From Prague to Paris:
Formalism as a Method in Literary Study

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Louis Althusser

"And the Princess and the Prince discuss
what's real and what is not."

-- Bob Dylan

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The epochal events in Eastern Europe since 1988 have once more put this region in the historical limelight, as it was on the eve on 1914, in 1938, 1956, and 1968. In the periods between these punctual outbursts, the region has had a tendency to become largely invisible to Western European and American intellectuals, whose cultural horizons only rarely extend beyond the borders established in late antiquity by the

Western Roman Empire and its Germanic invaders. There are of course complex historical reasons for this general neglect of the non-Teutono-Romance linguistic area of Europe. But it does seem rather odd, given the pivotal role of these nations in twentieth-century politics, that their languages and cultures have received so little sustained attention in Western Europe and the United States, where Slavic studies is almost exclusively a scholarly backwater, not, as they say in Atlantic City, where the action is.

In the specialized domain of literary and cultural theory, one might have expected this situation not to obtain, and indeed the past twenty years or so have witnessed brief, intense bursts of interest in Slavic theory. The most recent, but also the least typical, example of this phenomenon has been the extraordinary popularity of Mikhail Bakhtin, who appears finally to have secured the status of a permanent resident among the pantheon of modern theorists of culture. The visas of other Eastern European emigres, however, are perpetually in danger of non-renewal.

It is worthwhile reflecting briefly on why this latter should be the case. My own suspicion is that the comparative neglect of much Slavic theory is part of a deeper and more widely shared prejudice against poetics itself, indeed against the very notion of a scientific discipline of literary study. In the Anglo-Saxon world in particular, where belletristic criticism has long held sway, poeticians in the strict sense of the term are few in number. As a result, the research program that dominated Slavic literary theory from the 1920s through the mid-1940s has never held much attraction, least of all in the current conjuncture, where as Paul de Man already observed two decades ago, everyone seems agreed that we are well "beyond formalism."

The prejudice against poetics is unlikely to be dislodged in the near futures. Yet it will be my contention in the following paper that: 1) no consequent understanding of literature as a distinctive entity can be achieved without the aid of formal poetics; and 2) curious as this may at first sound, the research program inaugurated by the Russian Formalists and carried forward by the Prague Structuralists reaches its fulfillment in the fragmentary writings on art of a French marxist philosopher. I will go even further: the trajectory from Formalism to Structuralism establishes an itinerary for the theory of literature that can only reach its goals by alignment with the basic hypotheses of historical materialism. In what follows I shall attempt to justify these claims.

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At least since Trotsky's famous attack on the Russian Formalists in *Literature and Revolution*, formalism has generally been in bad repute among marxists. One thinks, for instance, of Fredric Jameson's influential account in *The Prison-House of Language*, of the various works by Terry Eagleton since his *Criticism and Ideology*, or more distantly, of Medvedev/Bakhtin's still classic -- and too little read -- critique, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*. Formalism, so the story goes, is constitutionally incapable of situating texts in history at least in the only history that matters for historical materialism, that is, the history of ideology as a product of social life. Little matter that after the first, highly polemical, phase of Formalist manifestos, texts like Sklovskij's "Art as Technique"

or Jakobson's "On realism in Art," the Formalists were themselves the first to discern the impasse in which claims for complete aesthetic autonomy left them, embarking on a program which, whatever its ultimate methodology limitations, could scarcely be charged with simple or directly denying the determination of literary texts by historical forces and conditions. Here, for example, are two passages from the Jakobson-Tynjanov theses of 1928:

> 2. The history of literature (art), being simultaneous with other series, is characterized, as is each of these series, by a complex network of specific structural laws. Without an elucidation of these laws, it is impossible to establish in a scientific manner the correlation between the literary series and other historical series.
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> . . . 8. A disclosure of the immanent laws of the history of literature (and language) allows us to determine the character of each specific change in literary (and linguistic) systems. However, these laws do not allow us to explain the tempo of evolution or the chosen path of evolution when several theoretically possible evolutionary paths are given . . . The question of a specific choice of path, or at least of the dominant, can be solved only through an analysis of the correlation between the literary series and other historical series. (Jakobson 1987, 47, 49)

