8

Marxist criticism

Beginnings and basics of Marxism

Karl Marx (1818–1883), a German philosopher, and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895), a German sociologist (as he would now be called), were the joint founders of this school of thought. Marx was the son of a lawyer but spent most of his life in great poverty as a political exile from Germany living in Britain (he was expelled after the 1848 'year of revolutions'). Engels had left Germany in 1842 to work in Manchester for his father's textile firm. They met after Marx had read an article by Engels in a journal to which they both contributed. They themselves called their economic theories 'Communism' (rather than 'Marxism'), designating their belief in the state ownership of industry, transport, etc., rather than private ownership. Marx and Engels announced the advent of Communism in their jointly-written *Communist Manifesto* of 1848.

The aim of Marxism is to bring about a classless society, based on the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange. Marxism is a *materialist* philosophy: that is, it tries to explain things without assuming the existence of a world or of forces beyond the natural world around us, and the society we live in. It looks for concrete, scientific, logical explanations of the world of observable fact. (Its opposite is *idealist* philosophy, which *does* believe in the existence of a spiritual 'world elsewhere' and would offer, for instance, religious explanations of life and conduct). But whereas other philosophies merely seek to

understand the world, Marxism (as Marx famously said) seeks to change it. Marxism sees progress as coming about through the struggle for power between different social classes. This view of history as class struggle (rather than as, for instance, a succession of dynasties, or as a gradual progress towards the attainment of national identity and sovereignty) regards it as 'motored' by the competition for economic, social, and political advantage. The exploitation of one social class by another is seen especially in modern industrial capitalism, particularly in its unrestricted nineteenth-century form. The result of this exploitation is *alienation*, which is the state which comes about when the worker is 'deskilled' and made to perform fragmented, repetitive tasks in a sequence of whose nature and purpose he or she has no overall grasp. By contrast, in the older 'pre-industrial' or 'cottage industry' system of manufacture, home and workplace were one, the worker completed the whole production process in all its variety, and was in direct contact with those who might buy the product. These alienated workers have undergone the process of *reification*, which is a term used in Marx's major work, *Das Kapital*, but not developed there. It concerns the way, when capitalist goals and questions of profit and loss are paramount, workers are bereft of their full humanity and are thought of as 'hands' or 'the labour force', so that, for instance, the effects of industrial closures are calculated in purely economic terms. People, in a word, become things.

There were various influences on early Marxist thinking in addition to that of the political experiences of its founders, including the work of the eighteenth-century German philosopher Hegel (especially his idea of the *dialectic*, whereby opposing forces or ideas bring about new situations or ideas). Marxism also built upon the socialist thinking which was produced in France at the time of the French Revolution, and it inverted some of the ideas of early economic theory, especially the view that the pursuit of individual economic self-interest would bring economic and social benefits to the whole of society (the belief which was and is the underlying rationale of capitalism).

The simplest Marxist model of society sees it as constituted by a *base* (the material means of production, distribution, and

exchange) and a *superstructure*, which is the 'cultural' world of ideas, art, religion, law, and so on. The essential Marxist view is that the latter things are not 'innocent', but are 'determined' (or shaped) by the nature of the economic base. This belief about culture, known as *economic determinism*, is a central part of traditional Marxist thinking.

Marxist literary criticism: general

In fact, though, Marx and Engels themselves did not put forward any comprehensive theory of literature. Their views seem relaxed and undogmatic: good art always has a degree of freedom from prevailing economic circumstances, even if these economic facts are its 'ultimate determinant'. Thus, Engels, writing to the English novelist Margaret Harkness in April 1888, tells her that he is 'far from finding fault with you for not having written a point-blank socialist novel ... The more the opinions of the author remain hidden the better the work of art'. As cultured and highly-educated Germans, Marx and Engels had that reverence for 'great' art and literature which was typical of their class, and there is an obvious desire in such pronouncements to emphasise the difference between art and propaganda.

