Marxism and Popular Fiction
Problems and Prospects

Although, as I understand them, the concerns of this conference are really quite broad ones, I want to take as the subject of my talk a fairly sharply focused topic, namely the relationship between Marxism and popular fiction, especially in its written forms; and I want, in the main, to develop two lines of argument in relation to this topic. First, I want to outline and to be sharply critical of the predominant terms in which popular fiction has been studied in Marxist criticism; and second, I want to indicate the ways in which I think the study of popular fiction should be developed — not as an end in itself, but as part of a critical strategy aimed at deconstructing the category of literature and dismantling those critical procedures which currently produce for literary texts their political and ideological effects. However, although my concerns are quite particular ones, I think that the issues which hinge on them have a general pertinence for the development of cultural studies as a whole and not just for its literary-critical wing.

In speaking of “literature” here, of course, I have in mind not the “literary” (as a neutral term denoting the totality of imaginative or fictional writing) but rather “Literature” as, in Tony Davies’ words, “an ideologically constructed canon or corpus of texts operating in specific and determinate ways in and around the apparatus of education”; in short, the canonised tradition. Needless to say, I would regard the development of a critical strategy such as that outlined above as a Marxist project; indeed, it seems to me that the contestation of the category of Literature in a detailed and systematic way is perhaps the most important task currently facing Marxist criticism, and there are many signs that such a project is already well under way. The main burden of my argument is that the continued and sustained development of such a project requires a sharp and unequivocal break with some of the dominant concerns that have hitherto characterised the history of Marxist criticism. For the fact is that, until very recently, Marxist criticism has itself been developed under the sign of Literature. In this respect, it has been deeply complicit with bourgeois criticism; and although the effects of this are most clearly visible in the extent to which, in the classics of Marxist criticism, popular fiction has been simply neglected (or, where not ignored, treated disparagingly), these traits are symptomatic of broader problems. To the degree that it has underwritten the concept of Literature, Marxist criticism of necessity has had to take on board a set of idealist concerns — specifically the attempt to develop an aesthetic — which have been profoundly at odds with its more properly historical and materialist ambitions, and which have frustrated them at every turn.

Having roughly outlined the general concerns of my paper, I shall now try to develop these somewhat programmatic assertions into argued
positions, and to substantiate them in greater detail. First, my assertion that popular fiction has been a neglected area of study in Marxist criticism stands in need of some qualification. That the bulk of Marxist critical attention has focused on the canonised tradition is incontestable, I think. However, and especially of late, many Marxists or Marxism critics have certainly concerned themselves with the study of popular fiction; for example, people like Umberto Eco or Roland Barthes. Even so, it is noticeable that popular texts have figured more prominently in the project of developing a general semiology than in the distinctively literary critical region of Marxist theory. So far as the historical formation of Marxist criticism is concerned, however, the degree of critical attention devoted to the study of popular fiction in those major schools of criticism — which (at least until recently) have defined the central terms of reference of Marxist critical debate — has been cursory, to say the least. Take Lukács: he has literally nothing at all to say on the subject — his critical attention moves unremittingly within the confines of "world historical literature." Lucien Goldmann, it is true, makes one or two oblique references to popular fiction in attempting to explain why the methods of world-view analysis should be "valid only for the great works of the past." Resolving this problem definitively, Goldmann squares his circle with remarkable candour: world-view analysis, he argues, can be used only in relation to great works because (it turns out) only great works contain or express world views. Goldmann puts popular fiction safely back in the box labelled "Ideology" from whence he took it. Althusser, of course, having posited an unargued for distinction between "authentic art" and "works of average or mediocre level," ignores the latter entirely and, again, equates it with ideology. The only major school of Marxist criticism which can claim to have studied non-canonised texts in a serious and sustained manner (although more in the field of music than of fiction) is the Frankfurt school. However, the Hegelianised version of the mass culture critique which informed the Frankfurt theorists' approach to popular texts resulted chiefly in a leftward inflection of the terms in which popular texts had been condemned already in the mass society tradition. All the elements which inform the mass culture critique — the lack of a controlling centre of culture, aesthetic barbarism, and so on — are present in the Frankfurt critique, but (so to speak) shuffled to the left in being recast in the Frankfurt perspective of containment.