Or consider another text, less well-known, but equally important for comprehending the later project of Russian Formalism (as the one just cited was crucial to the agenda of the Prague School, founded two years prior to its publication). The passage comes from Eichenbaum's introduction to his study of Lermontov:

> To study an event historically does not mean to describe it as something unique, and meaningful only in the circumstances of its own time. That would be the naïve historicism which emasculates science. For it is not just a question of making a simple *projection into the past*, but of understanding the historical *actuality* of the event and defining its role in the development of historical energy, a force which, by its very essence, is constant: it does not come and go, and for this very reason it operates outside time. A fact which is understood historically is thereby withdrawn from time. Nothing is repeated in history, but this is because nothing disappears, it simply changes its form. Historical analogies, therefore, are not only possible but necessary, and the study of historical events outside the dynamics of history, as individual, "unrepeatable" and self-enclosed systems, is impossible, in that it contradicts the very nature of these events. (O'Toole and Shukman 1978, 2)

The theoretical complexity and methodological sophistication of the Formalist-Structuralism project (I shall speak of them as one, since it is not only possible, but I believe necessary, to see them as pursuing a single, continuous, evolving problematic) is,

or should now be, beyond doubt, as recent scholarly studies by Peter Steiner and Frantisek Galan have cogently argued and amply illustrated.

My purpose here is not to survey this familiar territory once more, but rather to consider more closely the methodological common ground between a historical materialist science of literature and the general claims made by both Russian Formalism and Prague Structuralism concerning the relative autonomy of literary texts. To suggest in advance what I shall only begin to demonstrate here, the distinctiveness of literary texts from other forms of ideological production is a necessary postulate if there is to be any such thing a systematic, rigorous discipline of literary study. Literary things either differ in kind from other sorts of socially produced objects -- material commodities, for example -- or there can be no special science of which they are the object. Perhaps this latter is the case, but then one wonders how all serious students of literature from Plato and Aristotle through Hegel and Marx down to Adorno and Althuseer have thought otherwise. Could they all have been so utterly mystified about the nature of literary artifacts and simply missed the fact that literature is just an instance of ideology in general, with no special claim upon our attention nor any constitutive features of its own? I shall in any event assume that the long tradition of literary formalism has proceeded correctly in designating literature a particular kind of thing, and that such a postulate is commensurate with the basic tenets of historical materialism, as Marx and every consequent marxist aesthetician since his time believed. What kind of thing, then, is literature?

I shall begin to answer this question by considering some of the basic hypotheses in the inaugural text of literary criticism and theory in the West, Aristotle's *Poetics*. First however it is necessary to understand the position of this text in the hierarchy of the empirical sciences as Aristotle conceived them. Poetics is the science of artificial things, *poiemata*, and as any number of commentators have observed, these include objects of both useful and fine art, although literary works would exemplify the poetic *par excellence*. The object of poetics is thus distinct from natural things (the forces and atoms examined by physics, or the organisms considered in biology), and from practical things (human societies, which are the object of politics, or right or prudent action, which is the object of ethics). It is crucial to bear this in mind, for the absolute discrimination of the natural and the practical from the poetic is not only the hallmark of Aristotle's investigation, but indeed the unassailable first principle of Formalism-Structuralism (even if the latter will attempt to hedge the point somewhat). Moreover, significant consequences follow from this inaugural distinction, in particular the fact that poems do not give us any theoretical or practical knowledge. Aristotle of course thought that the arts did have a social function, but he was adamant in his belief that this was not something poetics strictly defined could tell us about. And I believe he was entirely correct to do so. The object of poetics is the structure of artificial things, i.e., those formal relations that inhere in poems and constitute their specificity.

