

# Marxism and Literature

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## Introduction

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This book is written in a time of radical change. Its subject, Marxism and Literature, is part of this change. Even twenty years ago, and especially in the English-speaking countries, it would have been possible to assume, on the one hand, that Marxism is a settled body of theory or doctrine, and, on the other hand, that Literature is a settled body of work, or kinds of work, with known general qualities and properties. A book of this kind might then reasonably have explored problems of the relations between them or, assuming a certain relationship, passed quickly to specific applications. The situation is now very different. Marxism, in many fields, and perhaps especially in cultural theory, has experienced at once a significant revival and a related openness and flexibility of theoretical development. Literature, meanwhile, for related reasons, has become problematic in quite new ways.

The purpose of this book is to introduce this period of active development, and to do so in the only way that seems appropriate to a body of thinking still in movement, by attempting at once to clarify and to contribute to it. This involves, necessarily, reviewing earlier positions, both Marxist and non-Marxist. But what is offered is not a summary; it is both a critique and an argument.

One way of making clear my sense of the situation from which this book begins is to describe, briefly, the development of my own position, in relation to Marxism and to literature, which, between them, in practice as much as in theory, have preoccupied most of my working life. My first contacts with Marxist literary argument occurred when I came to Cambridge to read English in 1939: not in the Faculty but in widespread student discussion. I was already relatively familiar with Marxist, or at least socialist and communist, political and economic analysis and argument. My experience of growing up in a working-class family had led me to accept the basic political position which they supported and clarified. The cultural and literary arguments, as I then encountered them, were in effect an extension from this, or a mode of affiliation to it. I did not then clearly realize this. The dependence, I believe, is still not generally

realized, in its full implications. Hardly anyone becomes a Marxist for primarily cultural or literary reasons, but for compelling political and economic reasons. In the urgencies of the thirties or the seventies that is understandable, but it can mean that a style of thought and certain defining propositions are picked up and applied, in good faith, as part of a political commitment, without necessarily having much independent substance and indeed without necessarily following from the basic analysis and argument. This is how I would now describe my own position as a student between 1939 and 1941, in which a confident but highly selective Marxism co-existed, awkwardly, with my ordinary academic work, until the incompatibility — fairly easily negotiable as between students and what is seen as a teaching establishment — became a problem not for campaigns or polemics but, harshly enough, for myself and for anything that I could call my own thinking. What I really learned from, and shared with, the dominant tones of that English Marxist argument was what I would now call, still with respect, a radical populism. It was an active, committed, popular tendency, concerned rather more (and to its advantage) with making literature than with judging it, and concerned above all to relate active literature to the lives of the majority of our own people. At the same time, alongside this, its range even of Marxist ideas was relatively narrow, and there were many problems and kinds of argument, highly developed in specialized studies, with which it did not connect and which it could therefore often only dismiss. As the consequent difficulties emerged, in the areas of activity and interest with which I was most directly and personally concerned, I began sensing and defining a set of problems which have since occupied most of my work. Exceptionally isolated in the changing political and cultural formations of the later forties and early fifties, I tried to discover an area of studies in which some of these questions might be answered, and some even posed. At the same time I read more widely in Marxism, continuing to share most of its political and economic positions, but carrying on my own cultural and literary work and inquiry at a certain conscious distance. That period is summed up in my book *Culture and Society* and, in the present context, in its chapter on 'Marxism and Culture'.

But from the mid-fifties new formations were emerging, notably what came to be called the New Left. I found, at this time, an

immediate affinity with my own kind of cultural and literary work (in positions which had in fact been latent as early as the work in *Politics and Letters* in 1947 and 1948; positions which remained undeveloped because the conditions for such a formation did not then fully exist). I found also, and crucially, Marxist thinking which was different, in some respects radically different, from what I and most people in Britain knew as Marxism. There was contact with older work that had not previously come our way — that of Lukács and of Brecht, for example. There was new contemporary work in Poland, in France, and in Britain itself. And while some of this work was exploring new ground, much of it, just as interestingly, was seeing Marxism as itself a historical development, with highly variable and even alternative positions.

I began then reading widely in the history of Marxism, trying especially to trace the particular formation, so decisive in cultural and literary analysis, which I now recognize as having been primarily systematized by Plekhanov, with much support from the later work of Engels, and popularized by dominant tendencies in Soviet Marxism. To see that theoretical formation clearly, and to trace its hybridization with a strong native radical populism, was to understand both my respect for and my distance from what I had hitherto known as Marxism *tout court*. It was also to gain a sense of the degree of selection and interpretation which, in relation both to Marx and to the whole long Marxist argument and inquiry, that familiar and orthodox position effectively represented. I could then read even the English Marxists of the thirties differently, and especially Christopher Caudwell. It is characteristic that the argument about Caudwell, which I had followed very carefully in the late forties and early fifties, had centred on the question characteristic of the style of that orthodox tradition: 'are his ideas Marxist or not?'. It is a style that has persisted, in some corners, with confident assertions that this or that is or is not a Marxist position. But now that I knew more of the history of Marxism, and of the variety of selective and alternative traditions within it, I could at last get free of the model which had been such an obstacle, whether in certainty or in doubt: the model of fixed and known Marxist positions, which in general had only to be applied, and the corresponding dismissal of all other kinds of thinking as non-Marxist, revisionist, neo-Hegelian, or bourgeois. Once the cen-

tral body of thinking was itself seen as active, developing, unfinished, and persistently contentious, many of the questions were open again, and, as a matter of fact, my respect for the body of thinking as a whole, including the orthodox tradition now seen as a tendency within it, significantly and decisively increased. I have come to see more and more clearly its radical differences from other bodies of thinking, but at the same time its complex connections with them, and its many unresolved problems.

It was in this situation that I felt the excitement of contact with more new Marxist work: the later work of Lukács, the later work of Sartre, the developing work of Goldmann and of Althusser, the variable and developing syntheses of Marxism and some forms of structuralism. At the same time, within this significant new activity, there was further access to older work, notably that of the Frankfurt School (in its most significant period in the twenties and thirties) and especially the work of Walter Benjamin; the extraordinarily original work of Antonio Gramsci; and, as a decisive element of a new sense of the tradition, newly translated work of Marx and especially the *Grundrisse*. As all this came in, during the sixties and early seventies, I often reflected, and in Cambridge had direct cause to reflect, on the contrast between the situation of the socialist student of literature in 1940 and in 1970. More generally I had reason to reflect on the contrast for any student of literature, in a situation in which an argument that had drifted into deadlock, or into local and partial positions, in the late thirties and forties, was being vigorously and significantly reopened.

In the early seventies I began discussing these issues in lectures and classes in Cambridge: at first with some opposition from some of my Faculty colleagues, who knew (but did not know) what Marxism and Literature amounted to. But this mattered less than the fact that my own long and often internal and solitary debate with what I had known as Marxism now took its place in a serious and extending international inquiry. I had opportunities to extend my discussions in Italy, in Scandinavia, in France, in North America, and in Germany, and with visitors from Hungary, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union. This book is the result of that period of discussion, in an international context in which I have had the sense, for the first time in my life, of belonging to a sphere and dimension of work in which I could

feel at home. But I have felt, at every point, the history of the previous thirty-five years, during which any contribution I might make had been developing in complex and in direct if often unrecorded contact, throughout, with Marxist ideas and arguments.

That individual history may be of some significance in relation to the development of Marxism and of thinking about Marxism in Britain during that period. But it has a more immediate relevance to the character of this book, and to its organization. In my first part I discuss and analyse four basic concepts: 'culture', 'language', 'literature', and 'ideology'. None of these is exclusively a Marxist concept, though Marxist thinking has contributed to them — at times significantly, in general unevenly. I examine specifically Marxist uses of the concepts, but I am concerned also to locate them within more general developments. This follows from the intellectual history I have described, in that I am concerned to see different forms of Marxist thinking as interactive with other forms of thinking, rather than as a separated history, either sacred or alien. At the same time, the re-examination of these fundamental concepts, and especially those of language and of literature, opens the way to the subsequent critique and contribution. In my second part I analyse and discuss the key concepts of Marxist cultural theory, on which — and this is an essential part of my argument — Marxist literary theory seems to me in practice to depend. It is not only an analysis of elements of a body of thinking; it explores significant variations and, at particular points and especially in its later chapters, introduces concepts of my own. In my third part, I again extend the discussion, into questions of literary theory, in which variants of Marxism are now interactive with other related and at times alternative kinds of thinking. In each part, while presenting analysis and discussion of key elements and variants of Marxist thinking, I am concerned also to develop a position which, as a matter of theory, I have arrived at over the years. This differs, at several key points, from what is most widely known as Marxist theory, and even from many of its variants. It is a position which can be briefly described as cultural materialism: a theory of the specificities of material cultural and literary production within historical materialism. Its details belong to the argument as a whole, but I must say, at this point, that it is, in my view, a Marxist theory, and indeed that in

its specific fields it is, in spite of and even because of the relative unfamiliarity of some of its elements, part of what I at least see as the central thinking of Marxism.

