

Marxism and Literature

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9. Structures of Feeling

In most description and analysis, culture and society are expressed in an habitual past tense. The strongest barrier to the recognition of human cultural activity is this immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products. What is defensible as a procedure in conscious history, where on certain assumptions many actions can be definitively taken as having ended, is habitually projected, not only into the always moving substance of the past, but into contemporary life, in which relationships, institutions and formations in which we are still actively involved are converted, by this procedural mode, into formed wholes rather than forming and formative processes. Analysis is then centred on relations between these produced institutions, formations, and experiences, so that now, as in that produced past, only the fixed explicit forms exist, and living presence is always, by definition, receding.

When we begin to grasp the dominance of this procedure, to look into its centre and if possible past its edges, we can understand, in new ways, that separation of the social from the personal which is so powerful and directive a cultural mode. If the social is always past, in the sense that it is always formed, we have indeed to find other terms for the undeniable experience of the present: not only the temporal present, the realization of this and this instant, but the specificity of present being, the inalienably physical, within which we may indeed discern and acknowledge institutions, formations, positions, but not always as fixed products, defining products. And then if the social is the fixed and explicit—the known relationships, institutions, formations, positions—all that is present and moving, all that escapes or seems to escape from the fixed and the explicit and the known, is grasped and defined as the personal: this, here, now, alive, active, 'subjective'.

There is another related distinction. As thought is described, in the same habitual past tense, it is indeed so different, in its explicit and finished forms, from much or even anything that we can presently recognize as thinking, that we set against it more active, more flexible, less singular terms—consciousness, experience, feeling—and then watch even these drawn towards

fixed, finite, receding forms. The point is especially relevant to works of art, which really are, in one sense, explicit and finished forms—actual objects in the visual arts, objectified conventions and notations (semantic figures) in literature. But it is not only that, to complete their inherent process, we have to make them present, in specifically active ‘readings’. It is also that the making of art is never itself in the past tense. It is always a formative process, within a specific present. At different moments in history, and in significantly different ways, the reality and even the primacy of such presences and such processes, such diverse and yet specific actualities, have been powerfully asserted and reclaimed, as in practice of course they are all the time lived. But they are then often asserted as forms themselves, in contention with other known forms: the subjective as distinct from the objective; experience from belief; feeling from thought; the immediate from the general; the personal from the social. The undeniable power of two great modern ideological systems—the ‘aesthetic’ and the ‘psychological’—is, ironically, systematically derived from these senses of instance and process, where experience, immediate feeling, and then subjectivity and personality are newly generalized and assembled. Against these ‘personal’ forms, the ideological systems of fixed social generality, of categorical products, of absolute formations, are relatively powerless, within their specific dimension. Of one dominant strain in Marxism, with its habitual abuse of the ‘subjective’ and the ‘personal’, this is especially true.

Yet it is the reduction of the social to fixed forms that remains the basic error. Marx often said this, and some Marxists quote him, in fixed ways, before returning to fixed forms. The mistake, as so often, is in taking terms of analysis as terms of substance. Thus we speak of a world-view or of a prevailing ideology or of a class outlook, often with adequate evidence, but in this regular slide towards a past tense and a fixed form suppose, or even do not know that we have to suppose, that these exist and are lived specifically and definitively, in singular and developing forms. Perhaps the dead can be reduced to fixed forms, though their surviving records are against it. But the living will not be reduced, at least in the first person; living third persons may be different. All the known complexities, the experienced tensions, shifts, and uncertainties, the intricate forms of unevenness and confusion, are against the terms of the reduction and soon, by

extension, against social analysis itself. Social forms are then often admitted for generalities but debarred, contemptuously, from any possible relevance to this immediate and actual significance of being. And from the abstractions formed in their turn by this act of debarring—the 'human imagination', the 'human psyche', the 'unconscious', with their 'functions' in art and in myth and in dream—new and displaced forms of social analysis and categorization, overriding all specific social conditions, are then more or less rapidly developed.