All the same, Marxist literary criticism maintains that a writer's social class, and its prevailing 'ideology' (outlook, values, tacit assumptions, half-realised allegiances, etc.) have a major bearing on what is written by a member of that class. So instead of seeing authors as primarily autonomous 'inspired' individuals whose 'genius' and creative imagination enables them to bring forth original and timeless works of art, the Marxist sees them as constantly formed by their social contexts in ways which they themselves would usually not admit. This is true not just of the *content* of their work but even of *formal* aspects of their writing which might at first seem to have no possible political overtones. For instance, the prominent British Marxist critic Terry Eagleton suggests that in language 'shared definitions and regularities of grammar both reflect and help to constitute, a well-ordered political state' (*William Shakespeare*, 1986, p. 1). Likewise, Catherine Belsey, another prominent British left-wing critic, argues that the

form of the 'realist' novel contains implicit validation of the existing social structure, because realism, by its very nature, leaves conventional ways of seeing intact, and hence tends to discourage critical scrutiny of reality. By 'form' here is included all the conventional features of the novel – chronological time-schemes, formal beginnings and endings, in-depth psychological characterisation, intricate plotting, and fixed narratorial points of view. Similarly, the 'fragmented', 'absurdist' forms of drama and fiction used by twentieth-century writers like Beckett and Kafka are seen as a response to the contradictions and divisions inherent in late capitalist society.

However, it is probably true to say (as Ken Newton does, p. 244, *Theory into Practice*) that traditional Marxist criticism tends to deal with history in a fairly generalised way. It talks about conflicts between social classes, and clashes of large historical forces, but, contrary to popular belief, it rarely discusses the detail of a specific historical situation and relates it closely to the interpretation of a particular literary text. As Newton implies, this suggests one of the main differences between the Marxist criticism of the 1960s and 1970s and the cultural materialist and new historicist criticism (Chapter 9) which came to the fore in the 1980s, since the latter very often dealt closely with specific historical documents, attempting, in an almost archaeological spirit, to recreate the 'state of mind' of a particular moment in history.

'Leninist' Marxist criticism

A much harder line about literature than Marx and Engels themselves would have approved of was generally pursued by officially sanctioned Marxists, at least until the 1960s. In the 1920s, during the early years after the revolution in Russia, the official Soviet attitude to literature and the arts was very enlightened and 'experimental', and characteristically modern forms of art were encouraged. The 1930s saw reaction throughout the whole of Soviet society, and the State began to exert direct control over literature and the arts as well as everything else. At the first Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934 liberal views were outlawed and a new orthodoxy imposed, based on the writings of Lenin rather than

those of Marx or Engels. Lenin had argued in 1905 that literature must become an instrument of the party. 'Literature', he said, 'must become Party literature ... Literature must become part of the organized, methodical, and unified labours of the social-democratic party'. Experimentation was effectively banned: writers like Proust and Joyce were stigmatised as exemplars of 'bourgeois decadence' (Joyce's *Ulysses* was denounced at the 1934 Congress as 'a heap of dung crawling with worms'), and straight realism was imposed (known as 'Socialist Realism'). In George Steiner's words, these conditions made literature impossible above the level of, say, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Steiner calls the two main streams of Marxist criticism, the 'Engelsian' kind, which stresses the necessary freedom of art from direct political determinism, and the 'Leninist' which insists on the need for art to be explicitly committed to the political cause of the Left. (The above discussion of the views of Engels and Lenin draws on George Steiner's chapter 'Marxism and the literary critic', pp. 271–90 in his book *Language and Silence*).

Those abroad who were sympathetic to the ideas of Communism tried to follow the 'Moscow line' on matters where an official Party policy existed, hence the international influence of the 'Leninist' views which crystalised at the 1934 Congress. Thus, in what came to be called the 'Vulgar Marxism' of the 1930s, a direct cause–effect relationship between literature and economics was assumed, with all writers seen as irrevocably trapped within the intellectual limits of their social-class position. A much-cited example of this rigid kind of Marxist literary criticism is Christopher Caudwell's *Illusion and Reality* (written in the 1930s and published in 1946). Caudwell's writing is both very generalised, in the sense that there is little detailed textual reference to the works under discussion, and very specific, in the sense that every facet of a writer is linked to some aspect of her or his social status. Thus, in Caudwell's discussion of Victorian poets (extracted in Newton's *Twentieth Century Literary Theory*) we read that '[Browning's] vocabulary has a foggy verbalism which is a reflection of his intellectual dishonesty in dealing with real contemporary problems'. Thus, a particular kind of vocabulary is the direct product of the middle-class writer's evasiveness on sensi-

tive social issues. All poets have their own form of escape from modern reality: Tennyson laspes into a Keatsian dreamworld, Browning writes constantly on Italian medieval themes:

> To Tennyson the Keatsian world of romance, to Browning the Italian springtime; both are revolting backwards, trying to escape from the contradiction of the class for whom they speak.
>
> (Newton, p. 87).

The overall result is to provide little more than 'sound-bites' on literature for use in political argument.

'Engelsian' Marxist criticism

From the 1930s, however, a rich variety of what Steiner calls 'Engelsian' Marxist criticism flourished, either in exile, or in suppressed or underground form. The group now called the Russian Formalists had flourished in the 1920s, until disbanded by the Party, and should be mentioned here, even though their work is not strictly Marxist in spirit. The most prominent members of the group were Victor Shklovsky, Boris Tomashevsky, and Boris Eichenbaum, whose work can be sampled in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, edited by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (University of Nebraska Press, 1965). Their ideas included the need for close formal analysis of literature (hence the name), the belief that the language of literature has its own characteristic procedures and effects, and is not just a version of ordinary language, and Shklovsky's idea of 'defamiliarisation' or 'making strange' (expounded in the essay 'Art as Technique', which Lemon and Reis reprint) which claims that one of the chief effects of literary language is that of making the familiar world appear new to us, as if we were seeing it for the first time, and thus laying it open to reappraisal. Another key Formalist idea is Tomashevsky's distinction (again expounded in the essay reprinted in Lemon and Reis) between story (Russian *fabula*) and plot (Russian *sjuzhet*), the former being an actual sequence of (perhaps imaginary) events as they would have occurred, while the latter is the artistic presentation of these events, which might involve reorderings, juxtapositions, repetitions, and so on, in order to

which the former determines the nature of the latter. Now, says Goldstein, 'the economic infrastructure still influences ideological practices, but only in the "last instance"' (Goldstein, p. 23). *Decentering* is a key term in Althusser to indicate structures which have no essence, or focus, or centre. Again, this is partly a way of avoiding the view that the economic base is the essence of society and the superstructure merely a secondary reflection. The notion of decentering implies that there is no overall unity: art has a relative autonomy and is determined by the economic level only 'in the last instance'. These 'Engelsian' pronouncements do not cancel out the Marxist tendency to imprison art within economics, but they do release literature on bail, so to speak, and allow it a high degree of day-to-day freedom.

Althusser makes a useful distinction between what we might call state power and state control. State power is maintained by what Althusser terms *repressive structures*, which are institutions like the law courts, prisons, the police force, and the army, which operate, in the last analysis, by external force. But the power of the state is also maintained more subtly, by seeming to secure the internal consent of its citizens, using what Althusser calls *ideological structures* or *State ideological apparatuses*. These are such groupings as political parties, schools, the media, churches, the family, and art (including literature) which foster an ideology – a set of ideas and attitudes – which is sympathetic to the aims of the state and the political status quo. Thus, each of us feels that we are freely choosing what is in fact being imposed upon us.

This Althusserian distinction is closely related to the notion of *hegemony*, which was given prominence by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1934). Gramsci contrasts *rule*, which is direct political control, which uses force when necessary, and *hegemony*, which is (as defined by Raymond Williams) 'the whole lived social process as practically organized by specific and dominant meanings, values and beliefs of a kind which can be abstracted as a "world-view" or "class outlook"' (Williams, *Marxism and Literature* Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 101). Williams relates hegemony to culture in general and to ideology in particular. Hegemony is like an internalised form of social control which makes certain views seem 'natural' or invisible so that

they hardly seem like views at all, just 'the way things are'.