For Aristotle, to understand the nature of a thing requires an account of its causes, which are four in number: formal, material, efficient, and final. In the familiar example of the silver bowl, the formal cause is the shape, the material cause the silver, the efficient

cause the hammering of the silversmith (or if you like, the silversmith himself), and the final cause the purpose for which the bowl is constructed (to hold grapes, or to be use in religious rituals, for instance). When it comes to fine art, this schema of causes still holds, but with one important twist: the final cause of products of fine art is just to be what they are. The purpose of a tragedy, for example, is to be the best-formed tragedy it can be. Faults in construction (implausible actions or speeches by characters, the use of a *deus ex machina*) are merely that. It's no good, on an Aristotelian view, saying that such and such a work is decadent or is likely to corrupt -- Plato's charge against nearly all the extant literary art in classical Athens -- for these are extra-poetic concerns.

The focus of the early chapters of the *Poetics*, therefore, is on the material, formal and efficient causes of art. By describing their characteristic realization in particular arts, Aristotle is able to differentiate among them, and ultimately to establish the definition of tragedy as an art form, his principal objective in the treatise. I'm going to go over this ground rather quickly, and with the sole purpose of highlighting the similarities and differences between Aristotelian formalism and its heirs in twentieth-century Slavic poetics.

Arts differ first in their materials of imitation, color and shape in the visual arts, rhythm, speech, and harmony in the auditory or performing arts (1447a. 20-22). Not all the arts utilize all the materials of imitation; for example, "dancers imitate rhythms alone without harmony [or speech, obviously]" (1447a27). The distinguishing mark of dramatic art (at least as it was practiced in Aristotle's time) is its use of all three material causes of verbal art, though not always in every part (some speeches were spoken without musical accompaniment and music could occur when no one was speaking; Nietzsche was thus not simply wrong to see in Wagnerian opera the analogue in principle, if not in actual achievement, of Greek tragedy).

Secondly, the arts can be differentiated according to their objects of imitation. These for Aristotle are always agents, i.e., human subjects capable of action. One commentator has put the matter very well and I shall simply quote him to elucidate the point: "All art imitates human agents . . . either by imitating man in the fullest, most concrete sense -- that is, man as agent or man as possessing definite traits of character acting or being acted upon situations determined by agents -- or by imitating some aspect of man abstracted from his total being" (Telford 1961, 72). This provides the basis for the famous differentiation of tragedy from comedy: "for the latter wishes to imitate men worse than those of now, the former who are better" (1448a.17-18).

Finally, works of art can be distinguished by their manner of imitation. Here, as in the previous criterion, the examples adduced are entirely literary. The manners of imitation discussed are two: narration (which is proper to epic) and direct imitation of action and speech (which is proper to drama). As is well-known, the bulk of the remainder of the *Poetics* will be devoted to discussing tragedy as one kind of imitative object, giving a taxonomy of its necessary parts, establishing a hierarchy among them, and presenting many examples of better and worse ways to construct tragic forms. Epic is also taken up

briefly, but only to distinguish it from tragedy. The promised consideration of comedy never materializes (or, as some believe, it has been lost).

What is evident on even a first reading of the *Poetics* is the rather narrow scope of its accomplishment. While the lineaments of a full-blown theory of literary art can be gleaned from it, no such theory is made explicit in the text that has come down to us. In fact, one can legitimately doubt that such a theory would ever have been proposed by Aristotle himself, since from what we do know of his manner of proceeding, poetic science advances only by describing the nature of kinds of imitation, tragedy versus comedy, tragedy versus epic, the art of the *aulos* or the *kithara* versus that of the *dithyramb*, and so forth. Thus, for Aristotle, there is no such thing as a global theory of literature (except in the most general seems that literary texts are all imitations, but so are paintings, statues, and songs; or that literature imitates the actions and passions of men, but so does the dance). There can only be scientific descriptions of features necessary to various literary kinds. On some accounts, this could scarcely be called science at all, since the accent falls so heavily on the empirical and the descriptive, rather than on the causal and the explanatory. Aristotle's appeal to the innateness of imitation in human nature, and the intrinsic pleasure we derive from imitating or observing imitations, a pleasure linked to learning (1448b.5-20), is surely the weakest point in the *Poetics*, if also the most provocative. I shall return to this problem area later, but for now I want to move forward to compare the research program of Formalism-Structuralism with its Aristotelian forebear.