Social forms are evidently more recognizable when they are articulate and explicit. We have seen this in the range from institutions to formations and traditions. We can see it again in the range from dominant systems of belief and education to influential systems of explanation and argument. All these have effective presence. Many are formed and deliberate, and some are quite fixed. But when they have all been identified they are not a whole inventory even of social consciousness in its simplest sense. For they become social consciousness only when they are lived, actively, in real relationships, and moreover in relationships which are more than systematic exchanges between fixed units. Indeed just because all consciousness is social, its processes occur not only between but within the relationship and the related. And this practical consciousness is always more than a handling of fixed forms and units. There is frequent tension between the received interpretation and practical experience. Where this tension can be made direct and explicit, or where some alternative interpretation is available, we are still within a dimension of relatively fixed forms. But the tension is as often an unease, a stress, a displacement, a latency: the moment of conscious comparison not yet come, often not even coming. And comparison is by no means the only process, though it is powerful and important. There are the experiences to which the fixed forms do not speak at all, which indeed they do not recognize. There are important mixed experiences, where the available meaning would convert part to all, or all to part. And even where form and response can be found to agree, without apparent difficulty, there can be qualifications, reservations, indications elsewhere: what the agreement seemed to settle but still sounding elsewhere. Practical consciousness is almost always different from official consciousness, and this is not only a matter of relative freedom or control. For practical

consciousness is what is actually being lived, and not only what it is thought is being lived. Yet the actual alternative to the received and produced fixed forms is not silence: not the absence, the unconscious, which bourgeois culture has mythicized. It is a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange. Its relations with the already articulate and defined are then exceptionally complex.

This process can be directly observed in the history of a language. In spite of substantial and at some levels decisive continuities in grammar and vocabulary, no generation speaks quite the same language as its predecessors. The difference can be defined in terms of additions, deletions, and modifications, but these do not exhaust it. What really changes is something quite general, over a wide range, and the description that often fits the change best is the literary term 'style'. It is a general change, rather than a set of deliberate choices, yet choices can be deduced from it, as well as effects. Similar kinds of change can be observed in manners, dress, building, and othersimilar forms of social life. It is an open question—that is to say, a set of specific historical questions—whether in any of these changes this or that group has been dominant or influential, or whether they are the result of much more general interaction. For what we are defining is a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or of a period. The relations between this quality and the other specifying historical marks of changing institutions, formations, and beliefs, and beyond these the changing social and economic relations between and within classes, are again an open question: that is to say, a set of specific historical questions. The methodological consequence of such a definition, however, is that the specific qualitative changes are not assumed to be epiphenomena of changed institutions, formations, and beliefs, or merely secondary evidence of changed social and economic relations between and within classes. At the same time they are from the beginning taken as social experience, rather than as 'personal' experience or as the merely superficial or incidental 'small change' of society. They are social in two ways that distinguish them from reduced senses of the social as the institutional and

the formal: first, in that they are *changes of presence* (while they are being lived this is obvious; when they have been lived it is still their substantial characteristic); second, in that although they are emergent or pre-emergent, they do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action.

Such changes can be defined as *changes in structures of feeling*. The term is difficult, but 'feeling' is chosen to emphasize a distinction from more formal concepts of 'world-view' or 'ideology'. It is not only that we must go beyond formally held and systematic beliefs, though of course we have always to include them. It is that we are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations between these and formal or systematic beliefs are in practice variable (including historically variable), over a range from formal assent with private dissent to the more nuanced interaction between selected and interpreted beliefs and acted and justified experiences. An alternative definition would be *structures of experience*: in one sense the better and wider word, but with the difficulty that one of its senses has that past tense which is the most important obstacle to recognition of the area of social experience which is being defined. We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-relating continuity. We are then defining these elements as a 'structure': as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. Yet we are also defining a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies. These are often more recognizable at a later stage, when they have been (as often happens) formalized, classified, and in many cases built into institutions and formations. By that time the case is different; a new structure of feeling will usually already have begun to form, in the true social present.

