complex, more than Shakespeare because we know more about the lives of women—Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf included.

Both the victimization and the anger experienced by women are real, and have real sources, everywhere in the environment, built into society, language, the structures of thought. They will go on being tapped and explored by poets, among others. We can neither deny them, nor will we rest there. A new generation of women poets is already working out of the psychic energy released when women begin to move out towards what the feminist philosopher Mary Daly has described as the "new space" on the boundaries of patriarchy. Women are speaking to and of women in these poems, out of a newly released courage to name, to love each other, to share risk and grief and celebration.

To the eye of a feminist, the work of Western male poets now writing reveals a deep, fatalistic pessimism as to the possibilities of change, whether societal or personal, along with a familiar and threadbare use of women (and nature) as redemptive on the one hand, threatening on the other; and a new tide of phallocentric sadism and overt woman-hating which matches the sexual brutality of recent films. "Political" poetry by men remains stranded amid the struggles for power among male groups; in condemning U.S. imperialism or the Chilean junta the poet can claim to speak for the oppressed while remaining, as male, part of a system of sexual oppression. The enemy is always outside the self, the struggle somewhere else. The mood of isolation, self-pity, and self-imitation that pervades "nonpolitical" poetry suggests that a profound change in masculine consciousness will have to precede any new male poetic—or other—inspiration. The creative energy of patriarchy is fast running out; what remains is its self-generating energy for destruction. As women, we have our work cut out for us.

*Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation (Boston: Beacon, 1973).*
of “socialist realism,” an extension of statist propaganda that has had chilling effects upon art and artists.

Like many sophisticated Marxist critics, Eagleton stresses the complicated interrelationships between the socio-economic base and the institutions and values (including literature) which comprise the superstructure. But precisely because those relationships are so complex, a wide variety of critical thought has been brought to bear upon them. Thus, Eagleton takes as his starting point an analysis of how various Marxist critics have addressed themselves to particular questions of literary analysis; subsequent chapters of his book, for example, explore the role that the writer plays in advancing the cause of the proletariat and the extent to which literature is a commodity, as much the product of economic activity as the automobile.

Other problems central to Marxist critical discussions include questions such as: What is the relationship between literature and ideology? How does literature develop out of the life of a society? Are there formal laws of literature which serve to distance it from the forms of the material world? Is the primary function of criticism to describe, to explain, to interpret, or to evaluate? To what extent is language separable from society, and is ideology separable from language? To what extent has Marxism, itself a body of theory, been influenced by other modern intellectual currents such as psychoanalysis, existentialism, structuralism, and semiotics? Far from being the monolithic dogma its detractors suggest, Marxism is a living body of thought, seeking to answer questions such as these, which are often ignored in other approaches to literature.

1: Literature and history

Marx, Engels and Criticism

If Karl Marx and Frederick Engels are better known for their political and economic rather than literary writings, this is not in the least because they regarded literature as insignificant. It is true, as Leon Trotsky remarked in Literature and Revolution (1924), that “there are many people in this world who think as revolutionists and feel as philistines”; but Marx and Engels were not of this number. The writings of Karl Marx, himself the youthful author of lyric poetry, a fragment of verse-drama and an unfinished comic novel much influenced by Laurence Sterne, are laced with literary concepts and allusions; he wrote a sizeable unpublished manuscript on art and religion, and planned a journal of dramatic criticism, a full-length study of Balzac and a treatise on aesthetics. Art and literature were part of the very air Marx breathed, as a formidably cultured German intellectual in the great classical tradition of his society. His acquaintance with literature, from Sophocles to the Spanish novel, Lucretius to potboiling English fiction, was staggering in its scope; the German workers’ circle he founded in Brussels devoted an evening a week to discussing the arts, and Marx himself was an inveterate theatre-goer, devourer of poetry, devourer of every species of literary art from August Strindberg to industrial ballads. He described his own works in a letter to Engels as forming an ‘artistic whole’, and was scrupulously sensitive to questions of literary style, not least his own; his very first pieces of journalism argued for freedom of artistic expression. Moreover, the pressure of aesthetic concepts can be detected behind some of the most crucial categories of economic thought he employs in his mature work.

Even so, Marx and Engels had rather more important tasks on their hands than the formulation of a complete aesthetic theory. Their comments on art and literature are scattered and fragmentary, glancing allusions rather than developed positions. This is one reason why Marxist criticism involves more than merely re-stating cases set out by the founders of Marxism. It also involves more than what has become known in the West as the ‘sociology of literature’. The sociology of literature concerns itself chiefly with what might be called the means of literary production, distribution and exchange in a particular society—how books are published, the social composition of their authors and audiences, levels of literacy, the social determinants of ‘taste’. It also examines literary texts for their ‘sociological’ relevance, raiding literary works to abstract from them themes of interest to the social historian. There has been some excellent work in this field, and it forms one aspect of Marxist criticism as a whole; but taken by itself it is neither particularly Marxist nor particularly critical. It is, indeed, for the most part a suitably tamed, degutted version of Marxist criticism, appropriate for Western consumption.

