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C. Stylistics

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■ VI. THE MARXIST APPROACH

If we approach a work of literature from a sociological point of view, and even more from an economic point of view, we could well be practicing a form of historical criticism. As we saw in chapter 2, a historical view necessarily opens the possibility of seeing a work in its social and economic contexts, not just in the broad sweep of governments and wars, migrations across Europe, or the fall of Rome. We might deal with the plight of the poor in a Dickens novel, even a relatively optimistic work such as *A Christmas Carol*. Of course it is even more obvious that the deeper principles of social and economic conditions are often at the heart of cultural studies, not just those aspects that are simply the results of a given setting. It was appropriate, therefore, that some mention be made in chapter 7 of those conditions, such as the "production" and marketing of a "product"—namely, a book.

In this section we want to provide a more specific approach to economic aspects, an approach generally regarded as "Marxist." Marxist approaches to literature provide a particularly apt opportunity to note that some emphases in literary criticism ebb and flow, or evolve, with the times. We could, for example, trace some of the roots of Marxist criticism to nineteenth-century experiments in communal living. Later, the publication of the famous work of Karl Marx laid the groundwork for literary critics to look at literature from that perspective. Various authors and critics throughout the twentieth century showed interest in class conflict, the problems of the poor,

and the effects of a capitalist system. But the pendulum of interest kept swinging, and what might have been popular during the Spanish Civil War was obviously less popular during the Cold War that followed World War II. Later still, after the breakup of the Soviet empire, additional views have been advanced.

But theoretical developments can come and go without necessarily being tied to specific governmental or military developments. Here we will call attention to critical developments that can stand separate from what was once seen as the alleged threat of Communist aggression.

We can find, for example, Fredric Jameson admitting that the Marxist critics of the 1930s had been "relegated to the status of an intellectual and historical curiosity"; but then Jameson stresses that "In recent years . . . a different kind of Marxist criticism has begun to make its presence felt upon the English-language horizon. This is what may be called—as opposed to the Soviet tradition—a relatively Hegelian kind of Marxism . . ." (*Marxism and Form* ix). From another perspective, this renewed interest in Marxist criticism is the result of the opinion of many that the formalistic approach, especially as practiced by the New Critics, has been inadequate. The formalistic approach, Marxists say, is elitist and deals too restrictively with the made object, with the art work's internal or aesthetic form, and not enough with the social milieu in which it was produced or the social circumstances to which it ought to speak. Consequently, among the schools of criticism that have found formalistic criticism inadequate, none have been more direct than the new Marxist criticism, challenging the formalists, in the words of Richard Wasson, "to explain how their own methodologies can come to grips with class, race, sex, with oppressions and liberation" (171).

A preeminent figure in new Marxist criticism, commanding respect regardless of one's political or philosophical leanings, is the Hungarian György Lukács (1885–1971), whose scholarly publications spanned half a century. His criticism ranges wide, and he has praise for figures as diverse as Sir Walter Scott and Alexander Solzhenitsyn. His name is associated with one particular direction of Marxist criticism: the reflection theory. Lukács and his followers stressed literature's reflection, conscious or unconscious, of the social reality surrounding it—not

just a reflection of a flood of realistic detail but a reflection of the essence of a society. Detriments to social wholeness reveal themselves in the literary work as aspects of capitalism. While it is true that every work reflects to some degree the age of its composition and thus the conditions of society, the contention of the Marxist would be that fiction formed without benefit of Marxist principles can never fully show true social wholeness or meaningfulness. The Marxist critic deals with content, for in content is to be found literature's importance in the movement of history. George Levine, for example, expressed concern about the breach between the practice of criticism and any concern for society: he hoped for a "step toward healing the terrible breach between the study of literature and the life that surrounds that study" (435).

The Marxist critic wishes to go beyond mere concern with literature's inevitable disclosure of tensions and contradictions within a society. He or she may espouse the production theory of Louis Althusser. According to this theory, through the ideology that capitalism has generated—the structures of thought, feelings, and behavior that maintain its control over society—capitalism exacts of its artists undeviating reproduction of that ideology. Thus we get fictions that gloss over the contradictions in order to justify capitalism. A writer fully committed to Marxism would feel compelled to transform the modes of production so that his or her work would show the transformation of social relationships. The ideal Marxist work would present not just a powerful story but a workable solution to socioeconomic ills. Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* might have the first part; the second remains to be found.

Quick Reference

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