One signal difference between early Russian Formalism and the method of the *Poetics* lies in the former's insistence not just on the possibility but the necessity of a global science of literature. Concepts like "literariness" and "deautonomization" are presented as universal features of literary texts, that which distinguishes them from, say, ordinary language or discourse. Secondly, as Bakhtin/Medvedev observed, early Formalism focused almost exclusively on what Aristotle would have called the material cause of literature, language as an autonomous system of signification locally determined in its effects, to the exclusion both of the efficient and the formal causes. Despite the axial distinction between story and plot, it is by no means clear that analyses like Sklovskij's famous essay on *Tristram Shandy* produce a concept of plot in the rigorous Aristotelian sense of the term. Also, in breaking with positivist notions of the relationship between the author and the text, Formalism effectively (if temporarily) brackets the entire problem of efficient causality.

This latter strategy poses an interesting dilemma, which can be stated in the form of a question: who or what is the agent of literary production, once the author as biographical subject has dropped out of the equation? For Formalism *stricto sensu*, Jakobson's famous pronouncement gives the definitive answer: "If the study of literature wants to become a science, it must recognize the device as it only hero" (quoted in Medvedve/Bakhtin 1978, 117). The efficient cause of any literary work is the immanent tendencies within the aesthetic horizons of a given period. Summarizing an early text by Mukarovsky (one that can be characterized as "a straightforward outgrowth of formalism" [p. 27], Frantisek Galan makes the point thus: "a poet is not free to choose any random configuration or

structure of elements -- any form -- but must confront the canon inherited from his or her precursors. It is not by delving into the poet's private or social life that the critic can uncover the reasons why and the way in which the particular poem came about. Rather, it is necessary that the critic come to grips with the state of aesthetic norms of the time, to which the poet must have reacted: (Galan 1985, 25).

In this very formulation, we see the door opening to the passage from Formalism to Structuralism. For once it is conceded that aesthetic norms are historical and contingent, at the same time that they are trans-personal, instantiated in a system rather than in individual works, the domain of formal poetics is no longer sufficient to account for the nature and causality of works of art. The canonical statement of this shift in emphasis is surely Mukarovsky's "Art as a Semiotic Fact," where the programmatic concept of the aesthetic sign is presented as follows:

> The objective study of the phenomenon of art must regard the work of art as a sign composed of a sensory symbol created by the artist, a "meaning" (= aesthetic object) lodged in the social consciousness, and relation to the thing signified -- a relation that refers to the entire context of social phenomena. (Mukarovsky 1978, 85)

The direction of Mukarovsky's own research would be two-fold. In what Peter Steiner has called the "second stage of Mukarovsky's structuralism" (Mukarorvsky 1978, xxv), the accent fell on the socio-historical horizon of aesthetic codes. But from the late 1930s onward, the problem of aesthetic universals increasingly occupied him. The position he ultimately adopted is captured in the following quotation:

> Let us proceed from the fact that the ultimate source of aesthetic norms -- and of all norms alike -- is man's attitude toward the world. And man, despite all his historical social changeability, is by his physical and partially also by mental organization an anthropological constant. Well then, are there some principles related to aesthetic norms which could constitute a permanent basis for them? Yes, there are; one such principle is the rhythm given by the physiological processes in the human body; another anthropological constant is the symmetry furnished by the consequences for the physical and mental behavior of man. (Mukarovsky 1978 xxx)