Methodologically, then, a 'structure of feeling' is a cultural hypothesis, actually derived from attempts to understand such

elements and their connections in a generation or period, and needing always to be returned, interactively, to such evidence. It is initially less simple than more formally structured hypotheses of the social, but it is more adequate to the actual range of cultural evidence: historically certainly, but even more (where it matters more) in our present cultural process. The hypothesis has a special relevance to art and literature, where the true social content is in a significant number of cases of this present and affective kind, which cannot without loss be reduced to belief-systems, institutions, or explicit general relationships, though it may include all these as lived and experienced, with or without tension, as it also evidently includes elements of social and material (physical or natural) experience which may lie beyond, or be uncovered or imperfectly covered by, the elsewhere recognizable systematic elements. The unmistakable presence of certain elements in art which are not covered by (though in one mode they may be reduced to) other formal systems is the true source of the specializing categories of 'the aesthetic', 'the arts', and 'imaginative literature'. We need, on the one hand, to acknowledge (and welcome) the specificity of these elements—specific feelings, specific rhythms—and yet to find ways of recognizing their specific kinds of sociality, thus preventing that extraction from social experience which is conceivable only when social experience itself has been categorically (and at root historically) reduced. We are then not only concerned with the restoration of social content in its full sense, that of a generative immediacy. The idea of a structure of feeling can be specifically related to the evidence of forms and conventions—semantic figures—which, in art and literature, are often among the very first indications that such a new structure is forming. These relations will be discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters, but as a matter of cultural theory this is a way of defining forms and conventions in art and literature as inalienable elements of a social material process: not by derivation from other social forms and pre-forms, but as social formation of a specific kind which may in turn be seen as the articulation (often the only fully available articulation) of structures of feeling which as living processes are much more widely experienced.

For structures of feeling can be defined as social experiences in solution, as distinct from other social semantic formations

which have been precipitated and are more evidently and more immediately available. Not all art, by any means, relates to a contemporary structure of feeling. The effective formations of most actual art relate to already manifest social formations, dominant or residual, and it is primarily to emergent formations (though often in the form of modification or disturbance in older forms) that the structure of feeling, *as solution*, relates. Yet this specific solution is never mere flux. It is a structured formation which, because it is at the very edge of semantic availability, has many of the characteristics of a pre-formation, until specific articulations—new semantic figures—are discovered in material practice: often, as it happens, in relatively isolated ways, which are only later seen to compose a significant (often in fact minority) generation; this often, in turn, the generation that substantially connects to its successors. It is thus a specific structure of particular linkages, particular emphases and suppressions, and, in what are often its most recognizable forms, particular deep starting-points and conclusions. Early Victorian ideology, for example, specified the exposure caused by poverty or by debt or by illegitimacy as social failure or deviation; the contemporary structure of feeling, meanwhile, in the new semantic figures of Dickens, of Emily Brontë, and others, specified exposure and isolation as a general condition, and poverty, debt, or illegitimacy as its connecting instances. An alternative ideology, relating such exposure to the nature of the social order, was only later generally formed: offering explanations but now at a reduced tension: the social explanation fully admitted, the intensity of experienced fear and shame now dispersed and generalized.

The example reminds us, finally, of the complex relation of differentiated structures of feeling to differentiated classes. This is historically very variable. In England between 1660 and 1690, for example, two structures of feeling (among the defeated Puritans and in the restored Court) can be readily distinguished, though neither, in its literature and elsewhere, is reducible to the ideologies of these groups or to their formal (in fact complex) class relations. At times the emergence of a new structure of feeling is best related to the rise of a class (England, 1700-60); at other times to contradiction, fracture, or mutation within a class (England, 1780-1830 or 1890-1930), when a formation appears to break away from its class norms, though it retains its

substantial affiliation, and the tension is at once lived and articulated in radically new semantic figures. Any of these examples requires detailed substantiation, but what is now in question, theoretically, is the hypothesis of a mode of social formation, explicit and recognizable in specific kinds of art, which is distinguishable from other social and semantic formations by its articulation of presence.