To sustain analysis, discussion, and the presentation of new or modified theoretical positions, I have had to keep the book in a primarily theoretical dimension. In many quarters this will be well enough understood, and even welcomed. But I ought to say, knowing the strength of other styles of work, and in relation especially to many of my English readers, that while this book is almost wholly theoretical, every position in it was developed from the detailed practical work that I have previously undertaken, and from the consequent interaction with other, including implicit, modes of theoretical assumption and argument. I am perhaps more conscious than anyone of the need to give detailed examples to clarify some of the less familiar concepts, but, on the one hand, this book is intended as in some respects a starting-point for new work, and, on the other hand, some of the examples I would offer are already written in earlier books. Thus anyone who wants to know what I 'really, practically' mean by certain concepts can look, to take some leading instances, at the exemplification of signs and notations in *Drama in Performance*; of conventions in *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*; of structures of feeling in *Modern Tragedy, The Country and the City*, and *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*; of traditions, institutions, and formations, and of the dominant, the residual, and the emergent in parts of *Culture and Society* and in the second part of *The Long Revolution*; and of material cultural production in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. I would now write some of these examples differently, from a more developed theoretical position and with the advantage of a more extended and a more consistent vocabulary (the latter itself exemplified in *Keywords*). But the examples need to be mentioned, as a reminder that this book is not a separated work of theory; it is an argument based on what I have learned from all that previous work, set into a new and conscious relation with Marxism.

I am glad, finally, to be able to say how much I have learned from colleagues and students in many countries and especially in the University of Cambridge; in Stanford University, California; in McGill University, Montreal; in the Istituto Universitario Orientale, Naples; in the University of Bremen; and in the Insti-

tute for the Study of Cultural Development, Belgrade. I owe personal thanks to John Fekete and, over many years, to Edward Thompson and Stuart Hall. The book could not have been written without the unfailing co-operation and support of my wife.

R.W.

# 1. Culture

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At the very centre of a major area of modern thought and practice, which it is habitually used to describe, is a concept, 'culture', which in itself, through variation and complication, embodies not only the issues but the contradictions through which it has developed. The concept at once fuses and confuses the radically different experiences and tendencies of its formation. It is then impossible to carry through any serious cultural analysis without reaching towards a consciousness of the concept itself: a consciousness that must be, as we shall see, historical. This hesitation, before what seems the richness of developed theory and the fullness of achieved practice, has the awkwardness, even the *gaucherie*, of any radical doubt. It is literally a moment of crisis: a jolt in experience, a break in the sense of history; forcing us back from so much that seemed positive and available — all the ready insertions into a crucial argument, all the accessible entries into immediate practice. Yet the insight cannot be sealed over. When the most basic concepts — the concepts, as it is said, from which we begin — are suddenly seen to be not concepts but problems, not analytic problems either but historical movements that are still unresolved, there is no sense in listening to their sonorous summons or their resounding clashes. We have only, if we can, to recover the substance from which their forms were cast.

Society, economy, culture: each of these 'areas', now tagged by a concept, is a comparatively recent historical formulation. 'Society' was active fellowship, company, 'common doing', before it became the description of a general system or order. 'Economy' was the management of a household and then the management of a community before it became the description of a perceived system of production, distribution, and exchange. 'Culture', before these transitions, was the growth and tending of crops and animals, and by extension the growth and tending of human faculties. In their modern development the three concepts did not move in step, but each, at a critical point, was affected by the movement of the others. At least this is how we may now see their history. But in the run of the real changes what was being put into the new ideas, and to some extent fixed

in them, was an always complex and largely unprecedented experience. 'Society' with its received emphasis on immediate relationships was a conscious alternative to the formal rigidities of an inherited, then seen as an imposed, order: a 'state'. 'Economy', with its received emphasis on management, was a conscious attempt to understand and control a body of activities which had been taken not only as necessary but as given. Each concept then interacted with a changing history and experience. 'Society', chosen for its substance and immediacy, the 'civil society' which could be distinguished from the formal rigidities of 'state', became in its turn abstract and systematic. New descriptions became necessary for the immediate substance which 'society' eventually excluded. For example, 'individual', which had once meant indivisible, a member of a group, was developed to become not only a separate but an opposing term—the 'individual' and 'society'. In itself and in its derived and qualifying terms, 'society' is a formulation of the experience we now summarize as 'bourgeois society': its active creation, against the rigidities of the feudal 'state'; its problems and its limits, within this kind of creation, until it is paradoxically distinguished from and even opposed to its own initial impulses. Similarly, the rationality of 'economy', as a way of understanding and controlling a system of production, distribution, and exchange, in direct relation to the actual institution of a new kind of economic system, persisted but was limited by the very problems it confronted. The very product of rational institution and control was projected as 'natural', a 'natural economy', with laws like the laws of the ('unchanging') physical world.

Most modern social thought begins from these concepts, with the inherent marks of their formation and their unresolved problems usually taken for granted. There is then 'political', 'social' or 'sociological', and 'economic' thought, and these are believed to describe 'areas', perceived entities. It is then usually added, though sometimes reluctantly, that there are of course other 'areas': notably the 'psychological' and the 'cultural'. But while it is better to admit these than neglect them, it is usually not seen that their forms follow, in practice, from the unresolved problems of the initial shaping concepts. Is 'psychology' 'individual' ('psychological') or 'social'? That problem can be left for dispute within the appropriate discipline, until it is noticed that it is the

problem of what is 'social' that the dominant development of 'society' has left unresolved. Are we to understand 'culture' as 'the arts', as 'a system of meanings and values', or as a 'whole way of life', and how are these to be related to 'society' and 'the economy'? The questions have to be asked, but we are unlikely to be able to answer them unless we recognize the problems which were inherent in the concepts 'society' and 'economy' and which have been passed on to concepts like 'culture' by the abstraction and limitation of those terms.

The concept of 'culture', when it is seen in the broad context of historical development, exerts a strong pressure against the limited terms of all the other concepts. That is always its advantage; it is always also the source of its difficulties, both in definition and comprehension. Until the eighteenth century it was still a noun of process: the culture of something—crops, animals, minds. The decisive changes in 'society' and 'economy' had begun earlier, in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; much of their essential development was complete before 'culture' came to include its new and elusive meanings. These cannot be understood unless we realize what had happened to 'society' and 'economy'; but equally none can be fully understood unless we examine a decisive modern concept which by the eighteenth century needed a new word—*civilization*.

The notion of 'civilizing', as bringing men within a social organization, was of course already known; it rested on *civis* and *civitas*, and its aim was expressed in the adjective 'civil' as orderly, educated, or polite. It was positively extended, as we have seen, in the concept of 'civil society'. But 'civilization' was to mean more than this. It expressed two senses which were historically linked: an achieved state, which could be contrasted with 'barbarism', but now also an achieved state of development, which implied historical process and progress. This was the new historical rationality of the Enlightenment, in fact combined with a self-referring celebration of an achieved condition of refinement and order. It was this combination that was to be problematic. The developmental perspective of the characteristic eighteenth-century Universal History was of course a significant advance. It was the crucial step beyond the relatively static ('timeless') conception of history which had depended on religious or metaphysical assumptions. Men had made their

own history, in this special sense: that they (or some of them) had achieved 'civilization'. This process was secular and developmental, and in that sense historical. But at the same time it was a history that had culminated in an achieved state: in practice the metropolitan civilization of England and France. The insistent rationality which explored and informed all the stages and difficulties of this process came to an effective stop at the point where civilization could be said to have been achieved. Indeed all that could be rationally projected was the extension and triumph of these achieved values.

This position, already under heavy attack from older religious and metaphysical systems and their associated notions of order, became vulnerable in new ways. The two decisive responses of a modern kind were, first, the idea of culture, offering a different sense of human growth and development, and, second, the idea of socialism, offering a social and historical criticism of and alternative to 'civilization' and 'civil society' as fixed and achieved conditions. The extensions, transfers, and overlaps between all these shaping modern concepts, and between them and residual concepts of much older kinds, have been quite exceptionally complex.

