Marxism after Structuralism

This paper, which focuses on two recent books of Marxist literary theory, Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* and Terry Eagleton's *Walter Benjamin, or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, continues some of the themes of a previous article on "Structuralist Marxism." In that piece I was mainly interested in exploring some of the limits of Althusserian structuralism; here I want to concentrate on the impact on Marxism of poststructuralist theory. The schematic opposition thus set up between structuralism and whatever comes "after" it is of course notoriously difficult, both because of its enclosure of "structuralism" as a neatly delimited "before" and because it fails to differentiate what is "after" from what is "within" but "against" and from what is simply "other." Like the "before-and-after" of a whole genre of advertisements, the concept of poststructuralism has mainly a publicity value unless and until we're sure what structuralism itself was.

One way of defining its limits might be in terms of a certain positivism that accompanied the adoption of epistemological models from mathematics and the natural sciences. Philip Lewis has characterised this aspect of structuralism as "a reinforced form of critical mastery, a kind of technological control over texts, that understands — makes them intelligible, representable — as manifestations of a logical structure." Its weakness is its inability to conceptualise the multiple frames within which structure is constituted. But to formulate this criticism is still to adopt a structuralist perspective in so far as the latter is "no longer directly concerned with knowledge or truth per se" but with the conditions of possibility of the production of meaning (p.13). The difference that works itself out within structuralism refers above all to these conditions, and in particular to the status of the analytic metadiscourse. This is the paradox that confronts the discourse of deconstruction: that it is forced to recognize the inability of language to ground itself, and forced to say so in language (as though it were grounded and authorised) (Lewis, 18). Thus late structuralism, focusing on the politics of its own critical mastery, repeatedly rejects the possibility of a beginning that would be given by a fixed relation of authority between object discourse and metadiscourse: no signifier without a signified, but no signified that cannot in its turn function as a signifier; no interpretation without a text that is itself an interpretation, a moment in an endless intertextual chain; no rhetoric without the possibility of literality, but no such thing as the literal; no identity that is not always preceded by otherness and difference. The structuralist concept of signifying system radically undermines the traditional dichotomised categories of being and representation, object and subject — and the relations of priority or hierarchy between them — insofar as being must be thought as deferred or mediated or even constituted by structures which are purely relational and differential; and representation must be thought not as the echoing of a primal presence nor as the manifestation of an
origininary act of consciousness but as a construct of the signifying chain. There is no starting point, no point of metadiscursive authority (either the Real or Truth) which is not already caught within the play of signifying codes.

In this rejection of an order of ontological priority, in its temporalisation of the spatial, and in its rounding on its own enunciative positions, deconstruction is effectively (if these things can be quantified) more dialectical than any current Marxist theory. But such a statement then needs to be moderated in two ways: first, the concept of “dialectic” would be rejected by most poststructuralist writers as being a form of that logic of identity which reduces otherness to sameness in the very process of recognising and incorporating the Other; second, the politics of deconstruction tends to be a version of Nietzschean romanticism, and so to refuse, finally, the possibility both of situating itself in relation to definite social determinations and of taking part in concerted action to change them.

Hence the provocation to Marxism. Jameson’s and Eagleton’s books are both preoccupied with it, directly or indirectly; both defend Marxist theory by means of a partial identification with the aggressor. The task is in many ways easier for Jameson, who has recourse to a Hegelian tradition capable of raiding, embracing, and subsuming a wide range of other theoretical positions. Indeed, this is built into the project: the concept that comes closest to defining his method — “metacommentary” — emphasises that Jameson’s path is not that of the “object,” “the historical origins of the things themselves,” but that of the “subject,” “that more intangible historicity of the concepts and categories by which we attempt to understand those things” (Jameson, 9). The opposition is a sleight of hand, of course, that affirms by presupposing the possibility of the first alternative. But the choice of the second path allows him to take as his object “less the text itself than the interpretations through which we attempt to confront and to appropriate it. Interpretation is here construed as an essentially allegorical act, which consists in rewriting a given text in terms of a particular interpretive master code” (9-10). Instead of naively adding its reading to the general stock of readings, instead of subjecting the text to an allegorising reduction of one narrative line to another which is taken to be “the ultimate hidden or unconscious meaning of the first one” (22), a Marxist hermeneutic will question the function of the text in relation to its interpretations. Its concern will be with the mediations of the text rather than with its inherent sense.

From this position Jameson suggests that each “local” interpretative system values a particular “master code,” and that these valorisations are historically explicable (they can be subordinated to the narrative master code of History). Thus structuralism tends to take language as its key category; existentialism, the concepts of anxiety and the fear of freedom; phenomenology, the experience and themes of temporality; psychoanalysis, the dynamics of sexuality; and the amorphous ethical criticism which is the untheorised mainstay of current institutional
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practice relies upon a humanist ideology and its attendant categories of self, identity, and so on. Despite their heterogeneity, all of these categories can be traced back to, and are the expression of, a real historical experience. The master code of psychoanalysis, for example, is to be situated not merely in terms of the institution of the nuclear family but, more importantly, in terms of a process of “psychic fragmentation since the beginnings of capitalism, with its systematic quantification and rationalization of experience, its instrumental reorganization of the subject just as much as of the outside world” (62): that is, in terms of a dynamic that Weber termed rationalisation and that Lukács translated into the concept of reification. The nature of the subject itself has changed, and the psychoanalytic revolution, ultimately epiphenomenal, reflects this change on another plane. In the same way, the attention paid by structuralism to the mediating codes of language “is at one with [language’s] structural abstraction from concrete experience, with its hypostasis as an autonomous object, power, or activity” (63). It’s the category of “(concrete) experience” that stands out in this context: everything depends upon its unproblematic acceptability, and yet it is posited as being prior to symbolic codes or the structure of the psyche. This is a difficult proposition that is never properly thematised.