The 'trick' whereby we are made to feel that we are choosing when really we have no choice is called by Althusser *interpellation*. Capitalism, says Althusser, thrives on this trick: it makes us feel like free agents ('You can have any colour you like…') while actually imposing things upon us ('… as long as it's black'). Thus, democracy makes us feel that we are choosing the kind of government we have, but in practice the differences between political parties, once in power, are far fewer than the rhetorical gulfs between them. Interpellation is Althusser's term for the way the individual is encouraged to see herself or himself as an entity free and independent of social forces. It accounts for the operation of control structures not maintained by physical force, and hence for the perpetuation of a social set-up which concentrates wealth and power in the hands of the few.

The general purport of these Althusserian ideas is to enable a much more subtle view of how society works than that provided by traditional Marxism. Instead of force crudely applied from a single source, as from a lever, there is assent secured in many different and complex ways, and ideological power is shown to be of ultimately greater significance than material power. Thus, literature is shown to be of crucial importance in its own right, not just a helpless and passive reflector of the economic base where the real business of society goes on. Hence, the attraction of Althusser to recent Marxist critics is that he offers ways of by-passing the crude base/superstructure model without giving up the Marxist perspective altogether. Althusser's views represent what we might call revisionist Marxism, which is to say that they rethink and repackage the basic concepts in a form which is more subtle and more flexible. This is not to say that Althusser was a flexible thinker generally: on the contrary, he was a particularly dogmatic one, much attacked on the left for his promotion of 'theory' as a separate realm which is above experience, practice, or activism (see especially *The Poverty of Theory* by the British Marxist historian E. P. Thompson). But he did provide terms and formulae when they were needed, in the liberalising 1960s, which loosened the monolithic fabric of Marxist thinking and therefore made it acceptable to the radicals of that period. Without these 'loosen-

ing' moves Marxism might have been widely rejected as just one more form of rigid traditional thinking which the 'counter-culture' of that time needed to reject.

Since the 1970s the best-known British Marxist critic has been Terry Eagleton, whose work has reflected a wide range of influences, including for a time that of Althusser. Marxist criticism seems to conflict in its basic assumptions with those of post-structuralism and postmodernism, and the most significant Marxist writing in the 1980s and 1990s had involved a process of intricate interaction with these movements. Marxist criticism has also traditionally been opposed to psychoanalytic explanations of conduct, on the grounds that psychoanalysis falsely isolates individuals from the social structures in which they exist. All the same, the American Marxist critic Fredric Jameson (in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, 1981) has tried to reconcile the two. Essentially, Jameson offers political extensions of basic psychoanalytic terms like 'the unconscious' and 'repression'. Literature, in his view, often tries to *repress* historical truth, but analysis can reveal its underlying ideology (that is, its unconscious). A basic starting point on Eagleton, Jameson, and this whole area of debate would be to read Jameson's essay 'The politics of theory: Ideological positions in the postmodernism debate' and Eagleton's 'Capitalism, modernism, and postmodernism', which are reprinted as items 22 and 23 in David Lodge's *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*.

STOP and THINK

General: The main tenet of Marxist criticism – that the nature of literature is influenced by the social and political cirumstances in which it is produced – might well be immediately accepted as self-evidently true.

The difficulty and controversy lie entirely in deciding how close the influence is. Are you going to adopt a 'determinist' position, and argue that literature is the passive product of socio-economic forces, or do you take a more 'liberal' line and see the socio-economic influence as much more distant and subtle?

Your main difficulty will be to show the operation of these economic forces (no matter whether you take the 'strong' or the 'weak' model) in a given literary work. What exactly do directly operating, or indirectly operating socio-economic forces look like in a literary work?

Specific: These are difficult questions to cope with in the abstract, and you will find it helpful to think about them in the context of a specific example. In the example below, therefore, is a 'determinist' or a 'liberal' line being taken, and how is this indicated? Is the socio-economic influence seen by the critic in the plot content of the play, in the characterisation, or in the literary form itself, and if so how?

