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Marxism: Part II

This part of the essay on Marxism looks at more broadly Marxist approaches to literary criticism, and to several more key terms.

Marx and Historicist Interpretations of Literature

An early point we can make about Marxism in relation to literary study is this: the move towards historicist analyses of texts – that is, critical interpretations which assume that literary texts cannot be properly understood apart from their historical contexts – is a move inspired in no small measure by Marx's theory of history, of human language-use and self-consciousness as “social product[s],” and his conviction that people are very much products of their environments (Marx 1983 [GI], 174). The historicism of Marxist criticisms is in many ways an extension of Marx's axiom “life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life” (Marx 1983 [GI], 170).

Works of art can certainly serve to criticize the social background against which they are written. Indeed, the African American intellectual W.E.B. DuBois (himself a Marxist thinker) once declaimed, “all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. [...] I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda” (DuBois 1926). Here, DuBois is speaking in strident terms of propaganda as a mechanism for promoting, accelerating, or even bringing about freedom and equality for “black folk” (DuBois 1926). But Marxist-historicist interpretations of literature can also view texts as reflecting or embodying certain ideologies (systems of beliefs) of their day. In this sense, literary texts are as much social-historical documents as they are “pure” works of art, which some critics might try to strip of all social, political, historical particularity.

Example: The Great Gatsby

To give an example that will be familiar to most readers: we might view Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) as a critique of the so-called “Jazz Age” and its consumerist excesses; a critique made all the more poignant when one considers the fact that the novel's publication was quickly followed by the Great Depression. However, we might excavate the text for signs that just as Fitzgerald is able to distance himself from his own times in order to write *Gatsby*, his text also encapsulates the *zeitgeist* (spirit of the day or age), the widespread anxieties around such issues as gender, racial, and sexual identity. Moreover, one might argue, the text never entirely relieves itself of the burden of other related anxieties – the desire for class mobility, for example, and the possibility of acceptance into another class on equal terms. Were this truly possible (but for *Gatsby*, it seems that ultimately it is not), it would give credence to the national myth that in America – that most modern of democratic experiments – one can truly

make and fashion oneself in the image one desires.

One attraction of this approach to literary analysis is this: such an interpretation (though it would, of course, require far more detailed textual justification than is offered here) requires little or no Marxist theoretical jargon; nevertheless, it bears a residual, yet easily seen, Marxism. An interpretation that reads the text as very much a sign of its historical times need only be aware of, and grounded in, the axiom with which we began this section: “consciousness does not determine the world, but the world consciousness.” Indeed, to read and interpret literature in such historicist fashion is very much in keeping with the spirit of Engels and Marx’s aesthetics (regardless of whether a “heavy” theoretical language is used), for they “considered it absolutely impossible to understand art and literature proceeding only from their internal laws of development” (Blunden). That is, art cannot properly be understood in “purely” formal and aesthetic terms, terms that divorce artworks from their historical context. Art, for Marx and Engels and their followers, “is one of the *forms of social consciousness* and it therefore follows that the reasons for its changes should be sought in the social existence of men” (Blunden; italics added). Artworks, then, are produced by social forces; but artworks also embody, represent, or reflect the social forces that have produced them.

If artworks are both the productions of and ideological “mirrors” of social forces and organizations, then this goes some way towards explaining why each era produces an aesthetically coherent yet unique body of art. Writers in the twenty-first century cannot write like those of the nineteenth. Or, rather, to write “like” the great nineteenth-century writers will never be anything more than a “writing like”; mere imitation, which will only ever amount to parody or pastiche. The air of authenticity that great works of literature have comes from their responding to and being produced by particular socio-economic forces. When these forces change, so too will the aesthetic response of artists. As Marx and Engels put it in *The German Ideology*, “Raphael’s works of art depended on the flourishing of Rome at that time, which occurred under Florentine influence, while the works of Leonardo depended on the state of things in Florence, and the works of Titian, at a later period, depended on the totally different development of Venice” (Marx & Engels 1970, 108).

“Life is Not Determined by Consciousness, but Consciousness by Life”: Marxism, “Human Nature,” Class, and Identity

The Marxist view of the person as a product of her environment is crucial in Marxist and post-Marxist criticism. The contributions of Marx, as well as the “[linguistic turn](#)” of Nietzsche and Freud’s development of psychoanalysis, paved the way for constructionist views of human identity and “human nature.” Briefly put, constructionists understand identity and its component parts (sex, gender, race, class and so on) as socially constructed or built: that is, we learn and acquire our identities; what we call identity and “human nature” are not the outward expressions of something innate or “natural” that lies somehow “within” us.

Part of Marx’s legacy, then, is a change in what we can understand by the term “human nature.” After Marx, to talk of human nature is very much to talk of the behaviours and characteristics that a society accepts as “natural.” “Nature” and “the natural” become, post-Marx, normative concepts rather than concepts of something universal and static “inside” of us. Today, we might say, if something is said to be “natural,” what this really points to is a value or set of values that are so deeply ingrained in a culture as to be virtually unquestionable. But this does not mean that those values have always been there, nor that they always will. The “natural,” in a broadly Marxist vision of culture, refers to the assumptions and values upon which a society is built, not to “God-given,” unchangeable “laws of nature.” This is a view of “nature” and “the natural” as socially constructed and externally imposed upon us, rather than as an expression of some “inner essence.”