On one level this strategy represents no more than a sophistication of the traditional Marxist tropology (leaving intact the structure of ontological opposition whilst complicating the forms of passage between the primary and derived poles). But it also has real advantages. Stylistically it generates structures of digression and incorporation similar to what Jameson once described as Adorno’s use of the footnote as a “lyrical form” allowing him “a momentary release from the inescrutable logic of the material under study in the main text, permitting him to shift to other dimensions, to the infrastructure as well as to the wider horizons of historical speculation.”4 Jameson’s cumulative, integrative sentences allusively build up totalities out of multifarious discursive material, displaying in the process the breadth and generosity of his learning. And in part what is at issue here—in the performance as well as methodologically—is the category of totality. The struggle is most centrally worked out during the course of an attempted recuperation of Althusser.

Jameson follows Althusser in isolating three possible models of effectiveness: those of mechanical, expressive, and structural causality. For Althusser these are mutually exclusive categories of social totality, forms of explanation of the linkage between instances of the social whole. What Jameson does is provisionally refuse any single general form of totality and so situate these models of causality as categories with a local and historical validity. Thus the central category of expressive causality (which he assimilates to the concept of allegory) is located “within the object”: expressive or “allegorical” interpretation has become inscribed “in the texts as well as in our thinking about them” (34), and is to that extent a necessary tool. Paradoxically, then, Jameson has shifted from the path of the subject to the path of the object. The historical objectivity of structure predetermines the appropriate categories of its representation.
From this rewriting (which is intended to redeem not only an expressive model of interpretation but also the narrative unities of historicism) Jameson moves to put Althusser's concept of structural causality to uncustomed work salvaging the objectivity of History (or rather its simultaneous externality and internality to the textual). What is problematic in Althusser's "antiteleological formula for history" (34) is that "it can readily be assimilated to the polemic themes of a host of contemporary post-structuralisms and post-Marxisms, for which History, in the bad sense — the reference to a 'context' or a 'ground,' an external real world of some kind, the reference, in other words, to the much maligned 'referent' itself — is simply one more text among others" (35). Against such an assimilation — but also in contrast to his own condemnation, in The Prison-House of Language, of the distinction between the concrete and the concrete-in-thought as "essentially a replay of the Kantian dilemma of the unknowability of the thing-in-itself" — Jameson now welds together two seemingly incompatible propositions in a "revised formulation" of Althusser's thesis: on the one hand there is an insistence "that history is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise"; on the other the concession "that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself [in Lacan's sense] necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious" (35). Here the Spinozan concept of an "absent cause" does double duty: Jameson takes it to be equivalent to the hors-texte of History, whereas Althusser uses it rather to designate the mode of existence of structure within the concept of structural causality. The semantic slide allows the question of History to become (again) the question of totality.

In a properly (and rare) political account of Althusser's stress on the "relative autonomy" of levels in the social formation, Jameson recognises (what E.P. Thompson, for one, wilfully distorts) that this "may now be understood as a coded battle waged within the framework of the French Communist Party against Stalinism" (37), where the concept of expressive causality stands for that "productionist ideology of Soviet Marxism" (37) according to which social relations constitute the more or less direct expression, the unilinear consequence, of the forces of production (so that changes in the form and the form of ownership of the latter will not only produce, but will guarantee the real existence of, a fully socialist society). The effect of Althusser's argument is to theorise social instances (the State, for example, or the institution of literature) as the sites of specific and contradictory political practices, rather than as the simple reproductions of a single central instance. The price paid for this is the possibility of dropping the "relative" from in front of "autonomy," failing to theorise the network of determinations of any level or instance (most notoriously that of Theory). But the conception of such a network is of course ultimately the point of Althusser's work. By the notion of semi-autonomy he "means to underscore some ultimate structural interdependency of the levels, but . . . he grasps this interdependency in terms of a mediation that passes through the structure, rather than a more immediate mediation in which one level folds into another directly" (41). His real object of attack is...
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"unreflected immediacy" or the immediate identities of homology (here Goldmann is thrown to the wolves), and it thus becomes apparent that his "polemic target is at one with that of Hegel" (41). In a very broad sense this may be true, but the proposition writes out some not insubstantial differences.

From another direction, finally, Althusser is wheeled in to do battle against the poststructuralist problematisation of the concept of totality. Here again, and characteristically, Jameson begins with a celebration of the negative, or the adversary position. Part of what is usually suggested by the concept of totality is an aesthetic of organic form, whereas the concept of structural causality would stress that "the appropriate object of study emerges only when the appearances of formal unification is unmasked as a failure or an ideological mirage," and it would then stage this object "as an interference between levels, as a subversion of one level by another" (56). Nevertheless, the priority granted in Althusserian theory to the concept of mode of production means that the "current post-structural celebration of discontinuity and heterogeneity is therefore only an initial moment in Althusserian exegesis, which then requires the fragments, the incomparable levels, the heterogeneous impulses, of the text to be once again related, but in the mode of structural difference and determinate contradiction" (56).