'Civilization' and 'culture' (especially in its common early form as 'cultivation') were in effect, in the late eighteenth century, interchangeable terms. Each carried the problematic double sense of an achieved state and of an achieved state of development. Their eventual divergence has several causes. First, there was the attack on 'civilization' as superficial; an 'artificial' as distinct from a 'natural' state; a cultivation of 'external' properties—politeness and luxury—as against more 'human' needs and impulses. This attack, from Rousseau on through the Romantic movement, was the basis of one important alternative sense of 'culture'—as a process of 'inner' or 'spiritual' as distinct from 'external' development. The primary effect of this alternative was to associate culture with religion, art, the family and personal life, as distinct from or actually opposed to 'civilization' or 'society' in its new abstract and general sense. It was from this sense, though not always with its full implications, that 'culture' as a general process of 'inner' development was extended to include a descriptive sense of the means and works of such development: that is, 'culture' as a general classification of 'the arts', religion, and the institutions and practices

of meanings and values. Its relations with 'society' were then problematic, for these were evidently 'social' institutions and practices but were seen as distinct from the aggregate of general and 'external' institutions and practices now commonly called 'society'. The difficulty was ordinarily negotiated by relating 'culture', even where it was evidently social in practice, to the 'inner life' in its most accessible, secular forms: 'subjectivity', 'the imagination', and in these terms 'the individual'. The religious emphasis weakened, and was replaced by what was in effect a metaphysics of subjectivity and the imaginative process. 'Culture', or more specifically 'art' and 'literature' (themselves newly generalized and abstracted), were seen as the deepest record, the deepest impulse, and the deepest resource of the 'human spirit'. 'Culture' was then at once the secularization and the liberalization of earlier metaphysical forms. Its agencies and processes were distinctively human, and were generalized as subjective, but certain quasi-metaphysical forms—'the imagination', 'creativity', 'inspiration', 'the aesthetic', and the new positive sense of 'myth'—were in effect composed into a new pantheon.

This original break had been with 'civilization' in its assumed 'external' sense. But as secularization and liberalization continued, there was a related pressure on the concept of 'civilization' itself. This reached a critical point during the rapid development of industrial society and its prolonged social and political conflicts. In one view this process was part of the continuing development of civilization: a new and higher social order. But in another view civilization was the achieved state which these new developments were threatening to destroy. 'Civilization' then became an ambiguous term, denoting on the one hand enlightened and progressive development and on the other hand an achieved and threatened state, becoming increasingly retrospective and often in practice identified with the received glories of the past. In the latter sense 'civilization' and 'culture' again overlapped, as received states rather than as continuing processes. Thus, a new battery of forces was ranged against both culture and civilization: materialism, commercialism, democracy, socialism.

Yet 'culture', meanwhile, underwent yet another development. This is especially difficult to trace but is centrally important, since it led to 'culture' as a social—indeed specifically



anthropological and sociological—concept. The tension and interaction between this developing sense and the other sense of 'inner' process and 'the arts' remain evident and important.

There was always, in practice, some connection between the two developments, though the emphases came to be very different. The origin of this second sense is rooted in the ambiguity of 'civilization' as both an achieved state and an achieved state of development. What were the properties of this achieved state and correspondingly the agencies of its development? In the perspective of the Universal Histories the characteristic central property and agency was reason—an enlightened comprehension of ourselves and the world, which allows us to create higher forms of social and natural order, overcoming ignorance and superstition and the social and political forms to which they have led and which they support. History, in this sense, was the progressive establishment of more rational and therefore more civilized systems. Much of the confidence of this movement was drawn from the enlightenment embodied in the new physical sciences, as well as from the sense of an achieved social order. It is very difficult to distinguish this new secular sense of 'civilization' from a comparably secular sense of 'culture' as an interpretation of human development. Each was a modern idea in the sense that it stressed human capacity not only to understand but to build a human social order. This was the decisive difference of both ideas from the earlier derivation of social concepts and social orders from presumed religious or metaphysical states. But when it came to identifying the real motive forces, in this secular process of 'man making his own history', there were radical differences of view.

Thus one of the very earliest emphases on 'man making his own history' was that of Vico, in *The New Science* (from 1725). He asserted

a truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind. Whoever reflects on this cannot but marvel that the philosophers should have bent all their energies to the study of the world of nature, which, since God made it, He alone knows; and that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations or civil world, which, since men had made it, men could hope to know. (p. 331)\*

\* All references are to editions specified in the Booklist.

Here, against the grain of the time, the 'natural sciences' are rejected but the 'human sciences' given a startling new emphasis. We can know what we have made, indeed know by the fact of making. The specific interpretations which Vico then offered are now of little interest, but his description of a mode of development which was at once, and interactively, the shaping of societies and the shaping of human minds is probably the effective origin of the general social sense of 'culture'. The concept itself was remarkably advanced by Herder, in *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1784–91). He accepted the emphasis on the historical self-development of humanity, but argued that this was much too complex to be reduced to the evolution of a single principle, and especially to something so abstract as 'reason'; and, further, that it was much too variable to be reduced to a progressive unilinear development culminating in 'European civilization'. It was necessary, he argued, to speak of 'cultures' rather than 'culture', so as to acknowledge variability, and within any culture to recognize the complexity and variability of its shaping forces. The specific interpretations he then offered, in terms of 'organic' peoples and nations, and against the 'external universalism' of the Enlightenment, are elements of the Romantic movement and now of little active interest. But the idea of a fundamental social process which shapes specific and distinct 'ways of life' is the effective origin of the comparative social sense of 'culture' and its now necessary plural 'cultures'.

The complexity of the concept of 'culture' is then remarkable. It became a noun of 'inner' process, specialized to its presumed agencies in 'intellectual life' and 'the arts'. It became also a noun of general process, specialized to its presumed configurations in 'whole ways of life'. It played a crucial role in definitions of 'the arts' and 'the humanities', from the first sense. It played an equally crucial role in definitions of the 'human sciences' and the 'social sciences', in the second sense. Each tendency is ready to deny any proper use of the concept to the other, in spite of many attempts at reconciliation. In any modern theory of culture, but perhaps especially in a Marxist theory, this complexity is a source of great difficulty. The problem of knowing, at the outset, whether this would be a theory of 'the arts and intellectual life' in their relations to 'society', or a theory of the social

process which creates specific and different 'ways of life', is only the most obvious problem.

The first substantial problem is in attitudes towards 'civilization'. Here the decisive intervention of Marxism was the analysis of 'civil society', and what within its terms was known as 'civilization', as a specific historical form: bourgeois society as created by the capitalist mode of production. This provided an indispensable critical perspective, but it was still largely contained within the assumptions which had produced the concept: that of a progressive secular development, most obviously; but also that of a broadly unilinear development. Bourgeois society and capitalist production were at once heavily attacked and seen as historically progressive (the latter in received terms, as in "the bourgeoisie . . . has made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilized ones", *Communist Manifesto*, 53). Socialism would supersede them as the next and highest stage of the development.

It is important to compare this inherited perspective with other elements in Marxism and in the radical and socialist movements which preceded it. Often, especially in the earlier movements, influenced by an alternative tradition, including the radical critique of 'civilization', it was not the progressive but the fundamentally contradictory character of this development that was decisive. 'Civilization' had produced not only wealth, order, and refinement, but as part of the same process poverty, disorder, and degradation. It was attacked for its 'artificiality'—its glaring contrasts with a 'natural' or 'human' order. The values upheld against it were not those of the next higher stage of development, but of an essential human brotherhood, often expressed as something to be recovered as well as gained. These two tendencies in Marxism, and in the wider socialist movement, have often in effect been brought together, but in theory and especially in the analysis of subsequent historical practice need to be radically distinguished.

The next decisive intervention of Marxism was the rejection of what Marx called 'idealist historiography', and in that sense of the theoretical procedures of the Enlightenment. History was not seen (or not always or primarily seen) as the overcoming of ignorance and superstition by knowledge and reason. What that account and perspective excluded was material history, the history of labour, industry as the 'open book of the human

faculties'. The original notion of 'man making his own history' was given a new radical content by this emphasis on 'man making himself' through producing his own means of life. For all its difficulties in detailed demonstration this was the most important intellectual advance in all modern social thought. It offered the possibility of overcoming the dichotomy between 'society' and 'nature', and of discovering new constitutive relationships between 'society' and 'economy'. As a specification of the basic element of the social process of culture it was a recovery of the wholeness of history. It inaugurated the decisive inclusion of that material history which had been excluded from the 'so-called history of civilization, which is all a history of religions and states'. Marx's own history of capitalism is only the most eminent example.

But there are difficulties within this achievement. Its emphasis on social process, of a constitutive kind, was qualified by the persistence of an earlier kind of rationalism, related to the assumption of progressive unilinear development, as in one version of the discovery of the 'scientific laws' of society. This weakened the constitutive and strengthened a more instrumental perspective. Again, the stress on material history, especially within the necessary polemics of its establishment, was in one special way compromised. Instead of making cultural history material, which was the next radical move, it was made dependent, secondary, 'superstructural': a realm of 'mere' ideas, beliefs, arts, customs, determined by the basic material history. What matters here is not only the element of reduction; it is the reproduction, in an altered form, of the separation of 'culture' from material social life, which had been the dominant tendency in idealist cultural thought. Thus the full possibilities of the concept of culture as a constitutive social process, creating specific and different 'ways of life', which could have been remarkably deepened by the emphasis on a material social process, were for a long time missed, and were often in practice superseded by an abstracting unilinear universalism. At the same time the significance of the alternative concept of culture, defining 'intellectual life' and 'the arts', was compromised by its apparent reduction to 'superstructural' status, and was left to be developed by those who, in the very process of idealizing it, broke its necessary connections with society and history and, in the areas of psychology, art, and belief, developed a powerful

alternative sense of the constitutive human process itself. It is then not surprising that in the twentieth century this alternative sense has come to overlay and stifle Marxism, with some warrant in its most obvious errors, but without having to face the real challenge which was implicit, and so nearly clarified, in the original Marxist intervention.