10. Creative Practice

At the very centre of Marxism is an extraordinary emphasis on human creativity and self-creation. Extraordinary because most of the systems with which it contends stress the derivation of most human activity from an external cause: from God, from an abstracted Nature or human nature, from permanent instinctual systems, or from an animal inheritance. The notion of self-creation, extended to civil society and to language by pre-Marxist thinkers, was radically extended by Marxism to the basic work processes and thence to a deeply (creatively) altered physical world and a self-created humanity.

The notion of creativity, decisively extended to art and thought by Renaissance thinkers, should then, indeed, have a specific affinity with Marxism. In fact, throughout the development of Marxism, this has been a radically difficult area, which we have been trying to clarify. It is not only that some important variants of Marxism have moved in opposite directions, reducing creative practice to representation, reflection, or ideology. It is also that Marxism in general has continued to share, in an abstract way, an undifferentiated and in that form metaphysical celebration of creativity, even alongside these practical reductions. It has thus never finally succeeded in making creativity specific, in the full social and historical material process.

The loose use of 'creative' to describe any and every kind of practice within the artificial grouping (and mutual self-definition) of 'the arts' and 'aesthetic intentions' masks these difficulties, for others as well as for Marxists. It is clear that the radical differences and differentials of these highly variable specific practices and intentions have to be described and distinguished if the terms are to acquire any real content. Most of even the best discussions of 'Art' and 'the Aesthetic' rely to an extraordinary extent on predicated selection, yielding conveniently selective answers. We have to refuse the short cut so often proposed, by which the 'truly creative' is distinguished from other kinds and examples of practice by a (traditional) appeal to its 'timeless permanence' or, on the other hand, by its affiliation, conscious or demonstrable, with 'the progressive

development of humanity' or 'the rich future of man'. Any such proposition might eventually be verified. But to know, substantially, even a little of what such phrases point to, in the extraordinary intricacies and variations of real human self-creation, is to see the phrases themselves, in their ordinary contexts, as abstract gestures, even where they are not, as they have so often been, mere rhetorical cover for some demonstrably local and temporary value or injunction. If the whole vast process of creation and self-creation is what it is said, abstractly, to be, it has to be known and felt, from the beginning, in less abstract and arbitrary and in more concerned, more regarding, more specific, and more practically convincing ways.

To be 'creative', to 'create', means many quite evidently different things. We can consider one central example, where a writer is said to 'create' characters in a play or a novel. At the simplest level this is obviously a kind of production. Through specific notations, and using specific conventions, a 'person' of this special kind is made to 'exist'—a person whom we may then feel we know as well as, or better than, living persons of our acquaintance. In a simple sense something has then been created: in fact the means of notation to know a 'person' through words. All the real complexities then at once follow. The person may have been 'copied' from life, in as full and accurate a verbal 'transcription' as possible of a living or once living person. The 'creation' is then the finding of verbal 'equivalence' to what was (and in some cases could still alternatively be) direct experience. It is far from clear, however, that this 'creative' practice, taken only so far, differs in any significant way, except perhaps in its limitations, from meeting and knowing someone. The point is often made that this 'creative' practice enables us to get to know interesting people whom we could not otherwise have met, or more interesting people than we could ever hope to meet. But then this, though in many circumstances important, is a kind of social extension, privileged accessibility, rather than 'creation'. Indeed, 'creation' of this kind seems to be no more than the creation of (real or apparent) opportunities.

It is interesting to see how far this point might extend beyond the simple and in fact relatively rare cases of a person 'copied from life'. Most such 'transcriptions' are necessarily simplifications, by the sheer fact of selection if by nothing else (the most uneventful life would take a library of books to transcribe). More

common cases are 'copying' certain aspects of a person: physical appearance, social situation, significant experiences and events, ways of talking and behaving. These are then projected into imagined situations, following an element of the known person. Or aspects of one person may be combined with aspects of one or more others, into a new 'character'. Aspects of a person may be separated and counterposed, rendering an internal relationship or conflict as a relation or conflict between two or more persons (the known person, in such a case, may well be the writer). Are these processes 'creative', beyond the simple sense of verbal production?