Many of the book's major themes are announced in this confrontation. Its limits may be suggested by Eagleton's remark that "the passage through and beyond Althusser is never really effected," that Jameson has never urgently felt the need to come to terms with the most radical aspects of Althusser's challenge to the humanist and historicist traditions in Marxism. Thus it is that the hermeneutic described as Althusser's (a progression from disruption to closure, from the text to its encompassing horizons) in fact resembles rather more closely Jameson's own practice. This practice is codified in the long opening essay "On Interpretation." To put it very schematically: Jameson suggests an interpretative progression passing through three concentric frameworks or horizons, modelled on those of patristic exegesis and reproducing the effects of the "libidinal apparatus" by which the text generates different levels of ideological investment. The first phase (the terminological influence of Frye is not accidental) governs the construction of the text within the horizon of "political history, in the narrow sense of punctual event and a chronicle-like sequence of happenings in time" (75); here the object of analysis coincides more or less with the individual work, understood as a strategic act within this political arena. The second phase covers the more broadly extended tensions of the class struggle, and the object of analysis is now "reconstituted in the form of the great collective and class discourse of which a text is little more than an individual parole or utterance." Jameson calls this object of study "the ideologue, that is, the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes" (76); and it is worth noting that, insofar as these discourses are apparently internally homogeneous, we are concerned at this level not with the play of
heterogeneous discourses within the text but with the expressive function of the text in the play of class ideologies. The third framework is that "of history now conceived in its vastest sense of the sequence of modes of production and the succession and destiny of the various human social formations" (75). Within this ultimate horizon texts are read in terms of "the ideology of form, that is, the symbolic messages transmitted to us by the coexistence of various sign systems which are themselves traces or anticipations of modes of production" (76).

The concept of genre, I think, would constitute one such sign system; and it is to an analysis of the romance genre that the brilliant second chapter, "Magical Narratives," is dedicated. The reasons for the decision to concentrate on romance can be found in the phrase I last quoted: "traces or anticipations of modes of production" (76). If the Marxist vision of history is marked by its "salvational or redemptive perspective of some secure future" (103), then its usual "negative" hermeneutic (which discovers the "traces" of violence and oppression in cultural artefacts) must be supplemented by a "positive" hermeneutic directed towards that imagery of libidinal energy which prefigures "the renewed organic identity of associative or collective life" (74). Such a hermeneutic, which is something like "a generalization of Durkheim's theory of religion to cultural production as a whole" (292), sets against the "instrumental" or "functional" forms of analysis of Jameson's second phase a "communal" and "anticipatory" methodology (296). Its strength lies perhaps in its ability to explore the forms of gratification offered by even the most repressive ideologies. But for all the passion of Jameson's commitment to the Utopian impulse, there seem to me good grounds for the reserve with which it is usually treated. The concept through which Jameson attempts to think the collective projection of desire is that of the Asiatic mode of production, with its consolidation of a dispersed collective unity in the image of the body of the despot (295). But even if we concede the validity of this concept, what Jameson glosses over is precisely its historical specificity. This strategy is first to postulate, on the basis of a rather dubious passage in the Grundrisse, a set of "cultural fantasies which cluster around the notion of 'Oriental despotism' in the political unconscious" (295, n. 16), and then anachronistically to project these fantasies as a general type of that fusion of desire with power which the concept of "political unconscious" never in fact adequately theorises. Granted, revolutionary (and counterrevolutionary) activity channels desire; but in a culture already saturated with the falsely Utopian, can the dialectical extraction of revolutionary hope from even the most degraded ideologies be anything other than a blunting of Marxism's negative, suspicious, critical force? To do him justice, Jameson is fully aware of the problem, and his discussion of the methodological balancing of "ideology" with "utopia" returns finally to the dark side of Benjamin's thesis on cultural transmission, "reasserting the undiminished power of ideological distortion that persists even within the restored Utopian meaning of cultural artifacts, and reminding us that within the symbolic power of art and culture the will to domination perseveres intact" (299).
A similar use of pre-capitalist models informs Jameson's view of the relation between text and ideology. The unity of the times of "trace" and "anticipation" is grounded in the Lévi-Straussian notion that texts (all texts, with varying degrees of success) work as "the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction" (77); they work with ideology (as "anticipation") to overcome the traces of the real sedimented within the text as a contradictory formal patterning. The model is derived from the study of tribal societies; but it must a fortiori be true, Jameson argues, of the much more contradictory class societies of the capitalist era. The conception of literary production generated from this model is explicitly directed against that of modernism: for the "formal history" of successive breaks or deviations from a constantly re-established norm, Jameson substitutes the notion of stylistic production as "a projected solution, on the aesthetic or imaginary level, to a genuinely contradictory situation in the concrete world of everyday social life" (225). The criteria of analysis thus cease to be immanent to the literary text or system; the yardstick is now the real itself, external and prior to the text even if it is visible and knowable only as formal structure. "Style" is thus still epiphenomenal and incapable of producing true cognition. It works at "the aesthetic or imaginary level"; the two are equivalent, and "imaginary" presumably carries at least in part its Lacanian overtones. And yet Jameson wants to have it both ways: what the text responds to is both this concrete reality of social contradiction and the "symptomatic expression and conceptual reflex" (83) of this reality, taking the form of a "subtext" which "is not immediately present as such, not some common-sense external reality, nor even the conventional narratives of 'history manuals, but rather must itself always be (re)constructed after the fact" (81). This distinction between two ontological levels of contradiction then makes it possible for Jameson to use a Greimasian semiotics of binary opposition to construct the system of ideological closure which the text works and transforms. The active and critical function of literary discourse is thereby redeemed, but at the expense, I think, of contradicting the initial model of imaginary (that is, ideological), resolution.

