

# Philosophical Realism and the Aesthetic in Michael Sprinker's Literary Criticism

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Michael Sprinker

I don't consider myself an "expert" on Michael Sprinker's writings. I have not read all of his works, and among those I have read I find that his knowledge and insight into matters discussed often surpass my own. I do consider myself to be someone who has learned from Michael's work. And those lessons form the subject of this presentation.

I first met Michael in 1988 at the conference he organized at the Humanities Institute at SUNY-Stony Brook on "The Althusserian Legacy." I delivered a mediocre paper entitled "The Marxist Thing," in which I attempted to use Althusser's philosophy to identify "revolution" as the disciplinary object of historical materialism. The argument of the paper, such as it was, need not concern us here. In any case, what I recall is the discussion that followed, in which Michael

asked the first question. At the time I was a fairly orthodox Althusserian and so had peppered my paper with potshots here and there against epistemology. In particular, I stated that I intended to rule out of court all epistemological questions about "causal primacy" and methodological "entry points." So I cruised along my merry way thinking I had safely ducked issues like base and superstructure, the ontological status of historical objects, the epistemological status of my own work, how do we know that Marx's account of capitalism is truer than Louis Ruckheyser's, etc.

Well, as you can imagine, the first question I got--from Michael, and asked with a pretty high energy level--was precisely this: On what epistemological basis can you justify NOT asserting a causal hierarchy among social elements? How do you know that we CAN'T establish the methodological primacy of certain conceptualizations of society over others? Michael's implicit criticism, of course, was obvious: "Just how effective a Marxist ARE you if you can't defend Marxism's claim to provide a KNOWLEDGE of history and society?"

So the first thing I learned from Michael was the importance of being a philosophical realist, as opposed to staying in the ranks of any of the variety of poststructuralist

nominalisms. A couple of years later a review essay that Michael published in *New Left Review* introduced me to the work of British philosopher Roy Bhaskar. Michael's essay equipped me and, I imagine, many others with the foundation necessary for a convincing defense of philosophical realism. And it is to a short summary of Bhaskar's positions in the late 80s and early 90s that I should now like to turn. I do this because I believe that Michael's upholding of philosophical realism is a major portion of his legacy, and because I believe that the methodology, as well as several of the insights, of Bhaskar's philosophy can be seen in retrospect to have informed Michael's practice of literary criticism in his two major works, *History and Ideology in Proust* and *Imaginary Relations*.



Roy Bhaskar

Bhaskar's work holds a natural attraction for anyone as committed as Michael was to Althusserian theory, for it accommodates the Althusserian distinction between "real objects" and "objects of knowledge" while simultaneously upholding philosophical realism. Philosophical realism asserts that "the ultimate objects of scientific inquiry exist and act (for the most part) quite independently of scientists and their activity" (Bhaskar 12). Some versions of philosophical realism nevertheless posit an isomorphic relation between knowledge and reality. Because he rejects isomorphism, Bhaskar proposes a "critical" philosophical realism, one which conceptualizes the knowledge process as an inferential one involving the distinction between real objects, which belong for Bhaskar to an "intransitive dimension" (ontology), and objects of knowledge, which belong to a "transitive dimension" (epistemology). Critical realism thus

explicitly asserts the non-identity of the objects of the transitive and intransitive dimensions, of thought and being. And it relegates the notion of a correspondence between them to the status of a metaphor for an *adequating practice* (in which cognitive matter is worked into a matching representation of a non-cognitive object). It entails acceptance of (i) the principle of *epistemic relativism*, which states that all beliefs are socially produced, so that all knowledge is transient, and neither truth-values nor criteria of rationality exist outside historical time. But it entails the rejection of (ii) the doctrine of *judgemental relativism*, which maintains that all beliefs are equally valid, in the sense that there can be no rational grounds for preferring one to another. It thus stands opposed to epistemic absolutism and epistemic irrationalism alike. Relativists have wrongly inferred (ii) from (i), while anti-relativists have wrongly taken the unacceptability of (ii) as a *reductio* of (i). (23-24)

As Michael and others, such as Christopher Norris, have pointed out, this argument "enables Bhaskar to defend both the basic rationality of science as an enterprise aimed toward better, more adequate grounds of judgement, and also the need for critique as a

process of reflective understanding that questions 'absolutist' truth-claims by revealing their partial, self-interested, or socially motivated nature' (Norris, *What's Wrong?* 98). Moreover, what keeps Bhaskar from falling back into idealism or empiricism, despite his acknowledgment of epistemic relativism and the distinction it brings between real objects and objects of knowledge, is his view that "it is the nature of objects that determines their cognitive possibilities for us" (Bhaskar 25). This view suggests that, while "reality" for empiricism is simply given in experience, and "reality" for idealism is something we construct ourselves, critical realism emerges rather "from the conjunction of two premises: (1) If scientific activity occurs (or makes sense) then there must be real generative mechanisms in nature; (2) scientific activity does occur (makes sense) . . ." (Collier 22). As Norris expresses it,

The strongest case for scientific realism is that which starts out from particular examples of the growth in knowledge typically achieved through a deeper (causal-explanatory) account of objects, events, processes, properties, microstructural features, etc. For such advances would themselves lack any remotely plausible explanation were it not for the fact that the object terms and predicates in a valid scientific theory can be taken as referring to (or quantifying over) a real-world physical object domain and its various integral attributes. (Norris, *Quantum Theory* 55)

It is important to underscore that Bhaskar's theory of critical realism has relevance for the human and social sciences as well as for the natural sciences. Society, on Bhaskar's view, is "a stratified system of structured realities" (Collier 142).