There are other exceptions. Most notably, Raymond Williams — at a theoretical level, if not at the level of his practical criticism (which, again, is concerned unremittingly with the canonised tradition) — has done perhaps more than any other single figure to contest the concept of Literature by tracing the processes of its historical formation. Nonetheless, the general point remains valid: that Marxist critics, for the greater part, have merely mirrored bourgeois criticism in accepting its valuations and duplicating its exclusions. If the gravitational pull of the concept of Literature has proved well nigh irresistible in the way in which the sphere of canonised texts has been approached and conceptualised, the pull of the mass culture critique has proved equally strong in the way in which Marxists have studied popular forms, casting them too often as the
villains of the piece in a critique of the cultural processes of monopoly capitalism in which all elements of the mass culture critique survive, albeit in an inverted form. The result has been a highly paradoxical history for a science which claims to be revolutionary, a history in which Marxist criticism for the most part has corroborated distinctions forged by bourgeois criticism. Approving of the same body of canonised works (but for different reasons) and disapproving of the rest (lumped together as a residue, but again for different reasons), bourgeois criticism has been patted on the back for having recognised which works are truly great, and simultaneously taken to task for having mis-recognised the reasons for their greatness. In a review article of Terry Eagleton’s *Criticism and Ideology*, Francis Mulhern warns that “it would be astonishing if the judgements of Marxist criticism turned out to be so many materialist Doppelgängers of those made current by the foregoing idealist tradition.” To which I would say: yes, astonishing indeed, but nonetheless, so far as the question of literary evaluation is concerned, this is the main heritage of Marxist criticism.

Such mimicry of idealist evaluative criticism is symptomatic of that complicity with bourgeois criticism which marked the foundations of Marxist criticism. For a variety of reasons, Marxist criticism has competed with bourgeois criticism on its own ground instead of disputing or displacing that terrain. At the level of ideological polemic, Marxist criticism has claimed that the central problem of bourgeois criticism—the problem of the specificity of literature—can be satisfactorily accounted for only by the application of Marxist (that is to say, historical and materialist) principles of analysis. Whatever its positive yield—and indeed there have been positive yields—the negative consequence of such a strategy has been to distinguish Marxist criticism from bourgeois criticism solely at the level of method. That is to say, it has addressed the same set of problems (the problems of “literariness,” and the specificity of literature and the aesthetic), but by means of different methodological and analytical principles. In doing so, it has distinguished itself from bourgeois criticism solely at the level of method, and not at all at the crucial level of the theoretical constitution of its object.

To illustrate the effects of this complicity with bourgeois criticism, I want now to reflect on the part played by the problem of value in Marxist critical theory. Briefly, what I want to suggest is that the problem of value (as it is usually construed) is an improper one for Marxist theory—and that its proper task in this respect is not to adumbrate a theory of value, but to analyse the social contestation of value; its central political task is to intervene in the processes of the social contestation of value, in strategically argued for and calculated ways. However, I want to argue also that the centrality accorded to the problem of value in Marxist theory has had a seriously debilitating effect upon the ways in which other aspects of Marxist critical concern have been posed, and I shall try to illustrate this by considering its effects on the study of popular fiction. But let me first develop my critique of the theory of value.
II

To avoid misunderstanding, I should make it clear that, in designating the problem of value an improper one for Marxism, I am not thereby attempting to assert the equivalence or parity of all forms of writing; that would be a self-evident absurdity. Statements to the effect that Joyce opened up the possibilities of language in ways that (say) Conan Doyle did not seem to me to be quite unproblematic. However, such purely technical assessments of the formal effects of different practices of writing do not of themselves offer grounds for valuing one above the other. A further step is required, namely the intervention of a discourse of value which argues reasons for ranking forms of writing which stretch the possibilities of language above those which do not (for not all discourses of value have produced such criteria for valuation). Still less (to grasp the nettle) am I advocating a neo-Kantian stance which would abdicate the realm of value in the name of a pseudo-neutrality. This is not merely to say that judgements of value can and should be made, but rather to recognise that they will be made inevitably, and that Marxists cannot afford to stand aloof from the continuing social process by which texts are valorised and counter-valorised. Given these qualifications, my chief objection is to the predominant form which the debate about value has taken in Marxist criticism, where it has been conceived as identical with and addressed through the problem of the specificity of Literature. This has resulted in the conflation of a whole series of discrete and analytically separate issues. The problem of explaining the source of a work’s value, for example, has been confused with that of its “literariness” — that is, those formal characteristics which are held to distinguish it uniquely as Literature from other forms of fiction. Worse still, problems of aesthetic evaluation and political calculation have been implicitly merged, as in Lukács’ attempt to construct a realist aesthetic that would recruit all great artists to the banner of progressivism in art.