In the complex development of the concept of 'culture', which has of course now been incorporated into so many different systems and practices, there is one decisive question which was returned to again and again in the formative period of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries but which was on the whole missed, or at least not developed, in the first stage of Marxism. This is the question of human language, which was an understandable preoccupation of the historians of 'civilization', and a central, even a defining question, for the theorists of a constitutive process of 'culture', from Vico to Herder and beyond. Indeed, to understand the full implications of the idea of a 'constitutive human process' it is to changing concepts of language that we must turn.

## 2. Language

A definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world. The received major categories—'world', 'reality', 'nature', 'human'—may be counterposed or related to the category 'language', but it is now a commonplace to observe that all categories, including the category 'language', are themselves constructions in language, and can thus only with an effort, and within a particular system of thought, be separated from language for relational inquiry. Such efforts and such systems, nevertheless, constitute a major part of the history of thought. Many of the problems which have emerged from this history are relevant to Marxism, and in certain areas Marxism itself has contributed to them, by extension from its basic revaluation, in historical materialism, of the received major categories. Yet it is significant that, by comparison, Marxism has contributed very little to thinking about language itself. The result has been either that limited and undeveloped versions of language as a 'reflection' of 'reality' have been taken for granted, or that propositions about language, developed within or in the forms of other and often antagonistic systems of thought, have been synthesized with Marxist propositions about other kinds of activity, in ways which are not only ultimately untenable but, in our own time, radically limiting to the strength of the social propositions. The effects on cultural theory, and in particular on thinking about literature, have been especially marked.

The key moments which should be of interest to Marxism, in the development of thinking about language, are, first, the emphasis on language as activity and, second, the emphasis on the history of language. Neither of these positions, on its own, is enough to restate the whole problem. It is the conjunction and consequent revaluation of each position that remains necessary. But in different ways, and with significant practical results, each position transformed those habitual conceptions of language which depended on and supported relatively static ways of thinking about human beings in the world.

The major emphasis on language as activity began in the eighteenth century, in close relation to the idea of men having

made their own society, which we have seen as a central element in the new concept of 'culture'. In the previously dominant tradition, through all its variations, 'language' and 'reality' had been decisively separated, so that philosophical inquiry was from the beginning an inquiry into the connections between these apparently separate orders. The pre-Socratic unity of the *logos*, in which language was seen as at one with the order of the world and of nature, with divine and human law, and with reason, had been decisively broken and in effect forgotten. The radical distinction between 'language' and 'reality', as between 'consciousness' and 'the material world', corresponding to actual and practical divisions between 'mental' and 'physical' activity, had become so habitual that serious attention seemed naturally concentrated on the exceptionally complicated consequent relations and connections. Plato's major inquiry into language (in the *Cratylus*) was centred on the problem of the correctness of naming, in which the interrelation of 'word' and 'thing' can be seen to originate either in 'nature' or in 'convention'. Plato's solution was in effect the foundation of idealist thought: there is an intermediate but constitutive realm, which is neither 'word' nor 'thing' but 'form', 'essence', or 'idea'. The investigation of either 'language' or 'reality' was then always, at root, an investigation of these constitutive (metaphysical) forms.

Yet, given this basic assumption, far-reaching inquiries into the uses of language could be undertaken in particular and specialized ways. Language as a way of indicating reality could be studied as *logic*. Language as an accessible segment of reality, especially in its fixed forms in writing, could be studied as *grammar*, in the sense of its formal and 'external' shape. Finally, within the distinction between language and reality, language could be conceived as an instrument used by men for specific and distinguishable purposes, and these could be studied in *rhetoric* and in the associated *poetics*. Through prolonged academic and scholastic development, these three great branches of language study—*logic*, *grammar*, and *rhetoric*—though formally associated in the medieval *trivium*, became specific and eventually separated disciplines. Thus though they made major practical advances, they either foreclosed examination of the form of the basic distinction between 'language' and 'reality', or determined the grounds, and especially the terms, in which such an examination might be made.

This is notably the case with the important medieval concept of *sign*, which has been so remarkably readopted in modern linguistic thought. 'Sign', from Latin *signum*, a mark or token, is intrinsically a concept based on a distinction between 'language' and 'reality'. It is an interposition between 'word' and 'thing' which repeats the Platonic interposition of 'form', 'essence', or 'idea', but now in accessible linguistic terms. Thus in Buridan 'natural signs' are the universal mental counterparts of reality and these are matched, by convention, with the 'artificial signs' which are physical sounds or letters. Given this starting-point, important investigations of the activity of language (but not of language as an activity) could be undertaken: for example, the remarkable speculative grammars of medieval thought, in which the power of sentences and of the modes of construction which underlay and complicated simple empirical notions of 'naming' was described and investigated. Meanwhile, however, the *trivium* itself, and especially grammar and rhetoric, moved into relatively formal, though immensely learned, demonstrations of the properties of a given body of 'classical' written material. What was later to be known as 'literary study', and from the early seventeenth century as 'criticism', developed from this powerful, prestigious, and limited mode.

Yet the whole question of the distinction between 'language' and 'reality' was eventually forced into consciousness, initially in a surprising way. Descartes, in reinforcing the distinction and making it more precise, and in demanding that the criterion of connection should be not metaphysical or conventional but grounded in scientific knowledge, provoked new questions by the very force of his scepticism about the old answers. It was in response to Descartes that Vico proposed his criterion that we can have full knowledge only of what we can ourselves make or do. In one decisive respect this response was reactionary. Since men have not in any obvious sense made the physical world, a powerful new conception of scientific knowledge was ruled out *a priori* and was, as before, reserved to God. Yet on the other hand, by insisting that we can understand society because we have made it, indeed that we understand it not abstractly but in the very process of making it, and that the activity of language is central in this process, Vico opened a whole new dimension.

It was and is difficult to grasp this dimension, initially

because Vico embedded it in what can be read as a schematic account of the stages of language development: the notorious three stages of divine, heroic, and human. Rousseau, repeating these three stages as 'historical' and interpreting them as stages of declining vigour, gave a form of argument to the Romantic Movement—the revival of literature as a revival of the 'original', 'primal' power of language. But this at once obscured the newly active sense of history (specializing it to regeneration and ultimately, as this failed, to reaction) and the newly active sense of language, which in being specialized to literature could be marked off as a special case, a special entity, a special function, leaving the 'non-literary' relations of language to reality as conventional and as alienated as before. To take Vico's three stages literally, or indeed as 'stages' at all, is to lose sight, as he did, of the dimension he had opened. For what was crucial, in his account of language, was that it emerged only at the human stage, the divine being that of mute ceremonies and rituals and the heroic that of gestures and signs. Verbal language is then distinctively human; indeed, constitutively human. This was the point taken up by Herder, who opposed any notion of language being 'given' to man (as by God) and, in effect, the apparently alternative notion of language being 'added' to man, as a special kind of acquisition or tool. Language is then, positively, a distinctively human opening of and opening to the world: not a distinguishable or instrumental but a constitutive faculty.

Historically this emphasis on language as constitutive, like the closely related emphasis on human development as culture, must be seen as an attempt both to preserve some idea of the generally human, in face of the analytical and empirical procedures of a powerfully developing natural science, and to assert an idea of human creativity, in face of the increased understanding of the properties of the physical world, and of consequently causal explanations from them. As such this whole tendency was in constant danger of becoming simply a new kind of idealism—'humanity' and 'creativity' being projected as essences—while the tendencies it opposed moved towards a new kind of objective materialism. This specific fission, so fateful in all subsequent thought, was in effect masked and ratified by a newly conventional distinction between 'art' (literature)—the sphere of 'humanity' and 'creativity'—and 'science' ('positive knowledge')—the knowable dimension of the physi-

cal world and of physical human beings within it. Each of the key terms—'art', 'literature', and 'science', together with the associated 'culture' and with such a newly necessary specialization as 'aesthetic' and the radical distinction between 'experience' and 'experiment'—changed in meaning between the early eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The resulting conflicts and confusions were severe, but it is significant that in the new situation of the nineteenth century the issues were never really joined on the ground of language, at any radical level, though it was precisely in relation to language that the newly conventional distinctions most needed to be challenged.