Mukarovsky reproduces here one of the oldest shibboleths of aesthetics in the West: as Goethe and Schiller asserted at the end of the eighteenth century, the specificity of the aesthetic is grounded in human physiology, more particularly, in coordination between mental activity and the biological structures of the species. Structural aesthetics finds its ultimate warrant in cognitive psychology. Doubtless, there is a measure of truth in this position, since the special cognitive attainments of the human species are clearly necessary for the production of art works. We know of no such thing as simian sonatas or canine Quattrocento, while archeological evidence can be cited to show that all human cultures have produced art works. But what tends to drop out of the equation between

species-specific capacities and structures and individual art works is just the historical specificity of the latter. Structural aesthetics remains weak where formalism is comparatively strong: in the description of the formal features of particular, historically realized artifacts.

The acuteness of Mukarovsky's dilemma is revealed in his essay "The Individual and Literary Development." In that text he locates the principle of the individuation and change in what he labels "personality": "personality comprises a focal point at which all the external influences that can affect literature meet, and at the same time it is the starting point from which they penetrate literary development (Mukarovsky 1977, 168). Far from veering back in the direction of some personalist conception of aesthetic creation, or what would perhaps be the more likely temptation, towards a Gadamerian conception of the classic, however, Mukarovsky pointedly situates personality within the overarching determinations of historical development:

> Here [in the individual work of art] the past and the future are always implied in the present, and therefore not even the disturbance caused by the partial disagreement between the creator's (the poet's) dispositions and the preceding state of the structure lacks predetermination. The choice of appropriate individuals for the realization of a certain developmental tendency must certainly be presupposed with respect to a negative relation to the preceding structure. Thus not even the very contents of personality, the set (the quality and the hierarchy) of its dispositions, are unrelated to the immanent development of literature, are accidental with regard to this evolution. (174)

The model of literary history adduced in this passage would seem to return to a strictly Formalist conception of the immanent development of the literary series, not to mention its hypostatization of absolute determinacy, the mastery of the accidental or allegory in a teleological structure. One can find evidence elsewhere in Mukarovsky's writings of this period for his concept of evolution as an essential homeostasis between structure and event, rendering more or less unthinkable any notion like a "revolution in poetic language" (see Mukarovsky 1978, 3-16, especially 4-6). Further, on the global theory of the social origin of signs which Mukarovsky endorses, the ultimate determining facts of literary evolution would have to lie beyond literary works themselves, so that what Mukarovsky has called "personality" is less the realization of certain intra-literary potentials (as would be the case in a strict Formalism) than "a bundle of dispositions, either inherent or acquired (through education, through the influence of the natural and social milieux, through occupation, etc.)" (Mukarvosky 1977, 178).

Clearly, Mukarovsky treads on dangerous ground here, since such a model of the relationship of individuals to history risks falling into the very sociologism that Formalism-Structuralism had rejected from the first. Mukarvosky recognizes this danger, and attempts to deflect it in the final sentences of the essay. Although he names no names, it would seem that his target here is vulgar marxist literary sociology:

> The fact that a poet comes from a certain social stratum, for example, can be -- and most probably will be -- a factor in his mental structure, but even the extreme case in which this fact remains -- especially if it is paralyzed by another stronger influence -- without any effect is conceivable. If social origin has become a factor, its influence is not necessarily direct; the poet can be an exponent of another stratum than the one from which he has come or several strata in succession. Indeed, he can even become an adversary of the stratum from which he has come. (179)

It should not be necessary to point out that the best examples of marxist criticism of the arts, from Marx and Engels on Balzac down to Benjamin on Proust, Macherey on Jules Verne and John Berger on Picasso, strictly observe the protocols of interpretation bruited here. This is to say, what I expect you have already guessed, that the apparent antagonism between the sociological dimensions of Mukarovsky's project and historical materialism is more superficial and conjunctural than substantial and theoretical.