Most disquieting of all, however, has been the tendency to view value as essentially static, at least over large periods of time. This involves regarding it as a property which is in some way inherently inscribed in conventionally revered texts; and, as part of an ideological polemic with bourgeois criticism, contending that such properties — which are contained in texts and held to explain their “literariness” — can be accounted for only by returning the text, analytically, to the conditions of its production. This way of posing the problem is mistaken, I think, and for a number of reasons, all of which cluster around the fact that, logically, value cannot be a property of the text alone; one cannot, that is to say, pose the question of value without introducing into the analysis the problem of the valuing subject. Texts cannot have intrinsic value: they can only be valued, for stated reasons, by valuing subjects of particular types; and these (both the reasons for valuing, and the type of valuing subject) are entirely the product of critical discourses of valuation — discourses which vary from criticism to criticism.

I want to suggest that what has thus been offered in Marxist criticism under the guise of theories of value or theories of literature are in fact
merely specific reasons for valuing, specific discourses of value: they produce valuing subjects of particular types which cannot be preferred logically above other reasons for valuing, although they may be so preferred for political reasons. In the case of Lukácsian aesthetics, for example, texts are valued in proportion to the degree to which they approximate the normal historical self-knowledge which constitutes the Lukácsian model of literariness. For Althusserians, value is explained in terms of the extent to which texts distance or rupture the ideological discourses to which they allude. If they do this significantly they’re “in” — they count as literature and are valued. If they don’t, they’re out: they are consigned elsewhere, and not valued. As specific, political reasons for valuing, such arguments are unexceptionable; they can be debated with politically at the level of a calculation of their effects, of the practices of writing they support, of the types of valuing subject they produce, of the category of readers they imply, of the textual/political conjunctures to which they relate, and so on. But such reasons for valuing can be presented as theories of value only by discounting the positions of valuing subjects which are produced by and in competing critical discourses. That is to say, such reasons for valuing can be sustained as theories of value only by means of a certain dogmatism. It is in this way, I think, that the logic of false-consciousness has exerted its peculiar presence in Marxist aesthetic debate, in so far as attempts to construct a theory of value have necessitated the dismissal of the valuing subjects — produced by the discourses of bourgeois criticism — as illusory subjects, mistaken in their reasons for valuing.

A theory of value, it seems to me, presupposes the possibility of escape from the plurality of different reasons for valuing, that plurality of discourses which produce different valuing subjects. One can do this only by means of the discursive construction of the category of a universal valuing subject. Precisely this strategy has been the central tactic of bourgeois criticism in the familiar argument (crudely summarised) that value resides in the relationship between those universal values which are embodied in great works and a universal subject which is buried deep within us all. In Marxism, the more usual tactic has been the historicist formation of teleological theories of value, pivoted on the construction of a universal valuing subject which, situated at the end of history (beyond the conflict which currently separates us), will vindicate the provisional judgements currently made on its behalf. The most clear example of this is Lukács, whose entire critical practice (especially his conception of texts as being related to one another historically while the baton of aesthetic totalisation is passed from class to class) requires for its very constitution the construction of the proletariat as the identical subject/object of history, waiting with its judgement in hand, but always just around the next historical corner.

Interestingly enough, Terry Eagleton is obliged finally to gesture in the direction of just such a historicism — despite his repudiation of it — in his discussion of aesthetic value in the final chapter of Criticism and Ideology. I would like to dwell on Eagleton’s case for a moment because I think it
illustrates the way in which the problematic of Literature may subvert even the best materialist intent. For although Eagleton gestures towards historicism eventually, his initial formulation of the problem of value is substantially correct, and a major advance on previous statements of the issue. Recognising the relational nature of value, Eagleton proposes "a science of the ideological conditions of the production of value," and sees these as residing both in the text and in the ideological determinations which bear on the process of reading. It's easy to see how, by proceeding in this way, a materialist account of the ideological conditions of the production of value might be produced which would steer between the twin perils of historicism on the one hand (the construction of a universal valuing subject at the end of history) and immanence on the other (the view that value is guaranteed by internal textual properties). Two further conditions, however, would need to be met. First, such an analysis of the ideological conditions of the production of value should not restrict itself to the canonised tradition, but examine the ideological conditions of the production of value which are operative in the evaluation of different groups of texts by different groups of readers, including those outside the educational apparatus. Second, it would involve abandoning the supposition that the plurality of different reasons for valuing, which are produced in different ideologies of value, might be integrated in some way so as to yield a unified set of reasons for valuing, which are subscribed to in turn by a unified, valuing subject. In fact, Eagleton complies with neither of these conditions. It is not merely that his analysis remains resolutely within the confines of the Great Tradition. Far more pertinent is the fact that, having redefined the problem of value as a problem of "the ideological conditions of the production of value," he then (as if by way of addressing that problem) conflates it with another, quite separate issue: namely, the problem of relative autonomy, retrieved as the problem of the irreducible specificity of the aesthetic as a special and limiting category. It is in precisely this elision or slippage that the category of Literature, having been shown the front door, is smuggled in again through the back. When the chips are down, the problem of value for Eagleton is no more nor less than the problem of Literature. After all, he argues, there is a basis for value in the text or in specific texts - a basis for value which, furthermore, is no more nor less than the text's literariness construed (in this case) as those properties which distinguish "literary" texts from other forms of writing, namely, the ability to effect an internal fracturing of ideology.