What is at issue here — if I may worry at the problem a little longer — is the ontological distinction between levels of the real, and the forms of mediation between them. Jameson's formulations are consistently double-edged. On the one hand the literary text is an active production of that history to which it is a reaction: "It articulates its own situation and textualizes it, thereby encouraging and perpetuating the illusion that the situation itself did not exist before it, that there is nothing but a text" (82). This illusion conceals the reality that history "is not a text, for it is fundamentally non-narrative and nonrepresentational" (82). History "is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis" (102). But then again what can be added "is the proviso that history is inaccessible to us except in textual form, or in other words, that it can be approached only by way of prior (re)textualisation" (82). This is surely a case of having one's referent and eating it too. If history is accessible only through discursive or epistemological categories, is there not a real sense in which it therefore has only a discursive existence?
In which its very otherness, its excess over the textual, is still a textual construct? Can real effects on real bodies be said to be the effects of abstract categories such as History or the Real? But the really important question, I think, is why there should be any necessity for Marxism to ground its politics in an appeal to a transcendental realm prior to any mediation, an appeal to the unifying cause behind the effects of power it deals with. In Jameson’s case there seem to be two reasons for this (both ultimately a function of his Hegelian location of structure in the real). The first is that in the final analysis he believes in the recoverability of the “absent cause” (so that it is in fact not properly absent but rather a lost or concealed presence). Thus the function of the concept of a political unconscious is said to lie “in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative, in restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history” (20). This reality is, surprisingly, defined not as that of class struggle, but, in purely humanist terms, as “the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity” (19); and within the framework of this totalisation of antagonistic social classes into a homogeneous human race, the unitary “human adventure” must then be “retold within the unity of a single great collective story” (19).

The second reason for this appeal is that, for all his insistence on mediation, Jameson characteristically conflates the real object with the object of knowledge. Discursive categories are not so much the products of institutional practices functionally interrelated with other social realms as they are effects of the structure of that reality which they thematise and put into circulation. Thus “the possibility of performing . . . a conceptual abstraction subjectively is dependent on the preliminary objective realization of such a process within the raw materials or objects of study. We can think abstractly about the world only to the degree to which the world itself has already become abstract” (66). This then affects the category of mediation insofar as it necessarily presupposes a structure of binary opposition in which one pole is given ontological priority over the other—precisely the structure that Derrida identifies as characteristic of metaphysical thinking. Certainly Jameson insists that a model based on isomorphism between levels needs to be replaced by “a hierarchical model in which the various levels stand in determinate relations of domination or subordination to one another” and by the categories of “production, projection, compensation, repression, displacement, and the like” (44); and certainly he refuses flatly to affirm that “superstructural phenomena, are mere reflexes, epiphenomenal projections of infrastructural realities” (42). Nevertheless “at some level this is certainly true, and modernism and reification are parts of the same immense process which expresses the contradictory inner logic and dynamics of late capitalism” (42).

The book’s major development of a practice of mediation is found in the chapter on Conrad’s Lord Jim, certainly one of the finest things Jameson has ever done. The central operation is described as “the invention of an analytic terminology or code which can be applied equally to two or more structurally distinct objects or sectors of being” (225). The metalanguage employed should be one that is capable of respecting the
relative autonomy of the multiple realms to which it is applied (here they are Conrad's style, impressionism painting, and "the organization and experience of daily life during the imperialist heyday of industrial capitalism" [226]), and yet must be capable of restoring "at least methodologically, the lost unity of social life" [226]. At some level distinct social instances can be reduced to an identity which is not that of a differential totality or, in Foucault's phrase, a "system of dispersion." Any one of a number of mediating codes could have been chosen, including "social class, mode of production, the alienation of labor, commodification, the various ideologies of Otherness (sex or race), and political domination" [226]. The one Jameson chooses to work with (almost arbitrarily, it would — wrongly — seem) is reification or rationalisation. The concept is predicated on a notion of the organic unity of pre-capitalist social forms and modes of experience, and then the disintegration or fragmentation of these traditional solidarities in a process of quantification and (re)functionalisation. Thus, to take one of Jameson's privileged instances, the faculty of sight becomes in the capitalist period a relatively separate and specialised activity, and it thereby "acquires new objects that are themselves the products of a process of abstraction and rationalisation which strips the experience of the concrete of such attributes as color, spatial depth, texture, and the like, which in their turn undergo reification" (63). This is hardly open to falsification; but what I want to stress here is the corollary Jameson draws from it: that the "history of forms evidently reflects this process" (63). Impressionism, for example, is discussed not in terms of the development of painterly conventions, the relative autonomy of a practice, but in terms of its direct intervention in the process of perception, its offer of "the exercise of perception and the perceptual recombination of sense data as an end in itself" (23). The mediation of the system of painting is simply ignored. Similarly, changes in the status of the subject can be read off more or less directly from the process of reification (153-54), and new monadic forms of the ego in turn give rise to specific narrative devices: to the Jamesian codification of point of view, for instance, which, coming into being "as a protest and a defence against reification, ends up furnishing a powerful ideological instrument in the perpetuation of an increasingly subjectivized and psychologized world" (221). In Conrad's hands point of view tends to become dissociated from the expressive categories of "consciousness" and "psychology" (224) and develop into a practice of écriture, an exercise of style which is allied on the one hand to impressionism and on the other to positivist doctrines of perception. What unites all these things is a historical "autonomization of the quantifying functions" which "permits an immense leap in the production of new kinds of formalization and is the precondition for the coming into existence of hitherto unimaginable levels of abstraction" (228), particularly in relation to the senses themselves. The structure of capitalist production, that is to say, produces deep-structural categories which shape the organisation of lived experience; and modernist art functions as both a realisation of these categories and, at the same time, a restoration of the archaic and libidinal elements which have been stripped
away. But the price Jameson pays for this establishment of a dialectically expressive and reactive identity between disparate realms is a blurring of the specific differences between them. Consider the use of the concept of “abstraction” in this passage:

The increasing abstraction of visual art thus proves not only to express the abstraction of daily life and to presuppose fragmentation and reification; it also constitutes a Utopian compensation for everything lost in the process of the development of capitalism — the place of quality in an increasingly quantified world, the place of the archaic and of feeling amid the desacralization of the market system, the place of sheer color and intensity within the grayness of measurable extension and geometrical abstraction. (236-37)

The “abstraction of visual art,” “the abstraction of daily life,” and “geometrical abstraction” are in fact quite distinct concepts, two of them technical terms referring to specific processes (non-representationality; mathematical formalisation), and the third a vague metaphor which gestures at a broad definition of “experience.” The act of mediation is brought about only by means of a pun which conflates distinct and irreducible domains.