Marxist criticism is not merely a ‘sociology of literature’, concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class. Its aim is to explain the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and meanings. But it also means grasping those forms, styles and meanings as the products of a par-
ticular history. The painter Henri Matisse once remarked that all art bears the imprint of its historical epoch, but that great art is that in which this imprint is most deeply marked. Most students of literature are taught otherwise: the greatest art is that which timelessly transcends its historical conditions. Marxist criticism has much to say on this issue, but the 'historical' analysis of literature did not of course begin with Marxism. Many thinkers before Marx had tried to account for literary works in terms of the history which produced them; and one of these, the German idealist philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, had a profound influence on Marx's own aesthetic thought. The originality of Marxist criticism, then, lies not in its historical approach to literature, but in its revolutionary understanding of history itself.

Base and Superstructure

The seeds of that revolutionary understanding are planted in a famous passage in Marx and Engels's The German Ideology (1845-6):

The production of ideas, concepts and consciousness is first of all directly interwoven with the material intercourse of man, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the spiritual intercourse of men, appear here as the direct efflux of men's material behaviour . . . we do not proceed from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as described, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at corporeal man; rather we proceed from the really active man . . . Consciousness does not determine life: life determines consciousness.

A fuller statement of what this means can be found in the Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1859):

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.

The social relations between men, in other words, are bound up with the way they produce their material life. Certain 'productive forces' say, the organisation of labour in the middle ages—involve the social relations of villein to lord we know as feudalism. At a later stage, the development of new modes of productive organisation is based on a changed set of social relations—this time between the capitalist class who owns those means of production, and the proletarian class whose labour-power the capitalist buys for profit. Taken together, these 'forces' and 'relations' of production form what Marx calls the economic structure of society, or what is more commonly known by Marxism as the economic 'base' or 'infrastructure'. From this economic base, in every period, emerges a 'superstructure'—certain forms of law and politics, a certain kind of state, whose essential function is to legitimate the power of the social class which owns the means of economic production. But the superstructure contains more than this: it also consists of certain 'definite forms of social consciousness' (political, religious, ethical, aesthetic and so on), which is what Marxism designates as ideology. The function of ideology, also, is to legitimate the power of the ruling class in society; in the last analysis, the dominant ideas of a society are the ideas of its ruling class.

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add footnotes about sociological facts which enter into them. It is first of all to understand the complex, indirect relations between those works and the ideological worlds they inhabit—relations which emerge not just in ‘themes’ and ‘preoccupations’, but in style, rhythm, image, quality and (as we shall see later) form. But we do not understand ideology either unless we grasp the part it plays in the society as a whole—how it consists of a definite, historically relative structure of perception which underpins the power of a particular social class. This is not an easy task, since an ideology is never a simple reflection of a ruling class’s ideas; on the contrary, it is always a complex phenomenon, which may incorporate conflicting, even contradictory, views of the world. To understand an ideology, we must analyse the precise relations between different classes in a society; and to do that means grasping where those classes stand in relation to the mode of production.

All this may seem a tall order to the student of literature who thought he was merely required to discuss plot and characterization. It may seem a confusion of literary criticism with disciplines like politics and economics which ought to be kept separate. But it is, nonetheless, essential for the fullest explanation of any work of literature. Take, for example, the great Placido Gulf scene in Conrad’s *Nostromo*. To evaluate the fine artistic force of this episode, as Decoud and Nostromo are isolated in utter darkness on the slowly sinking lighter, involves us in subtly placing the scene within the imaginative vision of the novel as a whole. The radical pessimism of that vision (and to grasp it fully we must, of course, relate *Nostromo* to the rest of Conrad’s fiction) cannot simply be accounted for in terms of ‘psychological’ factors in Conrad himself; for individual psychology is also a social product. The pessimism of Conrad’s world view is rather a unique transformation into art of an ideological pessimism rife in his period—a sense of history as futile and cyclical, of individuals as impeneetrable and solitary, of human values as relativistic and irrational, which marks a crisis in the ideology of the Western bourgeois class to which Conrad allied himself. There were good reasons for that ideological crisis, in the history of imperialist capitalism throughout this period. Conrad did not, of course, merely anonymously reflect that history in his fiction; every writer is individually placed in society, responding to a general history from his own particular standpoint, making sense of it in his own concrete terms. But it is not difficult to see how Conrad’s personal standing, as an ‘aristocratic’ Polish exile deeply committed to English conservatism, intensified for him the crisis of English bourgeois ideology.

