of the theoretical inconsistencies which result from the attempt to translate the transcendental distinctions of philosophical aesthetics into the typically triadic structure of Marxist conceptions of the economy of the superstructure. The objection is thus less that literature, as a special kind of writing, does not exist – although this is surely true – than that the system of concepts upon which this construction of literature depends is itself flawed. The problem, in other words, lies in how the space of the literary is theorised. Yet if this is so, it then remains at least a possibility that this space may be rethought and a cogent conception of literature elaborated which is disabled neither by the theoretical objections I have rehearsed nor by the argument that literature, as a special kind of writing, does not exist. The critical question here concerns the nature of the distinctions the category is used to effect. That the category cannot designate an ontologically distinct realm of writing is clear.

However, this need not hinder its capacity to designate distinctions of another kind. Let me indicate some possibilities:

1 That the term literature be used to refer to a particular socially organised space of representation whose specificity consists in the institutionally and discursively regulated forms of use and deployment to which selected texts are put, the

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empirical question as to the actual identity of those texts being regarded as a contingency which does not affect the definition. Clearly, a theory of literature proceeding from this definition would have no need to secure, either theoretically or empirically, literature's existence as a special kind of writing. Its concerns would rather centre on the constitution of a region of social practice whose specificity consists in the modes of use and deployment of the texts it constitutes as its occasions rather than in a set of formal properties. The effect of this move is to rethink the ontological status of literature such that it is taken to refer to an observable set of social processes rather than to an (as it has proved so far) unfathomable essence.

2 That literature, so defined, be regarded as a historically specific set of institutional and discursive arrangements regulating the use and deployment of the texts it constitutes as its occasions. In effect, this is to limit the concept of literature to the modern period, distinguishing it from earlier institutional and discursive organisations of the field of writing. This is not, however, the same thing as a distinction between modern and pre-modern forms of writing. The processes whereby forms of writing deriving from earlier periods are retrospectively literarised by abstracting them from the sharply different institutional and discursive forms regulating their initial use and organising their relations to adjacent fields of social practice would form a part of literature under this definition.

3 That literature, so defined, be regarded as a set of social realities and processes which interact with other spheres of social practices *on the same level*. This is to deny those depth models of the social structure which support the hermeneutic project of deciphering literary texts in terms of the underlying realities they express. The grounds for this denial consist in the contention that all social practices are simultaneously institutional and discursive in their constitution.

It can be seen how, if these steps are taken, the way is opened for a theory of literature that will construe its object as a historically specific, socially organised and maintained field of textual uses and effects. And if it is important to insist, in this sense, on the specificity of literature, this is because, thus understood, it is by no means a mere illusion. Although we can already see beyond its rims, this socially organised field of textual uses and effects has had very real consequences, historically, and continues to function as an influential set of social practices which have inescapably to be taken into account in present-day political/critical calculations. To conclude, because literature cannot be secured as a formal reality, that its analysis should be dissipated into an undifferentiated study of signifying practices is to miss what ought properly to have been the focus of analysis in the first place: the functioning of a definitely organised field of uses and effects in which strategies of boundary construction and maintenance are central to the functioning of a *socially differentiated region of textual uses and effects* (rather than kind of writing).

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Notes

- 1 For other studies of a similar kind, see Prawer (1978) and Demetz (1967).
- 2 Lukács, who had worked with Ryazanov at the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute in 1930–1 in preparing Marx's 1844 manuscripts for publication, developed a close friendship with Lifshitz after his emigration to the Soviet Union in 1933 and explicitly acknowledged his indebtedness to Lifshitz for rekindling his interest in aesthetic questions.
- 3 Jameson, for example, posits a distinction between the social and historical concerns of musical semantics and those of 'aesthetic value proper' in his introduction to *Attali* (1985: ix). For Eagleton, see the final chapter of Eagleton (1976).
- 4 Here, as elsewhere, Marxist thought is content merely to invert dominant aesthetic discourses. The view that genuine literature transcends its social determination, and hence exceeds sociological analysis, whereas popular fiction is riven by its determination, and hence amenable to such analysis, is a commonplace which finds its mirror reflection in this aspect of Marxist aesthetics.
- 5 I have developed this argument more fully elsewhere. See Bennett (1987).
- 6 More often than not, however, the issue is not posed in these terms. In being conflated with the problem of value, the question of literature's relative autonomy is often translated into a concern with its seeming ability to transcend its determinations. Posed in this way, the analysis of literature's autonomy concerns itself less with the relations between different forms of determination than with stressing the limitations of any account of literature which focuses on its determining conditions, however these might be conceived.
- 7 While Eagleton is sharply critical of Althusser's and Macherey's use of figurative language to express the relations between literature and ideology, his argument is none the less a variant of the Althusserian schema in installing literature, as Frow puts it, in an 'epistemological no man's land' between science and ideology. See Frow (1986: 27).
- 8 There is, however, another aspect to Eagleton's position here: the contention that it is ultimately ideology itself which governs the process of its signification by literature ('The process of the text is the process whereby ideology produces the forms which produce it . . .' (Eagleton, 1976: 84)). Still, however, literature enjoys the special status of being the privileged instrument through which ideology thus effects its self-production.
- 9 While these gendered metaphors are intended only loosely, an investigation of the degree to which the relations between science and aesthetics are typically represented in gendered terms in epistemological and aesthetic discourse would, I suspect, prove amply rewarding. Useful bearings for such an analysis can be found in Lloyd (1984).
- 10 An excellent example of the contradictory entanglements produced by this proliferation of not-statements is offered by Frow in his discussion of Macherey. See Frow (1986: 26).
- 11 In the aesthetics of writers such as Lukács, Lifshitz and Vazquez, their (largely speculative) anthropological accounts of the processes of art's differentiation from magic constitute the only point at which historical – or, more accurately, pre-historical – considerations enter into their specification of the aesthetic mode.
- 12 For the most sustained criticisms of the first of these criticisms, see Hirst (1976).
- 13 See, for example, Foucault (1980).

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- 14 In truth, *Formalism and Marxism* places its bets both ways here. While arguing that the Althusserian view of literature's capacity to produce an internal distancing of ideology is true only of historically specific forms of writing, it then undermines the ground necessary to support this argument in contending that the science/ideology distinction must be understood as political rather than epistemological. This disqualifies ideology from performing the role of a differentiating point of reference for literature's definition even in a historically limited sense.
- 15 Macherey (1978), for example, is concerned with the more general category of fiction rather than with the conventionally more restricted concept of literature.
- 16 For a further elaboration of the points which follow, see Bennett (1981).