The position that Eagleton finally adopts is thus paradoxical in the extreme. What he says, in effect, is that works conventionally valued have been valued rightly but for the wrong reasons. They have been valued rightly because (come the reckoning) they will be seen to have their value inscribed within them - and inscribed within them, Eagleton suggests (in an attempt to resolve the central problem of bourgeois aesthetics by means of Marxist principles of determination), by virtue of the conditions of their production. According to Eagleton, texts are valued not despite their historical limitations but by virtue of them - by virtue, that is, of those determinations which produce within them that rupturing, that internal troubling of ideology, which constitutes Eagleton's definition of the
"literary." Beneath the diverse ideologies of value, which overlay the text with diverse reasons for valuing, and which produce readers as valuing subjects of different sorts, there is ultimately (Eagleton argues) a residual core of real value in the text, soliciting partial recognition from those ideologically deluded subjects which constitute its historically variable and plural readers, until the day when its true nature will be recognised. "If Marxism has maintained a certain silence about aesthetic value," Eagleton finally confesses, "it may well be because the material conditions which would make such discourse fully possible do not as yet exist" (p. 187). It is here that a repressed historicism comes home to roost. Too clearly, the material conditions to which Eagleton alludes are those which, at the end of history, would produce a universal valuing subject, that is, a classless society.

To conclude on the question of value, then, I want to suggest that every materialist credo is undercut necessarily by the categories required to sustain a Marxist theory of value, chiefly the category of a universal valuing subject in its historicist variant. The real history of competing and contesting evaluations is discounted and nullified retrospectively by the impending integrative judgements of a post-historical valuing subject. The effect of such a theory is to exorcise conflict from the sphere of the aesthetic, even if only in the form of a visionary goal looming at the end of history. This is why I would suggest that Marxism's proper concern should be with the social contestation of value — with the social struggle which takes place over which texts should be valued, and why and how they are to be valued — rather than with the "conditions of the production of value," a formulation which reifies and fetishises value too readily.

III

Having tried to show why I think the problem of value is a mistaken one for Marxism, I now want to indicate the ways in which I think the centrality accorded the problem of value has seriously weakened Marxist study of popular fiction. To do so, it is necessary to take a slight detour in order to consider the way in which the problem of value has seriously distorted, to my mind, the way in which the issue of relative autonomy has been posed in Marxist literary criticism. For as a result of the legacy of questions of value and the concept of Literature (as a specialised and limiting category), Marxist literary criticism has regarded the question of relative autonomy not as a problem pertaining to the specificity of the determinations bearing on literary practice, but rather as concerning the limitations of any account which focuses on the analysis of determinations. It has not been viewed, that is to say, as the problem of how to articulate the relationships between those determinations which are specific to literature, and the more general economic, political and ideological determinations which Marxism sees as relevant to the analysis of any practice. Instead, it has been viewed as the problem of how to resolve the tension between any deterministic account of texts (which focuses on the analysis of conditions of production) and the apparently contradictory
evidence afforded by texts which continue to register their effects long after the originating conditions of their production have passed away. The result has been some highly curious formulations, in which the role allotted to the conditions of textual production has been not only shamefacedly curtailed but also, and at the same time, ludicrously extended. It has been curtailed by the acknowledgement that some texts break free from the conditions of their production in registering continuous and long term effects within a culture. But it has also been extended, since it has been argued (in a materialism bent back upon itself by the weight of an idealist problematic) that whether or not texts do thus break free from their conditions of production is — in that ever-impending last analysis — finally determined by those conditions of production themselves. That is Eagleton’s position: the ability of a text to achieve long term cultural effects (construed as equatable with its acquiring of value, equated in turn with its “literariness” or otherwise) is held to be explainable ultimately with reference to the originating conditions of production which determine a text’s relationship to ideology.