Not by definition, it would seem. It is only as the processes of combination, separation, projection (and even transcription) become processes beyond the bare production of characters that their description as 'creative' becomes plausible. There is the case, so often recorded, of a writer beginning with some known or observed person, whom he works to reproduce, only to find, at a certain stage of the process, that something else is happening: something usually described as the character 'finding a will (a life) of his own'. What is then in fact happening? Is it taking the full weight, perceived as an 'external' substance, of any human understanding, even in the simplest sense of recording another life? Is it coming to know the full weight of imagined or projected relations? It seems to be a highly variable active process. It is often interpreted, while it lasts, not as 'creating' but as contact, often humble, with some other ('external') source of knowledge. This is often mystically described. I would myself describe it as a consequence of the inherent materiality (and thence objectified sociality) of language.

It cannot be assumed that, even allowing for the complexities, the normal 'creative' process is the movement away from 'known' persons. On the contrary, it is at least as common for a character to be 'created' from other (literary) characters, or from known social types. Even where there are other real starting-points, this is usually what happens, eventually, in the great majority of plays and novels. And then in what sense are these processes 'creation'? In fact all these modes have an essential similarity, since the 'creation' of characters depends on the literary conventions of characterization. But there are evident differences of degree. In most drama and fiction the characters are already pre-formed, as functions of certain kinds of situation

and action. 'Creation' of characters is then in effect a kind of tagging: name, sex, occupation, physical type. In many important plays and novels, within certain class modes, the tagging is still evident, at least for 'minor' characters, according to social conventions of distribution of significance (the 'characterization' of servants, for example). Even in more substantial characterization, the process is often the activation of a known model. But then it must not be supposed that individuation is the sole intention of characterization (though tension or fracture between that retained intention and the selective use of models is significant). Over a wide range of intentions, the real literary process is *active reproduction*. This is especially clear within dominant hegemonic modes, and in residual modes. The 'persons' are 'created' to show that people are 'like this' and their relations 'like this'. The method can range from crude reproduction of an (ideological) model to intent embodiment of a convinced model. Neither is 'creation' in the popular sense, but the range of real processes, from illustration and different levels of typification to what is in effect *performance* of a model, is significant.

The detailed and substantial *performance of a known model* of 'people like this, relations like this', is in fact the real achievement of most serious novels and plays. Yet there is evidently also a mode beyond reproductive performance. There can be new articulations, new formations of 'character' and 'relationship', and these are normally marked by the introduction of different essential notations and conventions, extending beyond these specific elements to a total composition. Many of these new articulations and formations become, in their turn, models. But while they are being formed they are creative in the emergent sense, as distinct from the senses of 'creative' which are ordinarily appropriated for the range from reproduction to performance.

The creative in this emergent sense is comparatively rare. It is necessarily involved with changes in social formation, but two qualifications are necessary. First, that these are not necessarily, and certain not only directly, changes in institutions. The social area excluded by certain practical hegemonies is often one of their sources. Secondly, that the emergent is not necessarily the 'progressive'. For example, the character as inert object, reduced to a set of failing physical functions, as in late Beckett, can be

construed as 'alienated' and linked to a social—in fact deliberately excluded—model. Yet the typification is not only articulative but communicative. In imitation especially the new type is offered to convince, and incorporation begins.

Literary production, then, is 'creative', not in the ideological sense of 'new vision', which takes a small part for the whole, but in the material social sense of a specific practice of self-making, which is in this sense socially neutral: self-composition. It is the particular function of a social theory to understand the range of processes within this general practice. We have to make clear specific distinctions between their many examples, over and above the alternative specialized descriptions which limit, control, and would often exclude these decisive distinctions. In the vital area of contemporary social practice there can be no reserved areas. Nor is it only a matter of analysis and description of alignment. It is a matter of recognizing the issues as parts of a whole social process which, as it is lived, is not only process but is an active history, made up of the realities of formation and of struggle.