In Marxism and Form Jameson had written of Benjamin’s attention to “invention and technique as the primary cause of historical change” that “such theories . . . function as a substitute for Marxist historiography in the way they offer a feeling of concreteness comparable to economic subject matter, at the same time that they dispense with any consideration of the human factors of classes and of the social organization of production.”4 It is true that Benjamin’s technologicalism is not a temptation for Jameson, but in many ways this book’s conceptual terrain remains akin to the post-Lukácsian problematic of the Frankfurt School, of which Jameson has been one of the leading proponents in English. Terry Eagleton’s book on Benjamin pays some attention to questions of mediation, arguing that the violent and semi-ironic metaphors through which Benjamin thinks the relations between base and superstructure “signify not just an individual theoretical lapse, but an objective lacuna within modern Marxism: the absence of a theory of the relations in question that would be at once non-mechanistic and non-historicist” (Eagleton, 76). But these questions are never really as central as they are for Jameson. Eagleton’s concerns are much more directly political, and in particular he is concerned to come to terms with the politics of poststructuralist theory.

One of the ways in which he approaches this is by infiltrating Benjamin into the enemy ranks: his work “seems to me strikingly to prefigure many of the current motifs of post-structuralism, and to do so, unusually, in a committedly Marxist context” (xii); and “as a collector of the contingent, of that which escapes the censoring glance of history in its sober yet potent unremarkability, Benjamin in some sense prefigures the contemporary critical practice of deconstruction” (131). As might be expected, this identification is not always without its difficulties. Consider,
for example, the dense and suggestive discussion of the concepts of “trace” and “aura.” On the one hand the trace is a moment or aspect of the aura, “either as its petrified physical residue or . . . the unconscious track, fraying or Bahnung which psychoanalytically speaking is the aura’s very mechanism” (31). But it is also subversive of aura insofar as it constantly refers back (like the print of the potter’s thumb) to those elements of the production process that mark the object’s historicity, scar it with the signs of its accumulated historical functions. To erase or to bring to light the trace is thus a political practice, in which “the object may need to be treated as a palimpsest, its existent traces expunged by an overwriting, or it may secrete blurred traces that can be productively retrieved” (32). But the metaphor is misleading insofar as it suggests a surface inscription rather than the constitutive “writtenness” of the object in the text of social relations (32). From this point Eagleton moves to develop an analogy with the constitution of the subject: the illusory self-identity of the ego is matched by the object’s “aura”, ‘authority’, ‘authenticity’—names which designate the object’s persistence in its originary mode of being, its carving out of an organic identity for itself over time” (32). It is this myth of origin that is destroyed by mechanical reproduction, but this destruction cannot be taken for granted:

For just as the psychoanalytic subject is able to designate itself as a homogeneous entity over time only by repressing the traces of its unconscious desires, so the aural object, whether it be cultural artefact or state apparatus, continually rewrites its own history to expel the traces of its ruptured, heterogeneous past. The political task of ‘liberating’ an object, then, takes the form of opening up its unconscious — detecting within it those chips of heterogeneity that it has been unable quite to dissolve. (33)

Benjamin’s use of the metapsychology of Beyond the Pleasure Principle allows him to extend this parallel between object and subject. The trace is incompatible both with lived experience (Erlebnis), which rebuffs the perceptual stimulus, and with the more authentic experience of Erfahrung, where there is a complete disjunction between consciousness and the unconscious; in both cases “writing has rudely invaded the inmost sanctum of experience itself, whose productive mechanism lies exposed as nothing more than a set of inscriptions” (35). Eagleton concludes this argument by asserting that “what we have here, then, is an adumbration of the contemporary theme of the non-coincidence of signification and being, whether in the form of Michel Foucault’s flamboyant assertion that Man and language can never be coterminous, or in Jacques Lacan’s reflections on the ‘fading’ of the subject in language, its Hobson’s choice between meaning and being” (35). But it is just here that the difficulties arise. Neither Foucault nor Lacan would argue for an opposition between meaning and being, because “being” is not thinkable outside of language. Although there is in Lacan a nostalgia for a lost authenticity, there is also a commitment to the constitution of being in the symbolic. It is perhaps partly because of the residual and ineradicable essentialism of the concept of aura that Eagleton is here led to force the comparison; and it is also true
that what is “adumbrated” is in fact Derrida’s rather different and apparently less politicised concept of trace.