Such a materialism is purchased at a price. It results in a one-sided historical approach to the study of literary texts, based on the assumption that the history which flows into the text through the conditions of its production is the only one that counts, overriding or cancelling out in advance the history which might bear upon it in the course of its subsequent consumption. More importantly, perhaps, the reductionism which is avoided in one area of fiction (by virtue of such a position) is actively endorsed in others: for by the very force of the argument, non-canonical texts are collapsed back, necessarily, into the conditions of production from which they’re derived. In the case of popular fiction, it seems, culture works by reflex — not because detailed textual study supports this conclusion (such study has never been undertaken), but because it is necessitated by the attempt to render a materialist account of the specificity of Literature in terms of the uniqueness of its relations to the conditions of its production. The price of arguing a non-reductive position in relation to Literature, in other words, has been that those other areas of fiction which do not fall within the canonised tradition are of necessity viewed reductively.

The necessitarianism of this position is most clearly seen in the way in which Marxist critics have addressed the problem of the specificity of the literary, and the diverse mode of its relations to the ideological. No matter which school of Marxist criticism one takes (Lukácsian, Althusserian, the Frankfurt School), a substantially similar position is on offer. Literature, it is argued, is not ideology, and is relatively autonomous in relation to it, whereas popular fiction is nothing but ideology. Literature is said to rise above ideology, in some way, either because of its social typicality or the depth of its historical penetration (Lukács’ position), or because it consists of a specific set of formal operations upon ideology (the view of Althusser and Eagleton). But popular fiction (mass fiction, or whatever it’s called) is viewed simply as a reflection or formulaic reproduction of the ideology on which it is dependent, and which — allegedly — it simply passes on.
Popular literature, as Roger Bromley has recently put it, "is one among many of the material forms which ideology takes (or through which it is mediated) under capitalism, and is an instance of its social production through the medium of writing." The difficulties with such formulations are numerous. It simply isn't possible to contend (to take Althusser's formulation) that it is only in the case of "truly authentic art" — and not at all in the case of "average or mediocre works" — that a distance is opened up between the literary and the ideological. One finds quite an elaborate play with dominant forms of narrative ideology, for example, in many types of detective novel, whereas the detective film (as Stephen Neale has put it) "dramatises the significational process itself as its fundamental problem." More generally, as even the most casual acquaintance with popular television would affirm, the entire field of popular fiction is replete with parodic forms in which quite a lot of distancing, alluding, foregrounding and so on takes place. But leaving aside such empirical difficulties, the very attempt to found a distinction between Literature and popular fiction — such that one is differentiated from and the other flattened against ideology — results in a crucial theoretical inconsistency: the effectiveness granted in one area of fiction to formal and aesthetic strategies (in relation to ideological categories) is withheld from often not dissimilar strategies in other areas of fiction. At best, such a formulation is illogical. Any area of writing in which fictional devices and strategies are in evidence must in some way or other effect a specific production of the ideological discourses contained within it. If the concept of fiction is to retain any usefulness as a differentiating term, it cannot be equated simply with ideologies; nor, if the logic of reflection-theory is considered faulty elsewhere, can it be construed as a reflection or formulaic reproduction of such ideologies. What is worse, however, is that such a construction of popular texts is self-fulfilling, the product of a rift in the critical strategy of Marxism which guarantees that popular texts be viewed reductively.

Ultimately, Marxism's proffered equation of popular fiction with ideology is merely tautologous: it is entailed necessarily by the way in which the relations between literature, science (usually equated, in this context, with Marxism) and ideology have already been constituted (I'm thinking particularly here of the formulations in Althusser's work; but it's true also of Lukács). Once literature has been distinguished from ideology, and once both have been distinguished from science (that is, Marxism) in the formulation of classical Marxism's favoured art of the superstructure, there is quite simply nowhere else to put popular fiction except in the ideological, which does not call into question the category of Literature and the terms in which it has been distinguished from science and ideology. Theoretically, in other words, Marxists have been so constrained as to have no option but to argue, time and time again, that since popular fiction is neither Marxism (because it is not a scientific analysis of social relationships) nor Literature (since it does not have the critical edge of Literature, however this may be defined) then it must be ideology: there's nowhere else to put it.