What happened instead was an extraordinary advance in empirical knowledge of languages, and a wholly remarkable analysis and classification of this knowledge in terms which set some of the basic questions aside. It is impossible to separate this movement from its political history, within the dynamic development of Western societies in a period of extending colonialism. Older studies of language had been largely contained within the model of the dead 'classical' languages (which still effectively determined 'grammar' in both its syntactic and literary senses) and of the 'derived' modern vernaculars. European exploration and colonization, meanwhile, had been dramatically expanding the available range of linguistic material. The critical encounter was between the European and Indian civilizations: not only in available languages but in European contact with the highly developed methods of Indic grammatical scholars; with their alternative body of 'classical' texts. It was as an Englishman in India that William Jones learned Sanskrit and from an observation of its resemblances to Latin and Greek began the work which led to classification of the Indo-European (Aryan) and other 'families' of languages.

This work, based on comparative analysis and classification, was procedurally very close to the evolutionary biology with which it is contemporary. It is one of the major periods of all scholarly investigation, empirically founding not only the major classifications of language families, including schemes of their evolutionary development and relationships, but also, within these schemes, discovering certain 'laws' of change, notably of sound-change. In one area this movement was 'evolutionary' in a particular sense: in its postulate of a proto-language (proto-Indo-European) from which the major 'family' had developed.

But in its later stages it was 'evolutionary' also in another sense. Increasing rigour in the study of sound-changes associated one branch of language study with natural science, so that a system of linguistic phonetics marched with physical studies of the language faculty and the evolutionary origins of speech. This tendency culminated in major work in the physiology of speech and in the field significantly designated within this area as experimental *psychology*.

This identification of language-use as a problem in *psychology* was to have major effects on concepts of language. But meanwhile within general language-studies there was a new phase which reinforced inherent tendencies to objectivism. What was characteristically studied in comparative philology was a body of records of language: in effect, centrally, the alien written word. This assumption of the defining material of study was already present, of course, in the earlier phase of 'classical' language studies: Greek, Latin, Hebrew. But then the modes of access to a wider range of languages repeated this earlier stance: that of the privileged (scientific) observer of a body of alien written material. Methodological decisions, substantially similar to those being developed in the closely related new science of anthropology, followed from this effective situation. On the one hand there was the highly productive application of modes of systematic observation, classification, and analysis. On the other hand there was the largely unnoticed consequence of the privileged situation of the observer: that he was observing (of course scientifically) within a differential mode of contact with alien material: in texts, the records of a past history; in speech, the activity of an alien people in subordinate (colonialist) relations to the whole activity of the dominant people within which the observer gained his privilege. This defining situation inevitably reduced any sense of language as actively and presently constitutive. The consequent objectivism of fundamental procedure was intensely productive at the level of description, but necessarily any consequent definition of language had to be a definition of a (specialized) philological system. In a later phase of this contact between privileged observer and alien language material, in the special circumstances of North America where hundreds of native American (Amerindian) languages were in danger of dying out after the completion of European conquest and domination, the earlier philological procedures were

indeed, characteristically, found to be not objective enough. Assimilation of these even more alien languages to the categories of Indo-European philology—the natural reflex of cultural imperialism—was scientifically resisted and checked by necessary procedures which, assuming only the presence of an alien system, found ways of studying it in its own (intrinsic and structural) terms. This approach was a further gain in scientific description, with its own remarkable results, but at the level of theory it was the final reinforcement of a concept of language as an (alien) objective system.

Paradoxically, this approach had even deeper effect through one of the necessary corrections of procedure which followed from the new phase of contact with languages without texts. Earlier procedures had been determined by the fact that a language almost invariably presented itself in specific past texts: finished monologic utterances. Actual speech, even when it was available, was seen as *derived*, either historically into vernaculars, or practically into speech acts which were instances of the fundamental (textual) forms of the language. Language-use could then hardly ever be seen as itself active and constitutive. And this was reinforced by the political relations of the observer-observed, where the 'language-habits' studied, over a range from the speech of conquered and dominated peoples to the 'dialects' of outlying or socially inferior groups, theoretically matched against the observer's 'standard', were regarded as at most 'behaviour', rather than independent, creative, self-directing life. North American empirical linguistics reversed one part of this tendency, restoring the primacy of speech in the literal absence of 'standard' or 'classical' texts. Yet the objectivist character of the underlying general theory came to limit even this, by converting speech itself to a 'text'—the characteristically persistent word in orthodox structural linguistics. Language came to be seen as a fixed, objective, and in these senses 'given' system, which had theoretical and practical priority over what were described as 'utterances' (later as 'performance'). Thus the living speech of human beings in their specific social relationships in the world was theoretically reduced to instances and examples of a system which lay beyond them.

The major theoretical expression of this reified understanding of language came in the twentieth century, in the work of Saussure, which has close affinities to the objectivist sociology of

Durkheim. In Saussure the social nature of language is expressed as a system (*langue*), which is at once stable and autonomous and founded in normatively identical forms; its 'utterances' (*paroles*) are then seen as 'individual' (in abstract distinction from 'social') uses of 'a particular language code' through an enabling 'psycho-physical mechanism'. The practical results of this profound theoretical development, in all its phases, have been exceptionally productive and striking. The great body of philological scholarship has been complemented by a remarkable body of linguistic studies, in which the controlling concept of language as a formal system has opened the way to penetrating descriptions of actual language operations and many of their underlying 'laws'.

This achievement has an ironic relation with Marxism. On the one hand it repeats an important and often dominant tendency within Marxism itself, over a range from the comparative analysis and classification of stages of a society, through the discovery of certain fundamental laws of change within these systematic stages, to the assertion of a controlling 'social' system which is *a priori* inaccessible to 'individual' acts of will and intelligence. This apparent affinity explains the attempted synthesis of Marxism and structural linguistics which has been so influential a phenomenon of the mid-twentieth century. But Marxists have then to notice, first, that history, in its most specific, active, and connecting senses, has disappeared (in one tendency has been theoretically excluded) from this account of so central a social activity as language; and second, that the categories in which this version of system has been developed are the familiar bourgeois categories in which an abstract separation and distinction between the 'individual' and the 'social' have become so habitual that they are taken as 'natural' starting-points.

In fact there was little specifically Marxist work on language before the twentieth century. In their chapter on Feuerbach in *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels touched on the subject, as part of their influential argument against pure, directive consciousness. Recapitulating the 'moments' or 'aspects' of a materialist conception of history, they wrote:

Only now, after having considered four moments, four aspects of the fundamental historical relationships, do we find that man also posses-

ses 'consciousness'; but, even so, not inherent, not 'pure' consciousness. From the start the 'spirit' is afflicted with the curse of being 'burdened' with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short of language. Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness, as it exists for other men, and for that reason is really beginning to exist for me personally as well; for language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men. (*GI*, 19)

So far as it goes, this account is wholly compatible with the emphasis on language as practical, constitutive activity. The difficulty arises, as it had also arisen in a different form in previous accounts, when the idea of the constitutive is broken down into elements which are then temporally ordered. Thus there is an obvious danger, in the thinking of Vico and Herder, of making language 'primary' and 'original', not in the acceptable sense that it is a necessary part of the very act of human self-creation, but in the related and available sense of language as the founding element in humanity: "in the beginning was the Word". It is precisely the sense of language as an indissoluble element of human self-creation that gives any acceptable meaning to its description as 'constitutive'. To make it precede all other connected activities is to claim something quite different.

The idea of language as constitutive is always in danger of this kind of reduction. Not only, however, in the direction of the isolated creative word, which becomes idealism, but also, as actually happened, in objectivist materialism and positivism, where 'the world' or 'reality' or 'social reality' is categorically projected as the pre-existent formation to which language is simply a response.

What Marx and Engels actually say, in this passage, points to simultaneity and totality. The 'fundamental historical relationships' are seen as 'moments' or 'aspects', and man then 'also possesses' consciousness'. Moreover, this language is material: the "agitated layers of air, sounds", which are produced by the physical body. It is then not a question of any temporal priority of the 'production of material life' considered as a separable act. The distinctively human mode of this primary material production has been characterized in three aspects: needs, new needs, and human reproduction—"not of course to be taken as three different stages . . . but . . . which have existed simultaneously since the dawn of history and the first men, and still assert

themselves in history today". The distinctive humanity of the development is then expressed by the fourth 'aspect', that such production is from the beginning also a social relationship. It then involves from the beginning, as a necessary element, that practical consciousness which is language.

Thus far the emphasis is primarily 'constitutive', in the sense of an indissoluble totality of development. But it is easy to see how, in this direction also, what begins as a mode of analysis of aspects of a total process develops towards philosophical or 'natural' categories—simple materialist statements which retain the idealist separation of 'language' from 'reality' but simply reverse their priority—and towards historical categories, in which there is, *first*, material social production and *then* (rather than *also*) language.