Example: “Them & [uz]”

Another approach to interpretation of literary texts – and one which, as before, does not rely heavily on technical jargon – would be to begin with a broadly Marxist view of the person being shaped, built, constructed by their social-cultural world (once more, “life is not determined by consciousness, but...”), and to build analyses around this notion. We might consider, for example, the extent to which the poetic voice in Tony Harrison's autobiographical poem “Them & [uz]” (Harrison 1978) has been formed by class-based prejudices, which the speaker experienced at school, years during which, it seems, accent (taken by the speaker's teachers as a token of class), was a bar that prevented access to English poetic culture: “Poetry,” our poet is told, is “the speech of kings. You're one of those / Shakespeare gives the comic bits to: prose!”

Note here the different values embodied by “poetry” and “prose,” and the class assumptions that accompany each - “prose,” far less valued by the teacher than “poetry,” is here a linguistic and stylistic marker of the “lowly” working classes. In this poem, voice – often used as a metaphor for individual identity – initially blocks the speaker from an imagined literary heritage. By poem's end, the speaker realizes something; he realizes, for example, that “Wordsworth's *matter/water* are full rhyme,” if spoken with the “right” accent. That is, the Cumberland accent of Wordsworth, not the “[Received Pronunciation](#)” so often touted as “standard” or “neutral,” and which Harrison so incisively mocks and critiques in this poem. The speaker realizes that the English poetic tradition is in fact composed of multiple regional – and by extension, “classed” – voices, including, more recently, his own (indeed, perhaps we should speak of “traditions,” rather than “tradition”). Of course, he quips, you cannot entirely prevent others' attempt to mould you to a particular social, class-based model: “My first mention in the *Times* / automatically made Tony Anthony!”

One must not miss the irony here: having been either blocked from Shakespeare altogether or relegated to the arena of the fool's “prose,” success sees our speaker dubbed “Anthony” by the *Times*, the nation's paper of record. Anthony, of course, is one of Shakespeare's romantic heroes; and Anthony, of course, does not speak in “prose.”

Aesthetic Life, the Work of Art, and Alienation

Our capacity to lead an aesthetic life is developed through our social existence – so would a Marxist say. It comes from our interactions with the material world, and our use, moulding, crafting of nature. Under the controlling gaze of the bourgeoisie, and in the context of capitalist economic organization, the working classes are alienated (that is made strange or alien to...; radically separated from...) in a four-fold way.

1) workers are alienated from the products of their labour, which are, in the era of bourgeois capitalism, commodities (things the ultimate aim of which is to generate profit for the bosses); 2) workers are alienated from *their own labour* – they work for the betterment of another, an exploitative boss, not themselves or their own aesthetic satisfaction; 3) workers are alienated from themselves, their own bodies. Not only are workers separated or alienated from the products of their labour and that labour itself (both of which are now under the control of someone else); but, because it is the worker who must carry out the work, they are no longer in control of their own selves, their own bodies. The general economy (that is, organization) of labour under capitalism can be summed up thus: “The more wealth the worker produces, the more his production increases in power and scope, the poorer he becomes. The more commodities the worker produces, the cheaper a commodity he becomes” (Marx 1983 [EPM], 133). 4) Finally, while man is by “nature” a social and socially organized animal, under capitalism the worker is not only alienated from herself, she is also alienated from her fellow human beings.

Capitalism throws the proletariat into a competitive and ruggedly individualistic relation with one another.

Examples: Atwood and Saunders

Anxiety over alienation is worked through to great effect, but in very different ways, in Atwood's "fictional essay" (the generic label is a strange one) "Voice," and Saunders's stories "Pastoralia" and "Sea Oak." In "Voice," the speaker – possibly an Atwood *persona* – considers the relationship one has to one's God-given voice (just what "voice" is a metaphor for must be given some careful consideration here). This short piece considers the extent to which one's sense of self is bound up in the notion of "voice," and considers the implications of losing one's (metaphorical?) voice.

If we take "voice" to be a metaphor for the authorial voice, then we can read Atwood's piece as a negotiation of the necessary alienation the author must endure in relation to her work, in order to have a public voice at all. Ironically, the very thing in which one's identity as a writer is bound up, is also the very thing one must be prepared to be alienated from if one is to have one's "voice" "heard." The fact that one is forced to work through the metaphorical richness of Atwood's "voice" using other bodily and sensual metaphors is a fitting reminder of Marx's materialism: he was aware that to talk of people is to talk, in a radical way, about bodies, not abstracted, spiritualized "essences."

In "Voice," then, the "voice" as metaphor links the speaker's sense of **corporeal** (bodily) self to the self that is *embodied* and externalized in the work of art. "Voice" is a fitting metaphor for this negotiation of identity and alienation: the voice is, strangely, a part of and apart from the body; it is produced by and in the body, and yet we often think of it as being disembodied, in a way that our arms, legs, heads are not.

In Saunders's "Pastoralia" and "Sea Oak," we are treated to investigation of the body as the means and product of labour, from which the workers are radically alienated. In "Pastoralia," the nameless narrator works as a caveman in a theme park. His body *is* the commodity, it is the product that the theme park is selling. In various ways throughout the story – the extended "conversations" the narrator has with his wife via fax; the restrictions of co-workers to "Separate Areas" after working hours – we witness the narrator experiencing the four-fold alienation outlined by Marx. It is the narrator's own body – as the commodity that the theme park "owns" and sells – that is both the source and means of this multiple alienation.

A similar dynamic and process of alienation is presented in "Sea Oak," in which the protagonist works as a stripper in order to raise enough money to move his family out of the sink estate in which they are trapped. Constantly struggling to make enough money to realize his aim, the protagonist is visited by his apparently undead aunt, who tells him in no uncertain terms that if he thinks he's ever going to move on, then he is going "to have to show some cock." A clearer dramatization of alienation from one's own body and self would, I suggest, be hard to find! In these stories, the body becomes the site and symbol on which Marx's four-fold alienation is concentrated; alienation in these stories is, as it were, written on the body.

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