Politically, of course, the effects of this approach are most damaging,
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for its *en bloc* categorisation of popular fiction as a sphere of writing which contributes to the reproduction of dominant ideological formations entails that it be abandoned as a field of struggle. The only relation of political calculation permitted by such an approach is that of struggling *against* popular fiction (by unmasking it and opposing it either the knowledge of Marxism or the critical insights of Literature); there is no strategy for struggling *within* it. It is necessary to insist, therefore, in opposition to the essentialism which has blighted much Marxist discussion of the subject, that conflict and struggle take place *within* the different regions and spheres of the superstructure, and not just between them. To beat popular fiction over the head with the three volumes of *Das Kapital* is politically beside the point. What is needed are terms of theorisation which will enable writers and critics to intervene, in a strategically calculated way, in the processes of popular reading and writing.

IV

My main purpose so far has been to suggest that the concept of Literature has intruded an idealist dimension into the structure of Marxist critical debates. I want now to argue that the proper materialist concerns of Marxist criticism can be realised only if questions concerning the determination and the effects of literary forms (and the articulation of the relations between them) are put in a way that stands to one side of the conventional ordering of the relations between texts implied in the concept of Literature. In doing so, I want also to outline, however tentatively, the part that the study of popular fiction might play in the development of a critical strategy which aims at by-passing current categories. Before doing so, however, some remarks on the spirit in which such an enterprise should be undertaken are called for, since there's a sense in which simply to speak of "popular fiction" is to sell the pass from the outset with respect to the organisation of relations between texts. No matter how much one might wish to contest the assumption that the concept of Literature is what organises the internal economy of writing, the mere use of a term such as "popular fiction" — inherited from the vocabulary of bourgeois criticism — keeps alive (in the very process of contesting it) the assumption that a key distinction in the sphere of writing is indeed the one between Literature and popular fiction.

The problem I'm pursuing here is one which Derrida has made familiar. It's that of "the status of a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself." One has to use the vocabulary of existing criticism; but one can still be aware of using it to seek terms beyond it. I use the term "popular fiction," then, merely for reasons of economy in the absence of a better alternative; and I mean by it simply that massive, exceedingly heterogeneous body of texts which is defined conventionally as a residue in relation to Literature. Strategically, however, the response required by the marginalisation of this area of texts is not simply the development of it as
an area of study if, as a result, it continues to be regarded as a separate domain, a particular enclave of fiction whose determining characteristics are still defined negatively in relation to the focal point of reference supplied by the concept of Literature. That way, it will remain a margin, albeit a better known one. Instead, it's necessary to dispute the cartography of the field by developing and deploying theoretical strategies that will question our sense of where the centre is and what the margins are. It's possible to distinguish two levels of study at which such strategies might be developed.

First, and most obviously, the critical and institutional procedures which bear upon the production and reproduction of the distinction between Literature and popular fiction need to be interrogated. Work in this area is already well under way, particularly on connections between the problematic of Literature and the development of universal schooling and literacy (I'm thinking especially of the work of Renée Balibar). What I want to focus on here, however, is the contribution which the study of specifically popular texts may make to such a strategy of "by-passing the categories." It's noticeable that virtually all established approaches to the study of popular fiction have shared a common absence — the absence of any serious consideration of the specific forms of writing associated with popular texts. These are either neglected in favour of generic or sociological analysis, or pushed to one side and ignored when critics treat them as mere surface impediments which get in the way of their quests for historical evidence, mythic or linguistic structures, universal patterns of narrative, ideology, inferior or harmful values, or whatever. In the domain of popular writing, the specific properties of the writing are not looked at but always looked through, in marked contradistinction to the ways in which the tradition of Literature has been studied.

Practically speaking, one implication of this is that conventional priorities need to be challenged by the production of a developing body of criticism which focuses on the specifically formal properties of different types of popular fiction, and which does so in a detailed rather than in a generalised way — at the level of specific texts, that is, rather than at the level of genre or period studies. But clearly there's a danger here — the danger of merely aestheticising a selection of popular texts and thus producing a "little tradition" beneath the Great Tradition. Any strategy which compounded the tyranny of Literature by producing, so to speak, a new category of cultural illiterates would clearly be anything but progressive. Indeed, it would merely do criticism's dirty work for it in extending the range of its repressive effects. There's also the danger that such a strategy, pursued in isolation, might result in a theory of popular fiction constructed merely alongside a theory of Literature, without in any sense disturbing the conventional ordering of relations between the two.