It is also possible to see in these terms why that scene in the Placido Gulf should be artistically fine. To write well is more than a matter of ‘style’; it also means having at one’s disposal an ideological perspective which can penetrate to the realities of men’s experience in a certain situation. This is certainly what the Placido Gulf scene does; and it can do it, not just because its author happens to have an excellent prose style, but because his historical situation allows him access to such insights. Whether those insights are in political terms progressive or ‘reactionary’ (Conrad’s are certainly the latter) is not the point—any more than it is to the point that most of the agreed major writers of the twentieth century—Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Lawrence—are political conservatives who each had truck with fascism. Marxist criticism, rather than apologising for the fact, explains it—sees that, in the absence of genuinely revolutionary art, only a radical conservatism, hostile like Marxism to the withered values of liberal bourgeois society, could produce the most significant literature.

### Literature and Superstructure

It would be a mistake to imply that Marxist criticism moves mechanically from ‘text’ to ‘ideology’ to ‘social relations’ to ‘productive forces’. It is concerned, rather, with the unity of these levels of society. Literature may be part of the superstructure, but it is not merely the passive reflection of the economic base. Engels makes this clear, in a letter to Joseph Bloch in 1890:

> According to the materialist conception of history, the determining element in history is ultimately the production and reproduction in real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. If therefore somebody twists this into the statement that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms it into a meaningless, abstract and absurd phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure—political forms of the class struggle and its consequences, constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc.—forms of law—and then even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the combatants: political, legal, and philosophical theories, religious ideas and their further development into systems of dogma—also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form.

Engels wants to deny that there is any mechanical, one-to-one correspondence between base and superstructure; elements of the super-
structure constantly react back upon and influence the economic base. The materialist theory of history denies that art can in itself change the course of history; but it insists that art can be an active element in such change. Indeed, when Marx came to consider the relation between base and superstructure, it was art which he selected as an instance of the complexity and indirectness of that relationship:

In the case of the arts, it is well known that certain periods of their flowering are out of all proportion to the general development of society, hence also to the material foundation, the skeletal structure, as it were, of its organisation. For example, the Greeks compared to the moderns or also Shakespeare. It is even recognised that certain forms of art, e.g. the epic, can no longer be produced in their world epoch-making, classical stature as soon as the production of art, as such, begins; that is, that certain significant forms within the realm of the arts are possible only at an undeveloped stage of artistic development. If this is the case with the relation between different kinds of art within the realm of art, it is already less puzzling that it is the case in the relation of the entire realm to the general development of society. The difficulty consists only in the general formulation of these contradictions. As soon as they have been specified, they are already clarified.

Marx is considering here what he calls 'the unequal relationship of the development of material production . . . to artistic production'. It does not follow that the greatest artistic achievements depend upon the highest development of the productive forces, as the example of the Greeks, who produced major art in an economically undeveloped society, clearly evidences. Certain major artistic forms like the epic are only possible in an undeveloped society. Why then, Marx goes on to ask, do we still respond to such forms, given our historical distance from them?

But the difficulty lies not in understanding that the Greek arts and epic are bound up with certain forms of social development. The difficulty is that they still afford us artistic pleasure and that in a certain respect they count as a norm and as an unattainable model.

Why does Greek art still give us aesthetic pleasure? The answer which Marx goes on to provide has been universally lambasted by unsympathetic commentators as lamely inept:

A man cannot become a child again, or he becomes childish. But does he not find joy in the child's naivety, and must he himself not strive to reproduce its truth at a higher stage? Does not the true character of each epoch come alive in the nature of its children? Why should not the historic childhood of humanity, its most beautiful unfolding, as a stage never to return, exercise an eternal charm? There are unruly children and precocious children. Many of the old peoples belong in this category. The Greeks were normal children. The charm of their art for us it not in contradiction to the undeveloped stage of society on which it grew. (It) is its result, rather, and is inextricably bound up, rather, with the fact that the unripe social conditions under which it arose, and could alone rise, can never return.

