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Literary Theory in the Labyrinth of Ideology

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Abstract

This paper critically examines key positions in modern and postmodern literary theory by foregrounding the ideological pressures embedded within them. Drawing primarily on Marxist literary theory, it argues that attempts to detach the literary text from the author and from history — most notably in New Criticism and post-structuralism — mirror the logic of capitalist alienation. Through a dialectical-materialist framework, the paper emphasizes the inseparable relationship between author, labor, text, and historical conditions. Concepts such as ideology, form and over-determination are discussed with reference to thinkers including T. S. Eliot, Roland Barthes, Georg Lukács, Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton, Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff. While acknowledging the complexity of social reality highlighted by postmodern and contemporary Marxist theories, the paper critiques their tendency toward indeterminacy and theoretical relativism. It concludes by asserting that literary creation involves the continual transcendence of ideological limits and that meaningful social transformation requires a functional theoretical center rather than radical decentering.

Keywords: Literary theory; Marxism; ideology; form; post-modernism; dialectical materialism.

The reservoir of theoretical thinking on literature is such a vast and diverse ocean that even the briefest outline of its contours cannot be drawn within a limited space. In this essay, this researcher attempts to point out the ideological pressures underlying some of the most prominent positions in modern and postmodern literary theory, and at the same time to offer a rational indication that such theories, in the final analysis, do not operate in the interest of the masses. Naturally, a brief reference to certain core concepts of Marxist literary theory will also be made. Despite its many modified forms and diverse strands, we regard Marxist literary theory as the most comprehensive theory of literature — one

capable of assimilating even those elements of non-Marxist literary theories that may be of use. In the absence of dialectical thinking, even the attractive aspects of non-Marxist literary theories tend to become partial, fragmented, and parochial.

For instance, the epoch-making poet-critic T. S. Eliot famously remarked: "Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation are directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry (qtd. in Enright and Chickera, 297)." At first glance, this appears to be a highly appealing theoretical position. Influenced by such views, the theorists of New Criticism later declared discussions of authorial intention, authorial psychology, and readerly response to be fallacious, insisting instead on exclusive attention to the "words on the page." This process of separating the text from the author progressed so far that in the second half of the twentieth century Roland Barthes proclaimed the "death of the author."

This attempt to detach the author from the text constitutes a literary echo of bourgeois capitalist economics. The author is a producer, a worker; the text is the product of the author's labour. Just as there exists an inseparable relationship between worker, labour, and product, so too exists an indissoluble relationship between author, creative labour, and text. It is precisely such creative labour that constitutes the essence of humanity and enables the realization of human potential. The produced object or literary text necessarily contains something of the producing worker or author; it is an extension of the creator's being. Just as capitalist society seeks to alienate the product from the producing worker, literary theory too attempts to alienate the text from the worker-author. Consequently, an unbridgeable divide is imagined between subject and object, creator and creation, and priority is granted to the creation over the creator.

From Eliot to Barthes, modern and postmodern theorists have expelled the author from the text to varying degrees, thereby generating another problem: the illusion of the text as an autonomous object detached from history. One might argue that Eliot actually connects literature to history by claiming that individual talent cannot be evaluated apart from tradition. However, closer scrutiny reveals that Eliot's concept of "tradition" is an idealist one: instead of the chronological materiality of history, it speaks of the simultaneity of past, present, and future, while denying the notion of artistic progress. When Eliot claims that "the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality (296)," personality or ego becomes an entity that can be offered at the altar of tradition, as though separate from it. But are not personality and ego themselves the outcomes of a conflict-ridden history and a dialectical tradition? Do we not, consciously or unconsciously, carry tradition within our personality in varying degrees? Then what does impersonality mean, and why is it necessary?

Eliot argues that new and unexpected combinations arise through the concentration of emotions and experiences — experiences not necessarily personal to the artist — and that the artist's mind functions merely as a catalyst, uninvolved and uncontrolled by the process itself. But if the artist lacks control over the artistic material, would not the outcome of the artistic process be surrendered to sheer chance?

In this researcher's view, Eliot's notion of impersonality is an idealist illusion. The idea that one can suppress personality while selectively absorbing tradition is self-contradictory. What must be transcended is not personality, but the ideological limits imposed by specific class positions and historical conditions. Only by transcending ideological constraints can an artist reveal the true nature of reality.

At this point, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by "ideology." Terry Eagleton identifies several possible meanings of the term, including: "the process of producing meanings,

signs, and values in social life (*Ideology* 1)"; "a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class"; "false ideas that help legitimate a dominant political power"; "forms of thought motivated by social interests"; "systematically distorted communication"; "that which positions subjects"; and "the medium through which conscious social actors make sense of their world" (2). Here, ideology is understood as a form of thought shaped by the social interests of a particular group or class, through which they comprehend their world.

A key objective of literary analysis, therefore, can — and should — be to examine whether authors have succeeded in transcending their ideological limits to present a truthful representation of social reality.

Dialectical materialism shows us that no object or phenomenon exists independently or in isolation. An apple is connected to a particular tree, the tree to its environment, that environment to a larger ecological system, and ultimately to the universe itself. Similarly, a text is connected to the author, the author to class and society, and class and society to broader historical conditions.