What Marxist critics do

1. They make a division between the 'overt' (manifest or surface) and 'covert' (latent or hidden) content of a literary work (much as psychoanalytic critics do) and then relate the *covert* subject matter of the literary work to basic Marxist themes, such as class struggle, or the progression of society through various historical stages, such as, the transition from feudalism to industrial capitalism. Thus, the conflicts in *King Lear* might be read as being 'really' about the conflict of class interest between the rising class (the bourgeoisie) and the falling class (the feudal overlords).
2. Another method used by Marxist critics is to relate the context of a work to the social-class status of the author. In such cases an assumption is made (which again is similar to those made by psychoanalytic critics) that the author is unaware of precisely what he or she is saying or revealing in the text.
3. A third Marxist method is to explain the nature of a whole literary genre in terms of the social period which 'produced' it. For instance, *The Rise of the Novel*, by Ian Watt, relates the growth of the novel in the eighteenth century to the expansion of the middle classes during that period. The novel 'speaks' for this social class, just as, for instance, Tragedy

'speaks for' the monarchy and the nobility, and the Ballad 'speaks for' for the rural and semi-urban 'working class'.

4. A fourth Marxist practice is to relate the literary work to the social assumptions of the time in which it is 'consumed', a strategy which is used particularly in the later variant of Marxist criticism known as cultural materialism (see Chapter 9, pp. 182–9).
5. A fifth Marxist practice is the 'politicisation of literary form', that is, the claim that literary forms are themselves determined by political circumstance. For instance, in the view of some critics, literary realism carries with it an implicit validation of conservative social structures: for others, the formal and metrical intricacies of the sonnet and the iambic pentameter are a counterpart of social stability, decorum, and order.

Marxist criticism: an example

As an example of Marxist criticism we will take chapter five, on *Twelfth Night*, in Elliot Krieger's *A Marxist Study of Shakespeare's Comedies* (1979). As it is discussed here, the example mainly shows the first of the five Marxist critical activities just listed. The play centres on the love between the Duke Orsino and the Lady Olivia. His love is extravagantly and persistently expressed but she at first rejects him, having dedicated herself to a period of protracted mourning for her dead father. Subsequently she falls in love with Viola, a young noblewoman who is temporarily disguised as a man and acting as his servant and go-between (under the name Cesario). Olivia is also loved by her steward, the strict and punctilious Malvolio, who is tricked by her uncle, Sir Toby Belch, into believing that his love for her is returned.

The essay begins by citing the dominant critical view of the play, which is that it presents various extremes of self-indulgence (such as Orsino's wallowing in fantasies of romantic love and Toby Belch's self-abandonment to physical appetites) and contrasts these with an extreme puritanism and resistance to pleasure, as seen in Malvolio. The play is seen as recommending a balance and decorum in which these extremes are avoided and

proper human fulfilment becomes possible. Krieger points out that this ignores the question of class in the play: when 'order' is restored at the end, the aristocratic characters suffer no particular ill effects, while Malvolio's fate is much more severe, yet Malvolio's self-interest differs from the obviously narcissistic preoccupations of Orsino and Olivia and the egoistic revelry of Sir Toby *only* because decorum forbids one of his rank to 'surfeit on himself' (p. 99). Thus 'only a privileged social class has access to the morality of indulgence'. Indeed, by definition, 'the members of the ruling class find their identities through excessive indulgence in appetite' (p. 100).

Each of the members of the aristocratic class, he continues, has a private 'secondary world'. For Sir Toby it is the unfettered world he reaches by drink, for he 'forces everyone to care for him while using the enforced incompetence of drunkenness and the willed oblivion of time in order to protect himself from the possibility of caring for others' (p. 102). Likewise, Olivia protects herself from the needs of others by retreating into a private world of bereavement, and Orsino into a wholly subjective world of love obsession in which everything becomes 'an adjunct of, and accompaniment to, the Duke's psychological condition' (p. 104). In these 'privatised' 'second worlds', each becomes, not part of a community, but 'one self king' (p. 103). Viola, too, attempts to retreat into one of these second worlds, but though she is actually aristocratic, the disguise she adopts enables her to choose a temporary non-aristocratic status ('I'll serve this duke'), and she thus becomes 'an object within the second worlds of Orsino, Olivia and Sir Toby' (p. 107), someone they assume is available for their use or manipulation.