So our liking for Greek art is a nostalgic lapse back into childhood—a piece of unmaterialist sentimentalism which hostile critics have gladly pounced on. But the passage can only be treated thus if it is rudely ripped from the context to which it belongs—the draft manuscripts of 1857, known today as the Grundrisse. Once returned to that context, the meaning becomes instantly apparent. The Greeks, Marx is arguing, were able to produce major art not in spite of but because of the undeveloped state of their society. In ancient societies, which have not yet undergone the fragmenting 'division of labour' known to capitalism, the overwhelming of 'quality' by 'quantity' which results from commodity-production and the restless, continual development of the productive forces, a certain 'measure' or harmony can be achieved between man and Nature—a harmony precisely dependent upon the limited nature of Greek society. The 'childlike' world of the Greeks is attractive because it thrives within certain measured limits—measures and limits which are brutally overridden by bourgeois society in its limitless demand to produce and consume. Historically, it is essential that this constricted society should be broken up as the productive forces expand beyond its frontiers; but when Marx speaks of 'striving' to reproduce its truth at a higher stage, he is clearly speaking of the communist society of the future, where unlimited resources will serve an unlimitedly developing man.

Two questions, then, emerge from Marx's formulations in the Grundrisse. The first concerns the relation between 'base' and 'superstructure'; the second concerns our own relation in the present with past art. To take the second question first: how can it be that we moderns still find aesthetic appeal in the cultural products of past, vastly different societies? In a sense, the answer Marx gives is no dif-
The other problem posed by the Grundrisse is the relation between base and superstructure. Marx is clear that these two aspects of society do not form a symmetrical relationship, dancing a harmonious minuet hand-in-hand throughout history. Each element of a society's superstructure—art, law, politics, religion—has its own tempo of development, its own internal evolution, which is not reducible to a mere expression of the class struggle or the state of the economy. Art, as Trotsky comments, has 'a very high degree of autonomy': it is not tied in any simple one-to-one way to the mode of production. And yet Marxism claims too that, in the last analysis, art is determined by that mode of production. How are we to explain this apparent discrepancy?

Let us take a concrete literary example. A 'vulgar Marxist' case about T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* might be that the poem is directly determined by ideological and economic factors—by the spiritual emptiness and exhaustion of bourgeois ideology which springs from that crisis of imperialist capitalism known as the First World War. This is to explain the poem as an immediate 'reflection' of those conditions; but it clearly fails to take into account a whole series of 'levels' which 'mediate' between the text itself and capitalist economy. It says nothing, for instance, about the social situation of Eliot himself—a writer living an ambiguous relationship with English society.
terms—to grasp it as part of an unchanging human condition, shared alike by ancient Egyptians and modern man.) *The Waste Land's* relation to the real history of its time, then, is highly mediated; and in this it is like all works of art.

**Literature and Ideology**

Friedrich Engels remarks in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1888) that art is far richer and more 'opaque' than political and economic theory because it is less purely ideological. It is important here to grasp the precise meaning for Marxism of 'ideology'. Ideology is not in the first place a set of doctrines; it signifies the way men live out their roles in class-society, the values, ideas and images which tie them to their social functions and so prevent them from a true knowledge of society as a whole. In this sense *The Waste Land* is ideological: it shows a man making sense of his experience in ways that prohibit a true understanding of his society, ways that are consequently false. All art springs from an ideological conception of the world; there is no such thing, Plekhanov comments, as a work of art entirely devoid of ideological content. But Engels' remark suggests that art has a more complex relationship to ideology than law and political theory, which rather more transparently embody the interests of a ruling class. The question, then, is what relationship art has to ideology.

This is not an easy question to answer. Two extreme, opposite positions are possible here. One is that literature is nothing but ideology in a certain artistic form—that works of literature are just expressions of the ideologies of their time. They are prisoners of 'false consciousness', unable to reach beyond it to arrive at the truth. It is a position characteristic of much 'vulgar Marxist' criticism, which tends to see literary works merely as reflections of dominant ideologies. As such, it is unable to explain, for one thing, why so much literature actually challenges the ideological assumptions of its time. The opposite case seizes on the fact that so much literature challenges the ideology it confronts, and makes this part of the definition of literary art itself. Authentic art, as Ernst Fischer argues in his significantly entitled *Art Against Ideology* (1969), always transcends the ideological limits of its time, yielding us insight into the realities which ideology hides from view.

Both of these cases seem to me too simple. A more subtle (although still incomplete) account of the relationship between literature and ideology is provided by the French Marxist theorist Louis Althusser.

Althusser argues that art cannot be reduced to ideology: it has, rather, a particular relationship to it. Ideology signifies the imaginary ways in which men experience the real world, which is, of course, the kind of experience literature gives us too—what it feels like to live in particular conditions, rather than a conceptual analysis of those conditions. However, art does more than just passively reflect that experience. It is held within ideology, but also manages to distance itself from it, to the point where it permits us to 'feel' and 'perceive' the ideology from which it springs. In doing this, art does not enable us to know the truth which ideology conceals, since for Althusser 'knowledge' in the strict sense means scientific knowledge—the kind of knowledge of, say, capitalism which Marx's *Capital* rather than Dickens' *Hard Times* allows us. The difference between science and art is not that they deal with different objects, but that they deal with the same objects in different ways. Science gives us conceptual knowledge of a situation; art gives us the experience of that situation, which is equivalent to ideology. But by doing this, it allows us to 'see' the nature of that ideology, and thus begins to move us towards that full understanding of ideology which is scientific knowledge.