A similar strategy of infiltration is employed with regard to Bakhtin, of whom it is said that he “recapitulates avant la lettre many of the leading motifs of contemporary deconstruction, and does so, scandalously, in a firmly social context” (150). In particular, Bakhtin’s Rabelais and His World stands as something like the model of a political criticism. In a “devious” gesture that creates “a lethal constellation between that redeemed Renaissance moment and the trajectory of the Soviet state” Bakhtin “pits against that ‘official, formalistic and logical authoritarianism’ whose unspoken name is Stalinism the explosive politics of the body, the erotic, the licentious and semiotic” (144). The order of discourse, hegemonic structures of power, are inverted, perverted, subverted in the semiotic riot of carnival which, ambivalently destructive and liberatory, gives birth to the promise of Utopia. Whilst stressing the power of Bakhtin’s categories Eagleton is also careful — unlike so many others in the current flush of rediscovery — to make the necessary political criticism of the corporatist and populist dimensions of Bakhtin’s thought: carnival is “a licensed affair” (148), a specular reversal which may in some ways serve as an example of “that mutual complicity of law and liberation, power and desire, that has become a dominant theme of contemporary post-Marxist pessimism” (149). But insofar as it is “a kind of fiction,” coming to life only through its oppositional relation to ruling-class culture, it seems in fact to avoid “the double-bind that all utopianism sets for the unwary: the fact that its affirmative images of transcendence rest upon a potentially crippling sublimation of the drives necessary to achieve it in practice” (149). It has the further advantage that it sets in relief the chillastic and relatively empty Utopia of Benjamin which is related only as negation to historical time, a negativity that has its historical basis in the absence of the revolutionary party (148). It would also seem possible to counterpose Bakhtin’s socio-semiotic theory of discourse to Benjamin’s belief in the prelapsarian unity of word and body and the crustylic immediacy of the sign to its referent (151-52). But Eagleton courageously argues that matters are rather more complex than this, for “the Judaic belief in the expressive unity of word and body, given a dialectical twist, can just as easily reappear as the ground for a materialist re-location of discourse within the social practices from which, as Benjamin shrewdly sees, modern semiotic ideologies have strategically isolated it” (152); and “at the very least, ‘onomatopoeic’ and materialist notions of language joins hand in common opposition to what Benjamin sees to be the idealism of Saussure” (153, n. 75).

This raises the question of what is meant by a “materialist” theory of language, and indeed the question of what force the concept of the “material” itself has. The issue is first joined in the confrontation set up between Benjamin’s meditation on baroque allegory and Leavis’ commitment to the aesthetic ideology of the symbol. What Benjamin discovers in allegory is an excess of signification over the signified, a surplus of “the materiality of the letter itself” (4) over meaning (the example Eagleton cites
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is the baroque echo-game). Whereas "the allegorical object has undergone a kind of haemorrhage of spirit" and lies "drained of all immanent meaning," the "inevitably idealizing" symbol "subdues the material object to a surge of spirit that illuminates and redeems it from within" (6). The equation between signified and spirit is established by way of Derrida's account of phonocentrism (the proximity of voice to the ideality of meaning). In attempting to combat the "idealism" or the "spirituality" of the symbol Eagleton appeals to the double "materiality" of the signifier and of the referent. But this is not only bad linguistics, it also invokes the fruitlessly metaphysical opposition of matter to spirit in a context which calls rather for properly Marxist categories. The damage this does is evidenced in a subsequent and related discussion of the commodity.

The commodity can be thought as "the baroque emblem pressed to an extreme" (30). In this form "the materiality of the signifier has on the one hand degenerated to esoteric self-reference, and on the other hand has been evacuated by exchange-value to mere abstraction. The commodity is the "bad side" of the emblem, grossly swelling its material density at the same time as it robs it of referential value" (30). That is to say that the excessive materiality of the signifier, which would seem to guarantee the concreteness of the referent, brings about a closed auto-referentiality, a collapsing of the object "back upon itself as a monstrous tautology" (30). Despite a surface appearance of substantiality, the essence of the commodity, the "secret" of its "truly tautological status" (30), is its "virulent anti-materialism" (28). The commodity "has no more body than a mirror-image" (29); each commodity "presents to the other a mirror which reflects no more than its own mirroring" (28). And this contradiction is reflected in contemporary semiotics, which tends to "reproduce at the level of the sign that blend of formalistic idealism and vulgar materialism that Marxism locates in the very structure of the commodity" (30). Semiotics "may valuably re-materialize the signifier — but only at the risk of collapsing history into it and conflating all materialisms into one." The "bad" materialism of semiotics succumbs to the "sex appeal" of the sign-as-commodity, its combination of "the fleshiness of the stripper within her elusiveness," whereas the Marxist critic will refuse the substitution of "strip-shows" for "genuine sexuality" (30).

The sign conceptualised in the form of the commodity is like the subject caught in the Imaginary closure of the mirror-phase. But what Eagleton seems to want to oppose to this is not so much the Symbolic (a concept coextensive with that of language) as that most brittle of Lacanian categories, the Real. It is only in this way that I can take the nostalgic references to the referent and the hostility to tautology. But tautology is the condition and the precondition of all signification. It is only in so far as language is a (hypothetically) closed system that it can be thought as a system of differences articulating the semantic continuum rather than as a system of correspondences, of nomenclature, predetermined by the structure of the real or, in effect, by a perceptuality given in nature. What is suppressed in the commodity form is not referentiality but the semiotic frame of the system of relations of production. Reference is an operation distinct
from and posterior to signification, a “supplement” which can in no way introduce substance into the sign. Granted on the other hand that much contemporary theory fetishises the materiality of the signifier, the answer is not to oppose a good to a bad materialism of the signifier, and then to set this against the “idealism” of Saussure. For the signifier is not material. The signifier is necessarily realised in phonic or graphic material, but is not identical with this material. Its “identity” is that immaterial mode of existence of the trace defined and constituted by a system of differential relations. And the relevant opposition here is not that between idealism and materialism but between an empiricist and a structuralist conception of the sign.