Within the world of the servants in the play, there is much emphasis on 'aspiration': the new servant Cesario/Viola displaces Valentine and Curio from their positions of privileged access to Duke Orsino, and in Olivia's household there is a constant struggle for prime position between Maria (another of the servants) and Malvolio. Both, in fact, aim to marry into the family, which Maria eventually achieves by marrying Sir Toby as a reward for her decisive humiliation of Malvolio. Krieger therefore sees her as a significant element in the play:

Maria is hardly a proto-bourgeoise, in that her aspiration supports and confirms rather than challenges the continued validity of aristocratic privilege, but with her abilities to separate self from vocation, to express self apart from imposed duty, and to earn by her actions advancement in social degree, only Maria in *Twelfth Night* indicates the bourgeois and Puritan emphasis on independence, competition, and the association of stature with merit. (p. 121)

In contrast, Malvolio is much less of a representative of any kind of change in the social order, since he has an extreme reverence for all the trappings of aristocracy, and attributes the circumstances which, he thinks, have made possible his own elevation to the aristocracy to 'fortune' and his 'stars'. Thus, fortune in the play is a force, like 'nature' which is often an alibi or a rationalisation of inherited aristocratic privilege. For the Marxist critic, then, the play demonstrates the gulf which exists between masters and servants and manifests something of the state of mind that is characteristic of each class. The Marxist feature of this essay is the way it introduces the notion of social class into interpretations of the play: this is its special 'intervention' into the large body of critical writing on the play, in which the topic is never raised. Very little indeed is said in the essay about the specifics of the precise historical moment in which it was written: rather, a subtle and original reading is woven round the generalised notions of social-class conflict, class privilege, and aspirations towards what would now be called upward social mobility.

Selected reading

Dowling, William C., *Jameson, Althusser, Marx: An Introduction to The Political Unconscious* (Methuen, 1994).
A 'contextualising introduction' to Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*. Excellent and brief, and really the best place to begin in studying the recent concerns of Marxist thinking and its transforming engagements with Derrida, Lacan, and postmodernism.

Eagleton, Terry, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (Routledge, 1976).
A brief yet thorough introduction to this field.

Eagleton, Terry, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Blackwell, 1990).
Representative of Eagleton's more recent concerns.

Goldstein, Philip, *The Politics of Literary Theory: An Introduction to Marxist Criticism* (Florida State University Press, 1990).
Useful on specific areas, such as: The Frankfurt School, pp. 17–21; post-structuralist Marxism, pp. 22–8; Terry Eagleton, pp. 59–65; Althusser, Derrida, and Foucault, pp. 164–74.

Howard, Jean E., and Shershow, Scott Cutler, *Marxist Shakespeares* (Routledge, 2000).
A very useful book in the 'Accents on Shakespeare' series, edited by Terence Hawkes, which takes up the mission of Methuen's 'New Accents' series of bringing literary theory to literary text.

Jameson, Frederic, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Cornell University Press, 1981).
The key text for Jameson, but undoubtedly difficult reading. It would be helpful to read William C. Dowling (above) first.

Krieger, Elliott, *A Marxist Study of Shakespeare's Comedies* (Macmillan, 1979).
'Applied' Marxist criticism.

Mulhern, Francis, ed. *Contemporary Marxist Literary Criticism* (Longman, 1992).
A thoughtful and wide-ranging introduction and some key documents.

Prawer, S. S., *Karl Marx and World Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1978).
A detailed presentation and discussion of 'what Marx said about literature at various times in his life'.

'Ruis', *Marx for Beginners* (Writers & Readers Cooperative/Unwin Paperbacks, 1976/1986).
A 'documentary comic book' which summarises Marx's ideas in comic strip form. A good place to begin if you have not encountered Marx's ideas before.

Williams, Raymond, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1977).
Useful on basic Marxist concepts, and Williams's adaptations of them. See 1.4 Ideology, 2.1 Base and Superstructure, 2.6 Hegemony, 2.8 Dominant, Residual, and Emergent, 2.9 Structures of feeling.