In its predominantly positivist development, from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, a dominant kind of Marxism made this practical reduction: not so much directly in language theory, which on the whole was neglected, but habitually in its accounts of consciousness and in its analyses of the practical language activities which were grouped under the categories of 'ideology' and 'the superstructure'. Moreover this tendency was reinforced by the wrong kind of association with important scientific work on the physical means of language. This association was wholly compatible with an emphasis on language as material, but, given the practical separation of 'the world' and 'the language in which we speak about it', or in another form, of 'reality' and 'consciousness', the materiality of language could be grasped only as physical—a set of physical properties—and not as material activity: in fact the ordinary scientific dissociation of the abstracted physical faculty from its actual human use. The resulting situation had been well described, in another context, by Marx, in the first 'thesis' on Feuerbach:

The chief defect of all materialism up to now (including Feuerbach's) is, that the object, reality, what we apprehend through our senses, is understood only in the form of the *object of contemplation* (*anschauung*); but not as *sensuous human activity, as practice*; not subjectively. Hence in opposition to materialism the active side was developed abstractly by idealism—which of course does not know real sensuous activity as such. (GI, 197)

This was indeed the situation in thinking about language. For the active emphases of Vico and Herder had meanwhile been remarkably developed, notably by Wilhelm von Humboldt. Here the inherited problem of the origin of language had been remarkably restated. Language of course developed at some point in evolutionary history, but it is not only that we have virtually no information about this; it is mainly that any human investigation of so constitutive an activity finds language already there in itself and in its presumed object of study. Language has then to be seen as a persistent kind of creation and re-creation: a dynamic presence and a constant regenerative process. But this emphasis, again, can move in different directions. It could reasonably have been associated with the emphasis of whole, indissoluble practice, in which the 'dynamic presence' and the 'constant regenerative process' would be necessary forms of the 'production and reproduction of real life' similarly conceived. What happened instead, in Humboldt and especially after him, was a projection of this idea of activity into essentially idealist and quasi-social forms: either the 'nation', based on an abstract version of the 'folk-mind' or the (ahistorical) 'collective consciousness'; or the 'collective spirit', the abstract creative capacity—self-creative but prior to and separate from material social practice, as in Hegel; or, persuasively, the 'individual', abstracted and defined as 'creative subjectivity', the starting-point of meaning.

The influence of these various projections has been deep and prolonged. The abstract idea of the 'nation' could be readily connected with major philological work on the 'families' of languages and on the distinctive inherited properties of particular languages. The abstract idea of the 'individual' could be readily connected with the emphasis on a primary subjective reality and a consequent 'source' of meaning and creativity which emerged in the Romantic concepts of 'art' and 'literature' and which defined a major part of the development of 'psychology'.

Thus the stress on language as activity, which was the crucial contribution of this line of thinking, and which was a crucial correction of the inherent passivity, usually formalized in the metaphor of 'reflection', of positivism and objectivist materialism, was in turn reduced from specific activities (then necessarily social and material, or, in the full sense, historical) to



ideas of such activity, categorized as 'nation' or 'spirit' or the 'creative individual'. It is significant that one of these categories, the 'individual' (not the specific, unique human being, who cannot of course be in doubt, but the generalization of the common property of all these beings as 'individuals' or 'subjects', which are already social categories, with immediate social implications), was prominent also within the dominant tendency of objectivist materialism. The exclusion of activity, of making, from the category of 'objective reality' left it contemplated only by 'subjects', who might in one version be ignored in the observation of objective reality — the active 'subject' replaced by the neutral 'observer' — or in another version, when it became necessary to speak about language or about other forms of practice, appeared in 'inter-subjective' relations — speaking to or at each other, passing information or a 'message' between each other, as separate or distinguishable identities, rather than ever with each other, the fact of language constituting and confirming their relationship. Language here decisively lost its definition as constitutive activity. It became a tool or an instrument or a medium taken up by individuals when they had something to communicate, as distinct from the faculty which made them, from the beginning, not only able to relate and communicate, but in real terms to be practically conscious and so to possess the active practice of language.

Against this reduction of language to instrumentality, the idea of language as expression, which was the main outcome of the idealist version of language as activity, was evidently attractive. It appeared literally to speak to an experience of language which the rival theory, confined to passing information, exchanging messages, naming objects, in effect suppressed. It could include the experience of speaking with others, of participating in language, of making and responding to rhythm or intonation which had no simple 'information' or 'message' or 'object' content: the experience, indeed, which was most evident in 'literature' and which was even, by specialization, made identical with it. Yet what actually happened was a deep split, which produced its own powerful categories of separation, some of them old terms in new forms: categorical divisions between the 'referential' and the 'emotive', between the 'denotative' and the 'connotative', between 'ordinary language' and 'literary language'. Certainly the uses towards which these categories point can be distin-

guished as the elements of specific practices, defined by specific situations. But their projection as categories, and then their further projection as separate entities, separate 'bodies' of language-use, permitted a dissolution and specialization which for a long time prevented the basic issues of the unfinished argument about language from becoming focused within a single area of discourse.

Marxism might have become this area of discourse, but it had developed its own forms of limitation and specialization. The most evident of these was a specialization of the whole material social process to 'labour', which was then more and more narrowly conceived. This had its effect in the important argument about the origins and development of language, which could have been reopened in the context of the new science of evolutionary physical anthropology. What happened instead was an application of the abstract concept of 'labour' as the single effective origin. Thus, in a modern authoritative account:

First labour, then articulate speech, were the two chief stimuli under the influence of which the brain of the ape gradually changed into the human brain. (*Fundamentals of Dialectical Materialism*, ed. Schneier-son, Moscow, 1967, 105)

This not only establishes an abstract, two-stage temporal development. It also converts both labour and language to 'stimuli', when the real emphasis should be on connected practice. This leads to an abstraction of evolutionary stages:

The development of labour brought the members of the community more closely together, for it enabled them to extend their joint activity and to support each other. Labour relations gave rise to the need for primitive men to speak and communicate with each other.

(Ibid. 105)

This is in effect an idealism of abstracted stimuli and needs. It must be contrasted with a properly materialist theory, in which labour and language, as practices, can be seen as evolutionarily and historically constitutive:

The argument that there could be no language without all the structure of modern man is precisely the same as the old theory that human hands made implement-making and using possible. But the implements are thousands of years older than hands of the modern human form. Modern speech-producing structures are the result of the evolutionary suc-

cess of language, just as the uniquely human hand is the result of the evolutionary success of implements. (J. S. Washburn and J. B. Lancaster, *Current Anthropology*, vol. 12, No. 3, 1971)

Any constitutive theory of practice, and especially a materialist theory, has important effects beyond the question of origins, in restating the problem of the active process of language at any time: a restatement which goes beyond the separated categories of 'language' and 'reality'. Yet orthodox Marxism remained stuck in reflection theory, because this was the only plausible materialist connection between the received abstract categories. Reflection theory, in its first period, was itself specialized to crude stimulus-and-response models, adapted from positivist physiology. In its second period, in the later work of Pavlov, it added, as a way of dealing with the special properties of language, the concept of the 'second signal system', the first being the simple physical system of sensations and responses. This was better than nothing, but it assimilated language to the characteristics of a 'signal system', in relatively mechanistic ways, and was in practice unequal to problems of meaning beyond simple models of the associative. Setting out from this point, L.S. Vygotsky (*Thought and Language*, Moscow, 1934) proposed a new social theory, still named the 'second signal system', in which language and consciousness are freed from simple analogies with physical perception. His work on the development of language in children, and on the crucial problem of 'inner speech', provided a new starting-point, within a historical-materialist perspective. But for a generation, in orthodox Marxism, this was neglected. Meanwhile the work of N. S. Marr, based on older models, tied language to the 'superstructure' and even to simple class bases. Dogmatic positions, taken from other areas of Marxist thinking, limited the necessary theoretical developments. It is ironic that the influence of Marr was in effect ended by Stalin in 1950 with declarations that language was not 'part of the superstructure' and that languages did not have any essential 'class character' but rather a 'national character'. Ironic because though the declarations were necessary, in that context, they simply threw the argument back to a much earlier stage, in which the status of 'reflection' and, very specifically, the status of 'the superstructure', had, in Marxist terms, needed question. By this time, moreover, linguistics had come to be dominated by a specific and distinctive form of

objectivism, which had produced the powerful systems of structuralism and semiotics. It was at this point that generally Marxist positions in other fields, especially in the popular form of objectively determined systems, were practically synthesized with theories of language which, from a fully Marxist position, needed to be profoundly opposed.

A tragic element in this history is that such theories had been profoundly opposed in the 1920s in Leningrad, where the beginnings of a school of Marxist linguistics, of a significant kind, had in fact emerged. It is best represented by the work of V. N. Vološinov, whose *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* appeared, in two editions, in 1929 and 1930; the second edition has been translated into English (Matejka and Titunik, New York and London, 1973). Vološinov had been associated with M. M. Bakhtin, author of a study of Dostoevsky (*Problemy tvorčestva Dostoevskogo*, 1929; new version, with new title, *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo*, 1963); see also 'P.N. Medvedev' (author of *Formal'ny metod v literaturovedenii—kritičeskoe vvedenie v sociologičeskiju poëtiku—The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: a critical introduction to sociological poetics—1928*). Sometime during the 1930s Vološinov disappeared. Nearly half a century was then lost, in real terms, in the development of his exceptionally important realignment of the argument.