In its polemical oscillations this book frequently (and often rewardingly) lacks the unscarred smoothness of an academic monologue. Key questions are not settled but are taken up from different angles of attack. The possibility of a political semiotics is elsewhere approached through a brief history of the science of rhetoric, which in its classical form Eagleton describes as a type of “discourse theory,”

devoted to analysing the material effects of particular uses of language in particular social conjunctures. It was a highly elaborate theory of specific signifying practices — above all, of the discursive practices of the juridical, political and religious apparatuses of the state. Its intention, quite consciously, was systematically to theorize the articulations of discourse and power, and to do so in the name of political practice: to enrich the political effectivity of signification. (101)

After a sketch of the decline of rhetoric through its splitting off from dialectic, from science, and finally from an autonomised Literature (a circular process in which “an initially logocentric rhetoric had passed into the pernicious falsities of print, to be opposed by an equally logocentric anti-rhetoric” (106)), we encounter a figure looking like Paul de Man but named Nietzsche. The radicalism of Nietzsche's project lay in his exposure of “the covertly rhetorical nature of all discourse” (108) and his turning of the technical aspects of rhetoric against a conception of language as essentially a form of communication. As a result, “rhetoric was undermined on its own ground: if all language worked by figure and trope, all language was consequently a form of fiction, and its cognitive or representational power problematized at a stroke” (108). The political implications of this were at once critical and evasive: in unmasking the will to knowledge as a form of the will to power the Nietzschean genealogy effectively denied its own authority and the possibility of any stable position from which the dominant ideology could be denounced (to the extent that any denunciation would be complicit, in its will to power, with that ideology). Thus “in retreat from market-place to study, politics to philology, social practice to semiotics, rhetoric was to end up as that vigorous demystifier of all ideology that itself provided the final ideological rationale for political inertia” (108).
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A Marxist response to this would presumably both recognise (as Eagleton does) that Marxism is itself a rhetoric, and then stress the distinction between dominant and subordinate cultures and the fact that power and authority are located in the former, even though subordinate cultures are always more or less incorporated into the hegemonic culture. Eagleton’s argument is that ambiguity is reactionary under all circumstances (110) and that a materialist understands the “self-molesting discourse” of, for example, politics “by referring it back to a more fundamental realm, that of historical contradictions themselves” (109). This may be the same answer, but it is problematic, I think, in its apparent assertion of a general and stable criterion against which to evaluate the political effects of language. As he writes elsewhere, “we cannot think ourselves back beyond language, for we need language in order to do so in the first place. . . . An origin is nothing to speak of” (69). The question at issue is, again, that of the possibility of grounding Marxist politics in a category of History which would be external to its discursive mediations.

The question is addressed directly in Eagleton’s attack on Colin MacCabe’s use of Benjamin “to challenge the contention that ‘the past has its own order independently of its present enunciation’” (51) (in the book’s pantomime of disguises “MacCabe” means “Hindess and Hirst”). On the one hand MacCabe is right “to insist that the past is a discursive construct of the present,” but on the other the past “is not, of course, merely an imaginary back-projection of it. Materialism must insist on the irreducibility of the real to discourse; it must also remind historical idealism that if the past itself — by definition — no longer exists, its effects certainly do” (51). And he proceeds to attack that “epistemological imperialism” which, fetishising the situation of utterance as the point of genesis of the historically Other which it has itself created, abolishes the difference and distance of the past. In part what is at issue is the Foucauldian and poststructuralist emphasis on discontinuity (60); and — whilst it may be doubted whether Benjamin’s essay on “The Story-teller,” with its narrative of the decline of “experience,” is the best corrective to this — it is certainly true that Benjamin’s meditations on history go to the core of the questions facing “a contemporary Marxism once more pondering the ‘alternatives’ of continuity and rupture, caught as it is between a discredited historicism on the one side and an unacceptable synchronicity on the other” (63).

In direct contrast to a Jamesonian construction of Marxism as a “mighty world-historical plot of humankind’s primordial unity, subsequent alienation, revolutionary redemption and ultimate self-recovery in the realm of communism” (64), Eagleton indicates both the ways in which Marx’s 1857 “Introduction” breaks with a historicist teleology and the ways in which it remains trapped within an evolutionist framework (65). It is Nietzsche who “presses Marx’s transitional formulations to a boldly affirmative point” (66), a fully “structural” conception of the disjunction between genesis and function and of the political (re)functionalisation of the past. In so doing, Nietzsche prefigures Benjamin’s “anti-historicist insistence on the ruptures, recylcings and re-insertions that underlie the
bland ideology of "cultural history"" (66). But then comes the refusal of sympathy that closes off so much that is valuable in Nietzsche. His conception of history "is equally ideological; by spurning all continuity as metepysical, he threatens to subvert much of what Benjamin designates by 'tradition'. If Marx wishes to sublate the 'earlier meaning', Nietzsche desires to suppress it"; he is himself the creator of "historical rubble" (66).