How literature can do this is more fully developed by one of Althusser's colleagues, Pierre Macherey. In his *Pour Une Théorie de la Production Littéraire* (1966), Macherey distinguishes between what he terms 'illusion' (meaning essentially, ideology), and 'fiction'. Illusion—the ordinary ideological experience of men—is the material on which the writer goes to work; but in working on it he transforms it into something different, lends it a shape and structure. It is by giving ideology a determinate form, fixing it within certain fictional limits, that art is able to distance itself from it, thus revealing to us the limits of that ideology. In doing this, Macherey claims, art contributes to our deliverance from the ideological illusion.

I find the comments of both Althusser and Macherey at crucial points ambiguous and obscure; but the relation they propose between literature and ideology is nonetheless deeply suggestive. Ideology, for both critics, is more than an amorphous body of free-floating images and ideas; in any society it has a certain structural coherence. Because it possesses such relative coherence, it can be the object of scientific analysis; and since literary texts 'belong' to ideology, they too can be the object of such scientific analysis. A scientific criticism would seek to explain the literary work in terms of the ideological structure of which it is part, yet which it transforms in its art: it would search out the principle which both ties the work to ideology and distances it from it. The finest Marxist criticism has indeed done precisely that;
Macherey’s starting-point is Lenin’s brilliant analyses of Tolstoy. To do this, however, means grasping the literary work as a formal structure; and it is to this question that we can now turn.

2: Form and content

IN HIS EARLY essay The Evolution of Modern Drama (1909), the Hungarian Marxist critic Georg Lukács writes that ‘the truly social element in literature is the form’. This is not the kind of comment which has come to be expected of Marxist criticism. For one thing, Marxist criticism has traditionally opposed all kinds of literary formalism, attacking that inbred attention to sheerly technical properties which robs literature of historical significance and reduces it to an aesthetic game. It has, indeed, noted the relationship between such critical technocracy and the behaviour of advanced capitalist societies. For another thing, a good deal of Marxist criticism has in practice paid scant attention to questions of artistic form, shelving the issue in its dogged pursuit of political content. Marx himself believed that literature should reveal a unity of form and content, and burnt some of his own early lyric poems on the grounds that their rhapsodic feelings were dangerously unrestrained; but he was also suspicious of excessively formalistic writing. In an early newspaper article on Silesian weavers’ songs, he claimed that mere stylistic exercises led to ‘perverted formalistic writing. In an early newspaper article on Silesian weavers’ songs, he claimed that mere stylistic exercises led to ‘perverted content’, which in turn impresses the stamp of ‘vulgarity’ on literary form. He shows, in other words, a dialectical grasp of the relations in question: form is the product of content, but reacts back upon it in a double-edged relationship. Marx’s early comment about oppressively formalistic law in the Rheinische Zeitung—‘form is of no value unless it is the form of its content’—could equally be applied to his aesthetic views.

In arguing for a unity of form and content, Marx was being faithful to the Hegelian tradition he inherited. Hegel had argued in the Philosophy of Fine Art (1835) that ‘every definite content determines a form suitable to it’. ‘Defectiveness of form’, he maintained, ‘arises from defectiveness of content’. Indeed for Hegel the history of art can be written in terms of the varying relations between form and content. Art manifests different stages in the development of what Hegel calls the ‘World-Spirit’, the ‘Idea’ or the ‘Absolute’; this is the ‘content’ of art, which successively strives to embody itself adequately in artistic form. At an early stage of historical development, the World-Spirit can find no adequate formal realization: ancient sculpture, for example, reveals how the ‘Spirit’ is obstructed and overwhelmed by an excess of sensual material which it is unable to mould to its own purposes. Greek classical art, on the other hand, achieves an harmonious unity between content and form, the spiritual and the material: here, for a brief historical moment, ‘content’ finds its entirely appropriate embodiment. In the modern world, however, and most typically in Romanticism, the spiritual absorbs the sensual, content overwhelmed by form. Material forms give way before the highest development of the Spirit, which like Marx’s productive forces have outstripped the limited classical moulds which previously contained them.