Vološinov's decisive contribution was to find a way beyond the powerful but partial theories of expression and objective system. He found it in fundamentally Marxist terms, though he had to begin by saying that Marxist thinking about language was virtually non-existent. His originality lay in the fact that he did not seek to apply other Marxist ideas to language. On the contrary he reconsidered the whole problem of language within a general Marxist orientation. This enabled him to see 'activity' (the strength of the idealist emphasis after Humboldt) as social activity and to see 'system' (the strength of the new objectivist linguistics) in relation to this social activity and not, as had hitherto been the case, formally separated from it. Thus in drawing on the strengths of the alternative traditions, and in setting them side by side showing their connected radical weaknesses, he opened the way to a new kind of theory which had been necessary for more than a century.

Much of his effort went to recovering the full emphasis on

language as activity, as practical consciousness, which had been weakened and in effect denied by its specialization to a closed 'individual consciousness' or 'inner psyche'. The strength of this tradition was still its insistence on the active creation of meanings, as distinct from the alternative assumption of a closed formal system. Vološinov argued that meaning was necessarily a social action, dependent on a social relationship. But to understand this depended on recovering a full sense of 'social', as distinct both from the idealist reduction of the social to an inherited, ready-made product, an 'inert crust', beyond which all creativity was individual, and from the objectivist projection of the social into a formal system, now autonomous and governed only by its internal laws, within which, and solely according to which, meanings were produced. Each sense, at root, depends on the same error: of separating the social from individual meaningful activity (though the rival positions then valued the separated elements differently). Against the psychologism of the idealist emphasis, Vološinov argued that "consciousness takes shape and being in the material of signs created by an organized group in the process of its social intercourse. The individual consciousness is nurtured on signs; it derives its growth from them; it reflects their logic and laws" (13).

Normally, it is at just this point (and the danger is always increased by retaining the concept of 'sign', which Vološinov revalued but continued to use) that objectivism finds its entry. "The material of signs' can be translated as 'system of signs'. This system can then be projected (by some notion of a theoretical 'social contract', as in Saussure, protected from examination by the assumption of the priority of 'synchronic' over 'diachronic' analysis) both beyond history and beyond any active conception of contemporary social life, in which socially related individuals meaningfully participate, as distinct from acting out the laws and codes of an inaccessible linguistic system. Each side of Vološinov's argument has a continuing relevance, but it is in his (incomplete) revaluation of the concept of 'sign' that his contemporary significance is most evident.

Vološinov accepted that a 'sign' in language has indeed a 'binary' character. (In fact, as we shall see, his retention of these terms made it easier for the radical challenge of his work to be missed.) That is to say, he agreed that the verbal sign is not equivalent to, nor simply a reflection of, the object or quality

which it indicates or expresses. The relation within the sign between the formal element and the meaning which this element carries is thus inevitably conventional (thus far agreeing with orthodox semiotic theory), but it is not arbitrary\* and, crucially, it is not fixed. On the contrary the fusion of formal element and meaning (and it is this fact of dynamic fusion which makes retention of the 'binary' description misleading) is the result of a real process of social development, in the actual activities of speech and in the continuing development of a language. Indeed signs can exist only when this active social relationship is posited. The usable sign—the fusion of formal element and meaning—is a product of this continuing speech-activity between real individuals who are in some continuing social relationship. The 'sign' is in this sense their product, but not simply their past product, as in the reified accounts of an 'always-given' language system. The real communicative 'products' which are usable signs are, on the contrary, living evidence of a continuing social process, into which individuals are born and within which they are shaped, but to which they then also actively contribute, in a continuing process. This is at once their socialization and their individuation: the connected aspects of a single process which the alternative theories of 'system' and 'expression' had divided and dissociated. We then find not a reified 'language' and 'society' but an active social language. Nor (to glance back at positivist and orthodox materialist theory) is this language a simple 'reflection' or 'expression' of 'material reality'. What we have, rather, is a grasping of this reality through language, which as practical consciousness is saturated by and saturates all social activity, including productive activity. And, since this grasping is social and continuous (as distinct from the abstract encounters of 'man' and 'his world', or 'consciousness' and 'reality', or 'language' and 'material existence'), it occurs within an active and changing society. It is of and to this experience—the lost middle term between the abstract entities, 'subject' and 'object', on which the propositions of idealism and orthodox materialism

\* The question of whether a sign is 'arbitrary' is subject to some local confusion. The term was developed in distinction from the 'iconic', to indicate, correctly, that most verbal signs are not 'images' of things. But other senses of 'arbitrary', in the direction of 'random' or 'casual', had developed, and it was these that Vološinov opposed.

are erected—that language speaks. Or to put it more directly, language is the articulation of this active and changing experience; a dynamic and articulated social presence in the world.

Yet it remains true that the mode of articulation is specific. This is the part of the truth which formalism had grasped. The articulation can be seen, and in some respects has to be seen, as both formal and systematic. A physical sound, like many other natural elements, may be made into a sign, but its distinction, Vološinov argued, is always evident: "a sign does not simply exist as part of a reality—it reflects and refracts another reality". What distinguishes it as a sign, indeed what made it a sign, is in this sense a formal process: a specific articulation of a meaning. Formalist linguistics had emphasized this point, but it had not discerned that the process of articulation is necessarily also a material process, and that the sign itself becomes part of a (socially created) physical and material world: "whether in sound, physical mass, colour, movement of the body or the like". Signification, the social creation of meanings through the use of formal signs, is then a practical material activity: it is indeed, literally, a means of production. It is a specific form of that practical consciousness which is inseparable from all social material activity. It is not, as formalism would make it, and as the idealist theory of expression had from the beginning assumed, an operation of and within 'consciousness', which then becomes a state or a process separated, *a priori*, from social material activity. It is, on the contrary, at once a distinctive material process—the making of signs—and, in the central quality of its distinctiveness as practical consciousness, is involved from the beginning in all other human social and material activity.

Formalist systems can appear to meet this point by referring it to the 'already-given', the 'last-instance determination of the economic structure', as in some current versions of structuralist Marxism. It is to avoid this kind of reduction that we must consider Vološinov's crucial distinction between a 'sign' and a 'signal'. In reflexive theories of language, whether positivist kinds of materialism, or such theories as psychological behaviourism, all 'signs' are in effect reduced to 'signals', within the simple models of 'object' and 'consciousness' or 'stimulus' and 'response'. Meanings are created by (repeated) recognition of what are then in effect 'signals': of the properties of an object or the character of a stimulus. 'Consciousness' and 'response'

then 'contain' (for this is what meaning now is) those properties or that character. The assigned passivity and mechanism of such accounts have often been recognized. Indeed it was against such passivity and mechanism that formalism had most to contribute, in its insistence on the specific (formal) articulation of meanings through signs.

But it has been less often noticed that quite different theories, based on the determinate character of systems of signs, depend, ultimately, on a comparable idea of the fixed character of the sign, which is then in effect a displacement of fixed content to fixed form. Intense argument between these rival schools has allowed us to overlook the fact that the conversion of the 'sign' (as the term itself always made possible and even likely) into either fixed content or fixed form is a radical denial of active practical consciousness. The sign, in either case, is moved in the direction of a signal, which Vološinov distinguishes from a sign by the fact that it is intrinsically limited and invariant. The true quality of a sign (one would have preferred him to say, of a signifying element of a language) is that it is effective in communication, a genuine fusion of a formal element and a meaning (a quality that it indeed shares with signals); but also that as a function of continuing social activity it is capable of modification and development: the real processes that may be observed in the history of a language, but which the privileged priority of 'synchronic' analysis had ignored or reduced to a secondary or accidental character.

Indeed since it exists, as a sign, by its quality of signifying relationship—both the relation between formal element and meaning (its internal structure) and the relations between the people who in actually using it, in practical language, make it a sign—it has, like the social experience which is the principle of its formation, both dialectical and generative properties. Characteristically it does not, like a signal, have fixed, determinate, invariant meaning. It must have an effective nucleus of meaning but in practice it has a variable range, corresponding to the endless variety of situations within which it is actively used. These situations include new and changing as well as recurrent relationships, and this is the reality of the sign as dynamic fusion of 'formal element' and 'meaning'—'form' and 'content'—rather than as fixed, 'already-given' internal significance. This variable quality, which Vološinov calls *multi-accentual*, is

of course the necessary challenge to the idea of 'correct' or 'proper' meanings, which had been powerfully developed by orthodox philology from its studies of dead languages, and which had been taken over both into social-class distinctions of a 'standard' language flanked either by 'dialects' or by 'errors', and into literary theories of a 'correct' or 'objective' reading. But the quality of variation—not random variation but variation as a necessary element of practical consciousness—bears heavily also against objectivist accounts of the sign-system. It is one of the decisive arguments against reduction of the key fact of social determination to the idea of determination by a system. But, while it thus bears heavily against all forms of abstract objectivism, it offers a basis also for a vital reconsideration of the problem of 'subjectivity'.