In order to resolve both difficulties, I think that the issue of relative autonomy as it has been posed in relation to literary practice needs to be radically rethought. The phrase "relative autonomy" always presupposes an answer to the question. "Relatively autonomous to what?" Usually, answers to this question have been conceived in terms of levels, so that we
get such formulations as the relative autonomy of the instance Literature in relation to ideology, and of both in relation to the economy or politics. Classically, the problem of instances or levels has been retrieved as one of categories, so that the problem of the relative autonomy of the instance Literature in relation to ideology becomes that of the relative autonomy of the category Literature in relation to the category Ideology. I have already mentioned the inconsistencies which result from this, especially as they affect the way popular texts are viewed. A more fundamental problem, however, is that the very attempt to conceive the internal economy of the superstructure as a set of relations between abstract and static categories needs to be questioned, given that (politically speaking) it is not the analytic separation of the various elements of the superstructure that needs to be focussed, but the diverse and historically specific modes of its articulation. What I mean by this is that the problem of relative autonomy should not be viewed as if it concerned merely the relations between two categories — Literature and Ideology — definable in abstract terms. Rather, it should be regarded as concerning the diverse and specific forms of the play and interaction between two spheres of the ideological: the discursive (consisting of those discourses which produce imaginary orderings of the relations of men and women to one another, to the conditions of their social existence, and to their history) and the fictional (a specific region of ideology which alludes to the discursive and recombines its elements by means of specific formal devices). To construct a rigid categorial distinction between these two spheres of the ideological is misleading, for the precise mode of their articulation varies historically. Furthermore, it is politically beside the point: the effects of literature (I’m speaking of literature now as the general category of written fiction) are located not in its separateness from the discursive region of ideology, but in the diverse ways in which literary practices connect with that region.

A mere formalism in response to these questions, however, is inadequate. It’s not enough to show, at the level of processes discernible within the texts, that practices of writing can be distinguished from one another in terms of the differing and specific ways in which they recombine elements of the ideological by means of formal strategies peculiar to them. True, to construct the relations of similarity and difference which traverse the sphere of writing in accordance with principles and procedures of this kind would be a considerable advance on the only available alternative, which is to designate it as either popular or middle-brow or Literature. But it would still stop short before the point at which analysis can engage concretely with the political — the point at which the articulation of the ideological elements contained in the text connects with those in the social formation at large. It is precisely here, at the interface between the formation of subjects within texts, and the diverse and plural formation of subjects outside them — not in ideology in Althusser’s sense, but within the specific articulations of ideologies which comprise specific moments of hegemony — that the effects of literary texts are located. In order to engage with such issues the very notion of a textual analysis which attends solely to the internal workings of the text needs to be jettisoned. In its place is needed an approach that will reinscribe the text in (and theorise its action
in relation to) the relations of articulation which constitute specific moments or types of hegemony. Posed in this way, the question of relative autonomy no longer concerns the specificity of either determinations or effects, nor is it a question of defining one category in relation to another. It is rather a question of articulation: it concerns the diverse ways in which different practices of writing are bound into the struggle for hegemony, and imbricated with other regions of ideological struggle.

**DISCUSSION**

**Question:** What justification do you think there is for retaining the category of fiction?

Bennett: I think it's a term that can be used without implying distinctions of value that are contestable for reasons I've outlined. Fiction, in this sense, exists as an area of practice distinguishable from other types of signifying practice — news, current affairs, historical writing, philosophical writing, and so on — by the sets of devices, narrative structures and conventions which mark it off as giving rise to a particular, fictive effect. That doesn't give you a watertight boundary, I know; but still, I think it's a usable distinction.

You seem to be retaining the concept of literature and arguing for situating a struggle there. But isn't culture the best concept through which to situate such a struggle, inasmuch as it dissolves the distinction between print and other media and allows you to step aside from the contentious problems associated with such terms as "popular literature"?

Certainly, when I was speaking of popular fiction, the points I made would apply just as well to television and film even though I was more particularly concerned with written forms of popular fiction. In that sense, fiction is itself a category that cuts across different forms of expression, the various artistic media, and is preferable to "culture," which (at least in the usages with which I'm familiar) gives rise to other problems, inasmuch as its ambit is wider than the whole domain of textual practices. You then have to introduce into the analysis that whole complex tradition, from Williams onwards, which is concerned with the study of lived cultures, subcultures and the rest, and the anthropological and historical concerns that have been developed in relation to these — and I was trying to avoid that.

The role of ideology is fairly important in what you were saying, and you also referred to science. I have a good deal of difficulty in distinguishing just what ideology and science are supposed to imply. I wonder if you could indicate what they are and the differences between them.