The . . . critical realism which I have expounded conceives the world as being structured, differentiated and changing. It is opposed to empiricism, pragmatism and idealism alike. Critical realists do not deny the reality of events and discourses; on the contrary, they insist upon them. But they hold that we will only be able to understand--and so change--the social world if we identify the structures at work that generate those events or discourses. Such structures are irreducible to the patterns of events and discourses alike. . . . They can only be identified through the practical and theoretical work of the social sciences . . . [through which they] may be hierarchically ranked in terms of their explanatory importance. (Bhaskar 2-3)

So realism in the social and human sciences is a condition of the ability to act consciously to transform society. Insofar as irrealism discounts the possibility of identifying "social structures" as anything more than the effects of discourse, and insofar as it refuses to assign causal primacy to some of these structures over others, to those precise degrees does it weaken the basis on which human beings can move collectively--not "into a realm free of determination"--but rather "from unneeded, unwanted and oppressive to needed, wanted and empowering sources of determination" (Bhaskar 5). Critical realism matters in the human and social sciences, therefore, because human emancipation "depends on the transformation of structures" (6).

Now, both in his theoretical understanding of literature and in his practice of literary criticism, Michael adopts an unmistakably realist stance. In particular, he views the aesthetic as an emergent part of a stratified social reality. This means two things. First, Michael considers the aesthetic as a real practice, or structure, if you will. Second, he affirms a cognitive role for literature, and art in general. Michael's perspectives derive initially from the familiar Althusserian conception of art as distinct from both ideology and science. As we shall see, however, he eventually moves well beyond this conception.

In *Imaginary Relations*, Michael defends an uncompromising version of "aesthetic specificity." He argues that, "on an Althusserian view aesthetic practice is conceived as a more or less permanent aspect of human social existence" (273). While the aesthetic clearly performs a "function within the formal structure of particular historical ideologies," he holds that it nonetheless remains open to inquiry along lines that recognize "its specifically aesthetic modality" (272). That modality, on Michael's account, surfaces as a "modality of worked matter, rather than as a discrete class of objects" (276).

Michael's precision here is important, for it allows him to keep faith with the Althusserian principle that science and art appropriate the same object for representation. The difference between science and art, on an Althusserian view, resides in that they represent objects according to separate modes of cognition--science by means of concepts and abstractions, art by means of perceptions and feelings. Michael's discussion of aesthetic specificity thus emphasizes the formal work undertaken by literature and art in presenting "objects" that might also be cognized by marxist historiography, by psychoanalysis, or by semiotics, as long as you think of these as sciences.

In classical Althusserianism, art takes ideology as its raw material and so transforms it that its character and existence as ideology becomes apparent. On the one hand, this is the basis of the charge of formalism leveled against the Althusserian critics--a charge with which I am in sympathy. On the other hand, the notion that art works on and transforms ideology simultaneously constructs the basis of the Althusserian claim that art is not reducible to ideology. In other words, it warrants the insight that art is somehow involved in the production of knowledge.

Now, again in classical Althusserianism, art itself does not actually provide knowledge of history and society. Rather, it is the Marxist critic who produces such knowledge by analyzing the symptomatic distance revealed between the formal structure of the literary work and the formal structure of the ideological materials that the literary work appropriates. Michael's earlier work tends to share the orthodox Althusserian description of art in relation to knowledge. Michael's later claim for the cognitive role of art, however, constitutes a significantly stronger assertion of such a role than Althusser's own, and certainly more so than Macherey's and Balibar's well-known statements.

In *Imaginary Relations*, Michael sticks pretty closely to the classical Althusserian view: it is not the art work but the critic's work that produces knowledge. "We have no

reason to suppose," Michael writes, "that *investigations* of works of art, or historical ideologies, or any other empirically present phenomena will not yield considerable insight into the structures of a given social formation" (293, my emphasis). He explains further, "Not that the artifacts themselves will immediately disclose the 'truth' of their existence, i.e., the structure of society that determines them. But the scientific analysis of a sufficiently broad range of works of art can yield preliminary hypotheses about the nature and operations of the structure" (293).

*History and Ideology in Proust.* subsequently heralds a dramatic shift in the way Michael treats the question of art and cognition. There Michael is willing, from one angle, to more directly locate art in relation to ideology: "Formal or aesthetic features," he states, "are themselves a part of ideology, as well as its efficient cause in literary representation" (4). At the same time, however, he now moves decisively to identify the work of art itself as a source of knowledge.

Theories can be at once ideological, viz., products of distinctive socio-historical conditions, and scientific, means for producing knowledge--a point I take generally from Althusser. Be it observed, however, that I differ from him and from Pierre Macherey in attributing a knowledge-producing function to works of art. . . . (6)

Proust not only diagnosed the causes for the ultimate demise of the French aristocracy; he also discerned the contradictions in and the historical contingency of bourgeois hegemony. Such is my ultimate hypothesis. (7)

No one has ever doubted that Proust observed his society acutely. I am proposing that he cogently and powerfully theorized its fundamental structures as well. (9)

Along with the necessity of philosophical realism as a condition for effective marxist literary criticism, the other lesson I learned--not only from Michael, but in substantial measure from him--was the importance of emphasizing the cognitive role of literature and art, while not neglecting ideological critique. In 1994, Michael formulated this lesson as follows, and it is with his words that I should like to conclude:

Whatever the limitations and deficiencies in the writings of Lukacs and the more orthodox communist critics of the 1930s, their insistence on the ideological character and function of literary texts, their holding to a view of history grounded in the analysis of class structures, and their attempt to demonstrate the ways in which literary texts reveal or expose the historical situation they present--these remain the necessary hallmarks of any marxist literary criticism worthy of the name. (3)

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