Such dialectical thinking also reveals that under specific historical circumstances, and under the pressure of the overt or covert interests of particular classes or groups, not only the content of literature but also its form and structure are largely determined. Georg Lukács asserted that "the truly social element in literature is form (qtd. in Eagleton, *Marxism*, 19)." Fredric Jameson likewise observed that "form itself is a development of content within the realm of the superstructure (qtd. in Eagleton, *Marxism*, 21)."

To say that history determines form does not merely mean that epic emerged in ancient times of greater unity between humans and nature, romance in the feudal Middle Ages, and the novel in the modern bourgeois era. It also means that choices regarding narrative voice, point of view, characterization, imagery, symbolism, and metaphor are profoundly shaped by specific historical and material conditions.

In this context, Lukács's concept of the "type" is particularly useful in discussing character formation, plot, and narrative selection. Characters who embody the fundamental contradictions of social history qualify as types, and it is through such characters that the contours of social conditions and historical development become intelligible. Only then does literature achieve significance, becoming an artistic condensation of human history and an alternative source of knowledge alongside science.

Terry Eagleton's discussion of Dickens's characterization further broadens our understanding. Dickens is often criticized for creating flat, static, psychologically simplistic, and eccentric characters. Eagleton, however, points out that Dickens is not an artist of rural life like George Eliot but an urban writer. In urban life, human relationships exhibit less continuity, making it difficult to fully know another person's inner life. Dickens's characterization thus reflects the realities of urban social existence.

It should be noted that contemporary Marxists such as Resnick, Wolff, and Markels reject the traditional base–superstructure model commonly found in earlier Marxist discourse. According to that model, a society's economy constitutes its base, which largely determines its cultural and ideological superstructure. These newer Marxists replace this simplified model with a more complex framework of overdetermined reality. Social reality, they argue, is an ensemble of countless processes, each influencing and being influenced by others, simultaneously acting as cause and effect.

Markels explains, "Resnick and Wolff argue that the dense web of overdetermination among social processes can never be comprehensively analyzed and that Marxism, like all other theories, must choose for its

analysis a point of entry which is necessarily incomplete and thus necessarily partisan (20)." Marxism's point of entry is class understood as a process of exploitation; Freudian theory's is libido and the superego; social Darwinism's is survival of the fittest.

Literary narratives — especially novels — are similarly organized around such points of entry. Just as social reality is an overdetermined totality composed of interacting processes, the fictional world of a novel is an overdetermined whole formed by multiple intersecting narrative strands. To grasp such complexity, a point of entry is required that can integrate the maximum number of social processes or narrative threads. The selection of this point of entry is itself ideologically determined.

While Resnick and Wolff's theory insightfully highlights social complexity, it also raises serious problems. Under the influence of postmodernism, their approach risks transforming Marxism into an anti-essentialist theory. By granting equal weight to all social processes and projecting over-determination as an infinite and indeterminate phenomenon, they slide into postmodern indeterminacy. While the economy may not be the sole and absolute determinant, it does not follow that all processes carry equal weight. By declaring all points of entry equally arbitrary, partial, and biased — and by granting all theories equal status — they open the door to theoretical anarchy. Can Marxism and existentialism be accorded the same legitimacy as patriarchal ideology or terrorism? While Resnick and Wolff rightly alert us to social complexity, we cannot uncritically accompany them throughout their theoretical journey.

In short, and put simply, every literary work is produced by a living author who is himself a product of history. The author participates in history through a particular ideology, which shapes their perspective on life and the world. The more truthful and artistically committed an author is, the more effectively they can pierce the web of ideology to portray the inner reality of society. Modifying Eliot's statement, one might say: "The progress of an artist is a continual transcendence of ideology." Ideology and material conditions determine not only content but also form, technique, and artistic strategy.

Finally, a brief comment on postmodernism. Is postmodernism itself a truth or merely an interpretation? Is it not a grand narrative or discourse centered on the ideas of decentering and indeterminacy? When Lacan drew conclusions from observing the behavior of infants and monkeys before mirrors, did he not rely on interpretation favorable to his theory? If the meaning of "indeterminacy of meaning" itself is indeterminate, what follows? If textual meaning is indeterminate, how do we understand postmodernist texts themselves? How can we grasp even a single sentence by Barthes, Derrida, Lacan, or Foucault? Can fragmented struggles of small groups, as envisioned by Foucault, successfully identify and defeat a common enemy such as imperialism? Why did postmodernism emerge precisely at the historical moment when capitalism transitioned from monopoly capitalism to multinational finance capitalism?

Ultimately, should we remain satisfied with what exists, or should we seek transformation? And if transformation is indeed desired — as postmodernists themselves demonstrate through their writing, theorizing, and debates — does it not require a center-oriented ideology or discourse? If, as Derrida suggests, the center is functional rather than essential, will that provide sufficient resolve, commitment, and motivation for transformative change? The final question remains: has not the theory of deconstruction itself been constructed with great effort?

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