The signal, in its fixed invariance, is indeed a collective fact. It may be received and repeated, or a new signal may be invented, but in either case the level at which it operates is of a collective kind: that is to say, it has to be recognized but it need not be internalized, at that level of sociality which has excluded (as reductive versions of the 'social' commonly exclude) active participation by conscious individuals. The signal, in this sense, is fixed, exchangeable, collective property; characteristically it is easily both imported and exported. The true signifying element of language must from the beginning have a different capacity: to become an *inner sign*, part of an active practical consciousness. Thus in addition to its social and material existence between actual individuals, the sign is also part of a verbally constituted consciousness which allows individuals to use signs of their own initiative, whether in acts of social communication or in practices which, not being *manifestly* social, can be interpreted as personal or private.

This view is then radically opposed to the construction of all acts of communication from pre-determined objective relationships and properties, within which no individual initiative, of a creative or self-generating kind, would be possible. It is thus a decisive theoretical rejection of mechanical, behaviourist, or Saussurean versions of an objective system which is beyond individual initiative or creative use. But it is also a theoretical rejection of subjectivist theories of language as individual expression, since what is internally constituted is the social fact of the sign, bearing a definite though never fixed or invariant

social meaning and relationship. Great strength has been given, and continues to be given, to theories of language as individual expression, by the rich practical experience of 'inner signs'—inner language—in repeated individual awareness of 'inner language activities', whether we call them 'thought' or 'consciousness' or actual verbal composition. These 'inner' activities involve the use of words which are not, at least at that stage, spoken or written to any other person. Any theory of language which excludes this experience, or which seeks to limit it to some residue or by-product or rehearsal (though it may often be these) of manifest social language activity, is again reductive of social language as practical consciousness. What has really to be said is that the sign is social but that in its very quality as sign it is capable both of being internalized—indeed has to be internalized, if it is to be a sign for communicative relation between actual persons, initially using only their own physical powers to express it—and of being continually available, in social and material ways, in manifest communication. This fundamental relationship between the 'inner' and the 'material' sign—a relationship often experienced as a tension but always lived as an activity, a practice—needs further radical exploration. In individual developmental psychology Vygotsky began this exploration, and at once discerned certain crucially distinguishing characteristics of 'inner speech', themselves constitutive rather than, as in Vološinov, merely transferred. This is still within the perspective of a historical materialist theory. The complex relationship, from another direction, needs specifically historical exploration, for it is in the movement from the production of language by human physical resources alone, through the material history of the production of other resources and of the problems of both technology and notation then involved in them, to the active social history of the complex of communicative systems which are now so important a part of the material productive process itself, that the dynamics of social language—its development of new means of production within a basic means of production—must be found.

Meanwhile, following Vološinov, we can see that just as all social process is activity between real individuals, so individuality, by the fully social fact of language (whether as 'outer' or 'inner' speech), is the active constitution, within distinct physical beings, of the social capacity which is the means of realiza-

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tion of any individual life. Consciousness, in this precise sense, is social being. It is the possession, through active and specific social development and relationships, of a precise social capacity, which is the 'sign-system'. Vološinov, even after these fundamental restatements, continues to speak of the 'sign-system': the formulation that had been decisively made in Saussurean linguistics. But if we follow his arguments we find how difficult and misleading this formulation can be. 'Sign' itself—the mark or token; the formal element—has to be revalued to emphasize its variability and internally active elements, indicating not only an internal structure but an internal dynamic. Similarly, 'system' has to be revalued to emphasize social process rather than fixed 'sociality': a revaluation that was in part made by Jakobson and Tynjanov (1928), within formalist argument, with the recognition that 'every system necessarily exists as an evolution while, on the other hand, evolution is inescapably of a systemic nature'. Although this was a necessary recognition, it was limited by its perspective of determinate systems within an 'evolutionary' category—the familiar reification of objective idealism—and still requires amendment by the full emphasis of social process. Here, as a matter of absolute priority, men relate and continue to relate before any system which is their product can as a matter of practical rather than abstract consciousness be grasped or exercise its determination.

These changes will have to be made, in the continuing inquiry into language. But the last point indicates a final difficulty. Much of the social process of the creation of meanings was projected within objectivist linguistics to the formal relations—thus the systematic nature—of signs. What at the level of the sign had been abstractly and statically conceived was set into a kind of motion—albeit a frozen, determinate motion, a movement of ice-fields—in the relational 'laws' or 'structures' of the system as a whole. This extension to a relational system, including its formal aspect as grammar, is in any case inevitable. Isolation of 'the sign', whether in Saussure or Vološinov, is at best an analytical procedure, at worst an evasion. Much of the important work on relations within a whole system is therefore an evident advance, and the problem of the variability of the sign can appear to be contained within the variability of its formal relations. But while this kind of emphasis on the relational system is obviously necessary, it is limited by the consequence

of the initial abstract definition of the sign. The highly complex relations of (theoretically) invariable units can never be substantive relationships; they must remain as formal relationships. The internal dynamics of the sign, including its social and material relationships as well as its formal structure, must be seen as necessarily connected with the social and material as well as the formal dynamics of the system as a whole. There have been some advances in this direction in recent work (Rossi-Landi, 1975).

But there has also been a move which seems to reopen the whole problem. In Chomskyan linguistics there has been a decisive step towards a conception of system which emphasizes the possibility and the fact of individual initiative and creative practice which earlier objectivist systems had excluded. But at the same time this conception stresses deep structures of language formation which are certainly incompatible with ordinary social and historical accounts of the origin and development of language. An emphasis on deep constitutive structures, at an evolutionary rather than a historical level, can of course be reconciled with the view of language as a constitutive human faculty: exerting pressures and setting limits, in determinate ways, to human development itself. But while it is retained as an exclusively evolutionary process, it moves, necessarily, towards reified accounts of 'systemic evolution': development by constituted systems and structures (the constitution now at once permitting and limiting variations) rather than by actual human beings in a continuing social practice. Here Vygotsky's work on inner speech and consciousness is theoretically crucial:

If we compare the early development of speech and of intellect—which, as we have seen, develop along separate lines both in animals and in very young children—with the development of inner speech and of verbal thought, we must conclude that the later stage is not a simple continuation of the earlier. *The nature of the development itself changes, from biological to socio-historical. Verbal thought is not an innate, natural form of behaviour but is determined by a historical-cultural process and has specific properties and laws that cannot be found in the natural forms of thought and speech.* (*Thought and Language*, 51)

Thus we can add to the necessary definition of the biological faculty of language as constitutive an equally necessary definition of language development—at once individual and

social—as historically and socially constituting. What we can then define is a dialectical process: the changing practical consciousness of human beings, in which both the evolutionary and the historical processes can be given full weight, but also within which they can be distinguished, in the complex variations of actual language use. It is from this theoretical foundation that we can go on to distinguish 'literature', in a specific socio-historical development of writing, from the abstract retrospective concept, so common in orthodox Marxism, which reduces it, like language itself, to a function and then a (superstructural) by-product of collective labour. But before we can go on to this, we must examine the concepts of literature which, based on earlier theories of language and consciousness, stand in the way.

### 3. Literature

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It is relatively difficult to see 'literature' as a concept. In ordinary usage it appears to be no more than a specific description, and what is described is then, as a rule, so highly valued that there is a virtually immediate and unnoticed transfer of the specific values of particular works and kinds of work to what operates as a concept but is still firmly believed to be actual and practical. Indeed the special property of 'literature' as a concept is that it claims this kind of importance and priority, in the concrete achievements of many particular great works, as against the 'abstraction' and 'generality' of other concepts and of the kinds of practice which they, by contrast, define. Thus it is common to see 'literature' defined as 'full, central, immediate human experience', usually with an associated reference to 'minute particulars'. By contrast, 'society' is often seen as essentially general and abstract: the summaries and averages, rather than the direct substance, of human living. Other related concepts, such as 'politics', 'sociology', or 'ideology', are similarly placed and downgraded, as mere hardened outer shells compared with the living experience of literature.

The naïvety of the concept, in this familiar form, can be shown in two ways: theoretically and historically. It is true that one popular version of the concept has been developed in ways that appear to protect it, and in practice do often protect it, against any such arguments. An essential abstraction of the 'personal' and the 'immediate' is carried so far that, within this highly developed form of thought, the whole process of abstraction has been dissolved. None of its steps can be retraced, and the abstraction of the 'concrete' is a perfect and virtually unbreakable circle. Arguments from theory or from history are simply evidence of the incurable abstraction and generality of those who are putting them forward. They can then be contemptuously rejected, often without specific reply, which would be only to fall to their level.

This is a powerful and often forbidding system of abstraction, in which the concept of 'literature' becomes actively ideological. Theory can do something against it, in the necessary recognition (which ought hardly, to those who are really in contact