This is nonsense, of course: a case of shooting the messenger. Its purpose is in fact to produce a further metamorphosis of Benjamin, this time into what is probably the incongruous figure of E.P. Thompson. Although the socialist movement derives its poetry not from the past but from the future and stands "in ironic relation to the historical 'text' it exists to produce, and whose emergence will finally signify its own demise" (69), it also works to foster, "across the structurally discontinuous social formations identified by Marxism, that 'fiction' of a coherent, continuous struggle which is Benjamin's 'tradition'" (73) and which is a key motif in the work of the English "left-organicist" historians). Indeed, "that fiction is not a lie... For there are real historical continuities, and it is a dismal index of our theoretical befuddlements that one needs to assert anything so obvious in the first place" (73). But these assertions surely answer the wrong kind of question. In Benjamin's thinking tradition is not a question of existence but of political work; in Eagleton's words, it is "the practice of ceaselessly excavating, safeguarding, violating, discarding and reinscribing the past" (59). It is not the essence of history, nor an alternative to it (48), and it bears no resemblance to any historicist hermeneutic ("labour history," "cultural history," "literary history"); the emancipatory force of the past "is to be always elsewhere. It is only through the radical discontinuity of past and present, through the space hollowed by their mutual eccentricity, that the former may be brought to bear explosively upon the latter. Any attempt to recuperate the past directly, non-violently, will result only in paralysing complicity with it" (44). The emphasis on the violence needed to salvage history for its victims is characteristic not only of Benjamin's rhetoric but of Eagleton's. There is a comment at one point on the aesthetic of anxiety that generates in Benjamin the image of "the sexual violence of 'blast[ing] open the continuum of history'" (46), where "continuum" signifies both the whore of history's "endless, meaningless amenability, but also the hymen — the smooth membrane that prohibits penetration, and which must be ruptured in an act of rape" (46). And yet this vocabulary of violence is Eagleton's own: things are "blasted apart," "exploded," "detonated," "penetrated," and Benjamin's work is, in the book's last sentence, blasted "out of its historical continuum, so that it may fertilize the present" (179). The linguistic celebration of violence is strangely at odds with a work that takes the project of feminist criticism as in many ways the paradigm of a textual politics. And part of the difficulty lies precisely in the fact that the politics is textual, that it is felt to be a substitute for the real thing. Hence the attack on Macherey's supposed assumption that ideology will "be unhinged by theory and literature somewhat sooner than by such traditional devices as class struggle" (91); or the assertion that deconstruction exemplifies "a sort of patient, probing
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reformism of the text" (134) (as though the alternative were to storm it at the barricades). Indeed, this over-politicisation of textual analysis informs much of the discussion of deconstruction.

Despite a wonderful "Oedipal Fragment" addressed in fear and awe and hatred to Derrida ("Die derider!" [131]), the section devoted to deconstruction refuses almost completely to identify its target(s). But unless Eagleton is supposing a homogeneous movement with a unitary political position, it seems fair to assume that he intends less the master in Paris than the epigones at Yale. In a first moment of the argument the confrontation between deconstruction and Marxism is set up in terms of an epistemological opposition: "either the subject is wholly on the 'inside' of its world of discourse, locked into its philosophico-grammatical forms, its very struggles to distantiate them 'theoretically' themselves the mere ruses of power and desire; or it can catapult itself free from this formation to a point of transcendental leverage from which it can discern absolute truth" (131). This opposition of inside to outside is of course a double-bind; but the double-bind can be described in such a way as to provide an appropriate political metaphor for the position of deconstruction: that of the complementarity of reformism and ultra-leftism (134). At this level of logical typing it is not a particular intellectual practice but the revolutionary working class that will deconstruct the inside/outside dichotomy. It's important to note here that everything is staked on a sort of revolutionary monism: the transformation of capitalism can only be brought about under the leadership of the industrial proletariat — not by "peasants, guerrillas, blacks, women or intellectuals" (133). In the England of the eighties this rejection of the possibility of a dispersed, plural, decentred politics is close to Benjamin's messianism. This is not to say that Eagleton is wrong in drawing parallels between deconstruction's privileging of plurality, heterogeneity, and indeterminacy, and the traditional themes of liberalism. But this is no more than a possible conjecture, and it doesn't justify the functionalisation of the parallel as a direct manifestation of the class struggle ("Deconstructionism, then, can salvage some of the dominant themes of traditional bourgeois liberalism by a desperate last-ditch strategy . . . ." [138]). Nor does it justify either the criticism that deconstruction rejects any "transcendental vantage-point from which definitive judgments could be delivered" (136) — as I wrote earlier, this seems to me part of the strength of much poststructuralist theory — or the heavy appeal to authority in the claim that "objectivity is suspect, for we know, do we not, that it must rest upon metaphysical notions of absolute truth? (At least we know if we have not read Lenin)" (14). If the Lenin that we have not read includes, for example, those passages in Materialism and Empirio-Criticism in which the "base" is redefined as "matter," or in which we are assured of the existence of a truth which is absolute, supra-historical, and independent of any social determinations, then we must perhaps despair of the Marxist dialectic?9

The repeated appeal to an ontological grounding of structures of power in some extra-semiotic realm, however qualified, tends to distract attention from the more important issues of the constitution of the Real in
and the dispersal of power through discursive systems. (It is notable that Eagleton’s most recent book, *The Rape of Clarissa*, whilst sharply critical of specific deconstructive readings is nevertheless methodologically much closer to a Derridean account of textuality.) But at its best Eagleton’s work is able to offer what is precisely a dialectical conceptualisation of the politics of discourse and of metadiscourse. In an elegant foreshadowing of a Marxist theory of comedy, for example, he writes that Brecht teaches us “the deep comedy of meta-language, which in distantiating its object displays just where it is itself most vulnerable” — namely, in the fact “that any place is reversible, any signified may become a signifier, any discourse may be without warning rapped over the knuckles by some meta-discourse which may then suffer such rapping in its turn” (160). Where Jameson ascribes history to the romance paradigm, Eagleton sees it as comic in form; and Marxism itself “has the humour of dialectics because it reckons itself into the historical equations it writes” (161). The way forward, for Eagleton and for Marxist cultural theory, lies neither in a rejection nor in a complete accommodation of those very varied languages called “post-structuralism” but in an acceptance of the challenge they offer to Marxism to rethink the status of the dialectic and to build a semiotic politics on the ruins of a metaphysics.

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2 Philip Lewis, “The Post-Structuralist Condition,” *Diacritics*, 12 (Spring 1982), 12. Further references will be given in the text.


7 See also Jameson’s comments in Leonard Green et al., “Interview: Fredric Jameson,” *Diacritics*, 12 (Fall 1982), 85-86.


This article was scheduled to appear in the July 1983 issue but had to be held over because of shortage of space.