It would be mistaken to think that Marx adopted Hegel’s aesthetic wholesale. Hegel’s aesthetic is idealist, drastically oversimplifying and only to a limited extent dialectical; and in any case Marx disagreed with Hegel over several concrete aesthetic issues. But both thinkers share the belief that artistic form is no mere quirk on the part of the individual artist. Forms are historically determined by the kind of ‘content’ they have to embody; they are changed, transformed, broken down and revolutionized as that content itself changes. ‘Content’ is in this sense prior to ‘form’, just as for Marxism it is changes in a society’s material ‘content’, its mode of production, which determine the ‘forms’ of its superstructure. ‘Form itself’, Fredric Jameson has remarked in his Marxism and Form (1971), ‘is but the working out of content in the realm of the superstructure’. To those who reply irritably that form and content are inseparable anyway—that the distinction is artificial—it is as well to say immediately that this is of course true in practice. Hegel himself recognized this: ‘Content’, he wrote, ‘is nothing but the transformation of form into content, and form is nothing but the transformation of content into form’. But if form and content are inseparable in practice, they are theoretically distinct. This is why we can talk of the varying relations between the two.

Those relations, however, are not easy to grasp. Marxist criticism sees form and content as dialectically related, and yet wants to assert in the end the primacy of content in determining form. The point is put, tortuously but correctly, by Ralph Fox in his The Novel and the People (1937), when he declares that ‘Form is produced by content, is identical and one with it, and, though the primacy is on the side of
content, form reacts on content and never remains passive.' This dialectical conception of the form-content relationship sets itself against two opposed positions. On the one hand, it attacks that formalist school (epitomized by the Russian Formalists of the 1920s) for whom content is merely a function of form—for whom the content of a poem is selected merely to reinforce the technical devices the poem deploys. But it also criticizes the 'vulgar Marxist' notion that artistic form is merely an artifice, externally imposed on the turbulent content of history itself. Such a position is to be found in Christopher Caudwell's Studies in a Dying Culture (1938). In that book, Caudwell distinguishes between what he calls 'social being'—the vital, instinctual stuff of human experience—and a society's forms of consciousness. Revolution occurs when those forms, having become ossified and obsolete, are burst asunder by the dynamic, chaotic flood of 'social being' itself. Caudwell, in other words, thinks of 'social being' (content) as inherently formless, and of forms as inherently restrictive; he lacks, that is to say, a sufficiently dialectical understanding of the relations at issue. What he does not see is that 'form' does not merely process the raw material of 'content', because that content (whether social or literary) is for Marxism already informed; it has a significant structure. Caudwell's view is merely a variant of the bourgeois critical commonplace that art 'organizes the chaos of reality'. (What is the ideological significance of seeing reality as chaotic?) Fredric Jameson, by contrast, speaks of the 'inner logic of content', of which social or literary forms are transformative products.

Given such a limited view of the form-content relationship, it is not surprising that English Marxist critics of the 1930s fall often enough into the 'vulgar Marxist' mistake of raiding literary works for their ideological content and relating this directly to the class-struggle or the economy. It is against this danger that Lukács's comment is meant to warn: the true bearers of ideology in art are the very forms, rather than abstractable content, of the work itself. We find the impress of history in the literary work precisely as literary, not as some superior form of social documentation.

Form and Ideology

What does it mean to say that literary form is ideological? In a suggestive comment in Literature and Revolution, Leon Trotsky maintains that 'The relationship between form and content is determined by the fact that the new form is discovered, proclaimed and evolved under the pressure of an inner need, of a collective psychological de-

mand which, like everything else . . . has its social roots.' Significant developments in literary form, then, result from significant changes in ideology. They embody new ways of perceiving social reality and (as we shall see later) new relations between artist and audience. This is evident enough if we look at well-charted examples like the rise of the novel in eighteenth-century England. The novel, as Ian Watt has argued, reveals in its very form a changed set of ideological interests. No matter what content a particular novel of the time may have, it shares certain formal structures with other such works: a shifting of interest from the romantic and supernatural to individual psychology and 'routine' experience; a concept of life-like, substantial 'character'; a concern with the material fortunes of an individual protagonist who moves through an unpredictably evolving, linear narrative and so on. This changed form, Watt claims, is the product of an increasingly confident bourgeois class, whose consciousness has broken beyond the limits of older, 'aristocratic' literary conventions. Plekhanov argues rather similarly in French Dramatic Literature and French 18th Century Painting that the transition from classical tragedy to sentimental comedy in France reflects a shift from aristocratic to bourgeois values. Or take the break from 'naturalism' to 'expressionism' in the European theatre around the turn of the century. This, as Raymond Williams has suggested, signals a breakdown in certain dramatic conventions which in turn embody specific 'structures of feeling', a set of received ways of perceiving and responding to reality. Expressionism feels the need to transcend the limits of a naturalistic theatre which assumes the ordinary bourgeois world to be solid, to rip open that deception and dissolve its social relations, penetrating by symbol and fantasy to the estranged, self-divided psyches which 'normality' conceals. The transforming of a stage convention, then, signifies a deeper transformation in bourgeois ideology, as confident mid-Victorian notions of selfhood and relationship began to splinter and crumble in the face of growing world capitalist crises.