The sharpest realization of this active history, a realization which brings with it at once the inevitabilities and the necessities of social and political action, must include realization of the variable realities of this practice, which are so often put under pressure or, from deformed or false theory, relegated to the secondary or the marginal, displaced as the superstructural, distrusted as apparently independent production, even controlled or silenced by injunctions. To see the full social dimension of this kind of production is to take it more seriously, and more seriously as *itself*, than has been possible in more specialized political or aesthetic perspectives. Every mode in its range, from reproduction and illustration through embodiment and performance to new articulation and formation, is a crucial element of practical consciousness. Its specific means, so powerfully developed and practised, are wholly indispensable: the capacity to reproduce and to illustrate, at what seems the lower end of the range; the capacity to embody and perform, a profound activation of what may be known but in these ways is radically known, in detail and in substance; and then the rare capacity to articulate and to form, to make latencies actual and momentary insights permanent. What we generalize as art is often, within a social theory, recognized and honoured from its original collec-

tive functions. It needs even more real respect—a respect of principle—in all its subsequently more varied functions, in complex societies and in the still more complex societies which real socialism envisages.

For creativity relates, finally, to much more than its local and variable means. Inseparable as it always is from the material social process, it ranges over very different forms and intentions which, in partial theories, are separated and specialized. It is inherent in the relatively simple and direct practice of everyday communication, since the signifying process itself is always, by its nature, active: at once the ground of all that is social and the renewed and renewable practice of experienced and changing situations and relationships. It is inherent in what is often distinguished from it as self-composition, social composition, often dismissed as ideology, for these also are always active processes, dependent on specific immediate and renewable forms. It is inherent most evidently, but not exclusively, in new articulations and especially in those which, given material durability, reach beyond their time and occasion.

Writing is so central a material social art that it has of course been used, and continues to be used, in all these forms and intentions. What we find is a true continuum, corresponding to the at once ordinary and extraordinary process of human creativity and self-creation in all its modes and means. And we have then to reach beyond the specialized theories and procedures which divide the continuum. Writing is always communication but it cannot always be reduced to simple communication: the passing of messages between known persons. Writing is always in some sense self-composition and social composition, but it cannot always be reduced to its precipitate in personality or ideology, and even where it is so reduced it has still to be seen as active. Bourgeois literature is indeed bourgeois literature, but it is not a block or type; it is an immense and varied practical consciousness, at every level from crude reproduction to permanently important articulation and formation. Similarly the practical consciousness, in such forms, of an alternative society can never be reduced to a general block of the same dismissive or celebratory kind. Writing is often a new articulation and in effect a new formation, extending beyond its own modes. But to separate this as art, which in practice includes, always partly and sometimes wholly, elements

elsewhere in the continuum, is to lose contact with the substantive creative process and then to idealize it; to put it above or below the social, when it is in fact the social in one of its most distinctive, durable, and total forms.

Creative practice is thus of many kinds. It is already, and actively, our practical consciousness. When it becomes struggle—the active struggle for new consciousness through new relationships that is the ineradicable emphasis of the Marxist sense of self-creation—it can take many forms. It can be the long and difficult remaking of an inherited (determined) practical consciousness: a process often described as development but in practice a struggle at the roots of the mind—not casting off an ideology, or learning phrases about it, but confronting a hegemony in the fibres of the self and in the hard practical substance of effective and continuing relationships. It can be more evident practice: the reproduction and illustration of hitherto excluded and subordinated models; the embodiment and performance of known but excluded and subordinated experiences and relationships; the articulation and formation of latent, momentary, and newly possible consciousness.

Within real pressures and limits, such practice is always difficult and often uneven. It is the special function of theory, in exploring and defining the nature and the variation of practice, to develop a general consciousness within what is repeatedly experienced as a special and often relatively isolated consciousness. For creativity and social self-creation are both known and unknown events, and it is still from grasping the known that the unknown—the next step, the next work—is conceived.