I'm not too sure about that either. I am unhappy with the attempt, any attempt, to distinguish between ideology and science in those black and white terms, because — as I think Althusser does — one ultimately ends up
with the proposition that one is false and one is true. That’s a crude summary of a complicated debate; but I think that, ultimately, Althusser is pushed to that position. I would prefer to define ideology in Althusser’s terms (but if possible, without the epistemological ballast) as consisting of those sets of representations which produce imaginary subject positions. Science would then be distinguishable from ideology as a form of discourse. Again, Althusser is helpful here in arguing that science is decentered, not in the sense that it doesn’t have a subject — some forms of science do have a subject at their centre — but in the sense that sciences don’t produce imaginary subject positions; they produce one as a subject of knowledge, of the knowledge which the discourse of that science offers. So the distinction, as I see it, is between different modes of working upon consciousness (and of organising consciousness) rather than between truth and falsehood.

My question perhaps relates to the former one, and has to do with the notion of the ideological. While the thrust of your talk has been to displace a particular kind of impulse in Marxist criticism, it seems to me that a problem still remains. At one point, you talked about the necessity to shift the struggle against popular fiction on to different terrain, which would make it a struggle within the arena of popular fiction, and I guess that what is meant by that would have to do partly with the way those two spheres of the ideological which you demarcated — the discursive and the fictional — link together. To what extent does in fact displace a notion of the ideological as a kind of given category against which popular fiction is defined? I’m not sure that one shifts the terrain of the object which is constituted in that way.

The object ideology? That’s partly true I think. What I was after there was a two-fold set of problems. The first is that if one construes the business of criticism as that of regulating the relations between reader and text (and views the task of Marxist criticism accordingly as to politicise those relations) the sets of text-reader relations that Marxism has addressed itself to have been largely those constituted in relation to the readers of canonised texts. It has sought to politicise those relations, just as (by and large) the forms of interventionist writing strategies produced from or supported by Marxist critical debates are addressed to subjects whose formation is within Literature. The Marxist tradition has thus yielded a set of strategies to be debated in and around the area of “serious” writings. What has not been addressed (or has gone by default) is the assumption that, within popular fiction, all is lost from the outset — that what is going on there is simply a reproduction of ideology, a passing on of it, which produces a simple politics of unmasking and opposition. I think that’s a mistake, and for two reasons. First, it’s simply idealist in the extreme to suppose that the majority of readers are formed within the institutions of Literature, and that the discursive conditions which must be met to intervene in such relations of reading are the same as those which obtain in relation to readers who have not been so formed. That’s one point: that simply to intervene in the area through a strategy of unmasking and opposing the ideologies which allegedly are contained in popular
fiction is an exceedingly hazardous one, because it means that the only strategy available to you is to bombard the subject you’re addressing. The second point is that one can’t get a handle on the nature of the ideological processes at work in popular texts simply by regarding them as reproductions of ideologies. On looking at such texts one finds in play a relationship to the ideological discourses (quite complicated ones) established within them, a relationship effected by the specific formal, narrative devices and strategies which are mobilised in popular fiction. Unless one can understand the ways in which that actually constitutes a fictive recombination of ideological elements, then one doesn’t have the sort of knowledge which can guide a strategy either for criticism or for practice in the area of popular fiction. Where that gets condensed, I think, is in a lot of debates about realism versus avant-gardism, because such debates are posed with a remarkable lack of clarity about which category of readers is being addressed.

Yes, I take your point exactly. I have a lot of sympathy with the way your argument is going against a certain tyranny. But it seems to me that there’s still a problem, precisely where you say it’s necessary to reconstitute the ideological, in that the ideological still remains a privileged area.

I don’t see why that’s the case. What I offered was a definition of the ideological as a set of discourses which produce imaginary subject positions. It’s privileged in relation to fiction, in the sense that fiction is seen as operating a work upon such ideological discourses, and in the sense that ideological discourses are not seen to operate in a similar way in relation to fiction.

By assumption then, fiction becomes a privileged domain of the ideological?

I certainly wouldn’t want to argue that. I don’t think it is a privileged domain; that’s the position I think you end up with if you follow Althusser and Eagleton — quite a conventional position, really, with literature as handmaiden to science in a struggle against ideology. I merely want to argue the difference between ideology and fiction; and I don’t see why, to do that, it’s necessary to privilege one in relation to the other, and to give one either the first or the last word. Certainly, in terms of the relations between fiction and ideology, fiction does not have the last word; that’s what all the struggles in the field of criticism are about.

The Open University

Tony Bennett

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2 Lucien Goldmann, The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal
Marxism and Popular Fiction