There is, needless to say, no simple, symmetrical relationship between changes in literary form and changes in ideology. Literary form, as Trotsky reminds us, has a high degree of autonomy; it evolves partly in accordance with its own internal pressures, and does not merely bend to every ideological wind that blows. Just as for Marxist economic theory each economic formation tends to contain traces of older, superseded modes of production, so traces of older literary forms survive within new ones. Form, I would suggest, is always a complex unity of at least three elements: it is partly shaped by a 'relatively autonomous' literary history of forms; it crystalizes out of certain
lays the basis for their formal achievement; 'richness and profundity of created characters', Lukács claims, 'relies upon the richness and profundity of the total social process'. For the successors of the realists—say, Flaubert who follows Balzac—history is already an inert object, an externally given fact no longer imaginable as men's dynamic project, an externally given fact no longer imaginable as men's dynamic project, an externally given fact no longer imaginable as men's dynamic project. Realism, deprived of the historical conditions which gave it birth, splinters and declines into 'naturalism' on the one hand and 'formalism' on the other.

The crucial transition here for Lukács is the failure of the European revolutions of 1848—a failure which signals the defeat of the proletariat, seals the demise of the progressive, heroic period of bourgeois power, freezes the class-struggle and cues the bourgeoisie for its proper, sordidly unheroic task of consolidating capitalism. Bourgeois ideology forgets its previous revolutionary ideals, dehistoricizes reality and accepts society as a natural fact. Balzac depicts the last great struggles against the capitalist degradation of man, while his successors passively register an already degraded capitalist world. This draining of direction and meaning from history results in the art we know as naturalism.

By naturalism Lukács means that distortion of realism epitomized by Zola, which merely photographically reproduces the surface phenomena of society without penetrating to their significant essences. Meticulously observed detail replaces the portrayal of 'typical' features; the dialectical relations between men and their world give way to an environment of dead, contingent objects disconnected from characters; the truly 'representative' character yields to a 'cult of the average'; psychology or physiology oust history as the true determinant of individual action. It is an alienated vision of reality, transforming the writer from an active participant in history to a clinical observer. Lacking an understanding of the typical, naturalism can create no significant totality from its materials; the unified epic or dramatic actions launched by realism collapse into a set of purely private interests. 'Formalism' reacts in an opposite direction, but betrays the same loss of historical meaning. In the alienated worlds of Kafka, Musil, Joyce, Beckett, Camus, man is stripped of his history and has no reality beyond the self; character is dissolved to mental states, objective reality reduced to unintelligible chaos. As with naturalism, the dialectical unity between inner and outer worlds is destroyed, and both individual and society consequently emptied of meaning. Individuals are gripped by despair and angst, robbed of social relations and so of authentic selfhood; history becomes pointless or cyclical, dwindled to mere duration. Objects lack significance and become merely contingent; and so symbolism gives way to allegory, which rejects the idea of

'immanent meaning. If naturalism is a kind of abstract objectivity, formalism is an abstract subjectivity; both diverge from that genuinely dialectical art-form (realism) whose form mediates between concrete and general, essence and existence, type and individual.

Goldmann and Genetic Structuralism

George Lukács's chief disciple, in what has been termed the 'neo-Hegelian' school of Marxist criticism, is the Rumanian critic Lucien Goldmann. Goldmann is concerned to examine the structure of a literary text for the degree to which it embodies the structure of thought (or 'world vision') of the social class or group to which the writer belongs. The more closely the text approximates to a complete, coherent articulation of the social class's 'world vision', the greater is its validity as a work of art. For Goldmann, literary works are not in the first place to be seen as the creation of individuals, but of what he calls the 'trans-individual mental structures' of a social group—by which he means the structure of ideas, values and aspirations that group shares. Great writers are those exceptional individuals who manage to transpose into art the world vision of the class or group to which they belong, and to do this in a peculiarly unified and translucent (although not necessarily conscious) way.

Goldmann terms his critical method 'genetic structuralism', and it is important to understand both terms of that phrase. Structuralism, because he is less interested in the contents of a particular world vision than in the structure of categories it displays. Two apparently quite different writers may thus be shown to belong to the same collective mental structure. Genetic, because Goldmann is concerned with how such mental structures are historically produced—concerned, that is to say, with the relations between a world vision and the historical conditions which give rise to it.