Still, it would be wrong to say that Prague Structuralism is just marxism *mangue.* Mukarovsk's continuing entanglement in the classical problematic of aesthetics, his commitment to a resolution of the antinomy between subject and structure in cognitive psychology, separates him decisively from the key tenets of historical materialism, all of which derive from Marx's famous axiom in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (Marx 1970, 21) For historical materialism, the key category in literary or aesthetic analysis must necessarily be ideology, which is at once universal in form and historically contingent in its contents.

It will come as no surprise to at least some of you that my route through this area will follow certain indications given by Louis Althusser. I shall begin with his much vilified description of art versus ideology in the "Letter on Art in Reply to Andre Daspre." The key passage is a follows:

> Art (I mean authentic art, not works of an average or mediocre level) does not give us a *knowledge* in the *strict sense,* it therefore does not replace knowledge (in the modern sense: scientific knowledge), but what it gives us does nevertheless maintain a certain *specific relationship* with knowledge . . . the peculiarity of art is to "make us see," "make us perceive," "make us feel" something which *alludes* to reality. If we take the case of the novel, Balzac or Solzhenitsyn . . . , they make us *see, perceive,* (but not *know*) something which *alludes* to reality . . . What art makes us *see,* and therefore gives us to in the form of *"seeing*" "*perceiving*" and "*feeling"* (which is not the form of *knowing*), is the *ideology* from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it *alludes* . . . Balzac and Solzhenitsyn give us a "view" of the ideology to which their work alludes and with which it is constantly fed, a view which presupposes a *retreat,* an *internal distantiation* from the very ideology from which their novels emerged.

> They make us "perceive" (but not know) in some sense *from the inside*, by an *internal distance*, the very ideology in which they are held. (Althusser 1971, 222-3)

Leaving aside the slip about "authentic art," a category that remains largely *impense* in Althusser" work, we can recognize here the distinctive features of historical materialist aesthetics, its agreement with certain aspects of Formalism and Structuralism, as well as its divergence from them.

What does Althusser say? First, art is not knowledge. Like Aristotle, he distinguishes between the theoretical domain of the sciences and the productive domain of the arts. Second, art is not ideology, or more precisely, it is ideology but ideology presented in an unusual way. It is ideology displace from its ordinary conditions of functioning; art is ideology made visible. To borrow from a famous slogan of the early Formalists, the specificity of art is to lay bare the device of ideology.

At this point, it will be useful to recall Aristotle's system of causes and to deploy them in an analysis of Althusser's description of the aesthetic function in the passage cited, comparing this with the somewhat different formulations made by the Formalists and Structuralists. For Althusser, the material cause of the work of art is neither matter in the ordinary sense (color and shape in the visual arts), nor in the somewhat more figurative sense that language can be said to be the material cause of literature. Rather, on Althusser's account, the material cause of art is ideology. In the Aristotelian schema, the closest analogue to ideology would be thought (*dianoia*), although ideology is probably a larger category than this, encompassing diction (*lexis*) and character (*ethos*) as well.

Somewhat more startling is the realization that ideology is also the efficient cause of the text. It is certainly not the author whose intentions govern the text's structure, as Althusser makes plain in another place: "at issue here is the play's latent structure and nothing else . . . what counts, beyond the words, the characters and the action of the play, is the internal relation of the basic elements of its structure. I would go further. It does not matter whether Bertolazzi [author of the text in question, *El Nost Milan*] consciously wished for this structure, or unconsciously produced it: it constitutes the essence of his work" (Althusser 1977, 141). Nor, as the early Formalists would have it, is the efficient cause literature itself. Althusser is quite explicit on this point in disagreeing with his interlocutor Daspre, who had claimed that Balzac "*was forced by the logic of his art to abandon certain of his political conceptions in his work as a novelist*." Althusser replies: "The fact that the content of the work of Balzac and Tolstoy is 'detached' from their political ideology and in some way makes us 'see' it from the *outside*, makes us 'perceive' it by a distantiation inside that ideology, *presupposes that ideology itself*. It is certainly possible to say that it is an 'effect' of *their art* as novelists that it produces this distance inside their ideology, which makes us 'perceive' it, but it is not possible to say, as you do, that art '*has its own logic'* which *'made Balzac abandon his political conceptions.'* On the contrary, *only because he retained them could he produce his work*, only because he stuck to his political ideology could he produce *in it* this internal 'distance' which gives us a critical 'view' of it" (Althusser 1971 224-5).