Goldmann's work on Racine in The Hidden God is perhaps the most exemplary model of his critical method. He discerns in Racine's drama a certain recurrent structure of categories—God, World, Man—which alter in their 'content' and interrelations from play to play, but which disclose a particular world vision. It is the world vision of men who are lost in a valueless world, accept this world as the only one there is (since God is absent), and yet continue to protest against it—to justify themselves in the name of some absolute value which is always hidden from view. The basis of this world vision Goldmann finds in the French religious movement known as Jansenism; and he explains Jansenism, in turn, as the product of a certain displaced so-
social group in seventeenth-century France—the so-called noblesse de robe, the court officials who were economically dependent on the monarchy and yet becoming increasingly powerless in the face of that monarch's growing absolutism. The contradictory situation of this group, needing the Crown but politically opposed to it, is expressed in Jansenism’s refusal both of the world and of any desire to change it historically. All of this has a ‘world-historical’ significance: the noblesse de robe, themselves recruited from the bourgeois class, represent the failure of the bourgeoisie to break royal absolutism and establish the conditions for capitalist development.

What Goldmann is seeking, then, is a set of structural relations between literary text, world vision and history itself. He wants to show how the historical situation of a social group or class is transposed, by the mediation of its world vision, into the structure of a literary work. To do this it is not enough to begin with the text and work outwards to history, or vice versa; what is required is a dialectical method of criticism which moves constantly between text, world vision and history, adjusting each to the others.

Interesting as it is, Goldmann’s critical enterprise seems to me marred by certain major flaws. His concept of social consciousness, for example, is Hegelian rather than Marxist: he sees it as the direct expression of a social class, just as the literary work then becomes the direct expression of this consciousness. His whole model, in other words, is too trimly symmetrical, unable to accommodate the dialectical conflicts and complexities, the unevenness and discontinuity, which characterize literature’s relation to society. It declines, in his later work, into an essentially mechanistic version of the base-superstructure relationship.

Pierre Macherey and ‘Decentred’ Form

Both Lukács and Goldmann inherit from Hegel a belief that the literary work should form a unified totality; and in this they are close to a conventional position in non-Marxist criticism. Lukács sees the work as a constructed totality rather than a natural organism; yet a vein of ‘organistic’ thinking about the art object runs through much of his criticism. It is one of the several scandalous propositions which Pierre Macherey throws out to bourgeois and neo-Hegelian criticism alike that he rejects this belief. For Macherey, a work is tied to ideology not so much by what it says as by what it does not say. It is in the significant silences of a text, in its gaps and absences, that the presence of ideology can be most positively felt. It is these silences which the critic must make ‘speak’. The text is, as it were, ideologically forbidden to say certain things; in trying to tell the truth in his own way, for example, the author finds himself forced to reveal the limits of the ideology within which he writes. He is forced to reveal its gaps and silences, what it is unable to articulate. Because a text contains these gaps and silences, it is always incomplete. Far from constituting a rounded, coherent whole, it displays a conflict and contradiction of meanings; and the significance of the work lies in the difference rather than unity between these meanings. Whereas a critic like Goldmann finds in the work a central structure, the work for Macherey is always ‘de-centred’; there is no central essence to it, just a continuous conflict and disparity of meanings. ‘Scattered’, ‘dispersed’, ‘diverse’, ‘irregular’; these are the epithets which Macherey uses to express his sense of the literary work.

When Macherey argues that the work is ‘incomplete’, however, he does not mean that there is a piece missing which the critic could fill in. On the contrary, it is in the nature of the work to be incomplete, tied as it is to an ideology which silences it at certain points. (It is, if you like, complete in its incompleteness.) The critic’s task is not to fill the work in; it is to seek out the principle of its conflict of meanings, and to show how this conflict is produced by the work’s relation to ideology.

To take a fairly obvious example: in Dombey and Son Dickens uses a number of mutually conflicting languages—realist, melodramatic, pastoral, allegorical—in his portrayal of events; and this conflict comes to a head in the famous railway chapter, where the novel is ambiguously torn between contradictory responses to the railway (fear, protest, approval, exhilaration etc.), reflecting this in a clash of styles and symbols. The ideological basis of this ambiguity is that the novel is divided between a conventional bourgeois admiration of industrial progress and a petty-bourgeois anxiety about its inevitably disruptive effects. It sympathizes with whose washed-up minor characters whom the new world has superannuated at the same time as it celebrates the progressive thrust of industrial capitalism which has made them obsolete. In discovering the principle of the work’s conflict of meanings, then, we are simultaneously analysing its complex relationship to Victorian ideology...