This brings us to the real nub of the issue: the means by which art produces this "internal distance" from the ideology it presents, and out of which it has been made. What, to reinvoke once more Aristotle's categories, is the formal cause of art works? Aristotle's answer for narrative or dramatic art was the plot, the causally ordered sequence of events that gives the action its particular shape. In one sense, this conception of form would hold for Althusser as well, as his analysis of *El Nost Milan* illustrates. The sequence of the action is decisive for the play's emotional power and its thematic point. But whereas in Aristotle's model for the well-made artifact, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the resolution of the plot involves the titular hero's recognizing the meaning of the events he has witnessed, Althusser's more properly Brechtian poetics hypothesizes a structure of events (or in the case of Cremonini's paintings, of shapes) that is nowhere presented as such in the text itself: "The structure is nowhere exposed, nowhere does it constitute the object of a speech or a dialogue. Nowhere can it be perceived directly in the play as can the visible characters or the course of the action. But it is there, in the tacit relation between the people's time and the time of the tragedy, in their mutual imbalance, in their incessant 'interference' and finally in their true and delusive criticism" (Althusser 1977, 141-2).

The key concepts in the Althusserian theory of art are nothing other than contradiction and overdetermination, which underpin the quite un-Aristotelian and anti-aesthetic (in the classical usage of the term) notion that the formal relations among elements in an artifact are untotalizable. Art works mobilize ideological materials in a structure that foregrounds their mutual incompatibility. In *Lord Jim* or in the Michael Radford film *White Mischief*, for example, plot, character, and thought combine to show the inherent contradiction between the code of honor invoked to justify imperial adventure and the ruthless pursuit of individual advantage required to sustain it. Or, to take a classical example and subject it to an Althusserian (rather than an Aristotelian) analysis, one could interpret the *Oedipus* as the presentation of an unresolved contradiction between the requirements of social order and the necessity to vest power and authority in individuals. One could, that is, see in the play the same problem that structures Rousseau's *Social Contract* in the tension between *etat* and *souverian.*

What, then, is the object of literary science for historical materialism? It is none other than the overdetermined structure of contradiction, the formal means of representation, that literary texts can be shown to exhibit. The contradiction is presented on the literal level of the text, in thought, character, and action, but its motivation lies elsewhere -- in the ideological signifies for which these are the overdetermined signifiers. It therefore follows that literary scholarship is a sub-discipline of the global science of the history of social formations which marxism has always claimed to be, and that the investigation of the formal structure of literary texts is subjacent to the study of ideologies. This need not diminish or belittle the importance of literary study. It was Marx himself who confessed to have learned more about the capitalist mode of production from reading Balzac than from all the works of classical political economy. Aristotle was correct to say that we learn from imitations, but wrong to believe that what we learn is only the structure or form of the imitation itself. We also learn, if only provisionally and partially, about the things to which the imitation alludes.

The task of any consequent materialist science of literature is to transform the ideological problematic presented in literary texts into a knowledge of the text's own ideology. The extent to which such knowledge can contribute to our understanding of actual historical societies is an empirical and contingent problem, dependent upon the level of explicit knowledge already available about the particular society, and also upon the perspicuousness of the text itself. None of this can be decided in advance. It remains an open question, in my mind at least, whether the existing histories of the *belle epogue* are more or less insightful about certain aspects French society in that era than is Proust's *Recherche.* As Walter Benjamin once observed, the truth of Proust's text will only be revealed at the moment of the bourgeoisie's final struggle. The recent developments in the Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union reveal all too clearly that that moment has yet to arrive.

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