

The Total Marx and the Marxist Theory of Literature¹

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The increasing availability of Marx's *Grundrisse* through translations into French² and, partially, English³ can only be welcomed by anyone seriously interested in the development of Marxist theory. But it is important to define precisely why we are concerned to publish and analyse works which Marx himself left incomplete and unpublished; thus Marx wrote of *The German Ideology* that 'we abandoned the manuscript to the gnawing criticism of the mice all the more willingly as we had achieved our main purpose – self-clarification'.⁴

Although the present increase in academic interest in Marx and Marxism is an important symptom of the crisis in bourgeois culture, there is a danger that the study of Marx's thought can degenerate into a kind of philology of Marxism – emphatically not a Marxist philology – occupied with tracing continuity and rupture within the thought-processes of the individual Karl Marx.

If, in Lukács's phrase, 'historical materialism is the theory of the proletarian revolution'⁵, such an attitude is essentially trivial. It was certainly not the position of the man to whom we owe the publication of both Marx's early works and the *Grundrisse* – David Borisovich Riazanov. Riazanov was no pure academic, but the very incarnation of a 'total Marxist'; he entered the labour movement in 1895, suffered imprisonment and deportation, worked with Lenin on *Iskra*, and organized the railway workers' union during the 1905 revolution. Joining the Bolshevik Party in 1917, he organized the Marx-Engels Institute and worked on publishing the complete works of Marx and Engels until he received the final tribute to his revolutionary integrity by being purged by Stalin.

The importance of uncovering the unpublished substructure of Marx's writings, of counterposing the total Marx to the orthodoxy of the 'classic texts', derives from the history of Marxism after Marx. The two major forms of twentieth-century revisionism, Social Democracy and Stalinism, which respectively used Marxism as justification for blatant capitulation by labour leaders and as the legitimizing ideology of a repressive ruling class, are the expression on the level of theory of massive defeats of the

¹ This piece was originally published in *Situating Marx: evaluations and departures*, Eds. Paul Walton and Stuart Hall, Human Context Books (Chaucer Publishing Co.) London, 1972.

² K. Marx, *Fondements de la Critique de l'économie politique*, Paris, Anthropos, 1968, 2 vols. (Hereafter Fondements.)

³ D. McLellan, *Marx's Grundrisse*, London, Macmillan, 1971. (Hereafter McLellan.) Also K. Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations* (ed. and with an introduction, E. J. Hobsbawm), London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1964. (Hereafter Hobsbawm.)

⁴ Marx and Engels, *Selected works in two volumes*, Moscow, F.L.P.H., 1958, I 364. Marx did not, of course, dismiss the *Grundrisse* in such terms; cf. Martin Nicolaus, 'The Unknown Marx', *New Left Review*, 48, p. 42.

⁵ G. Lukács, *Lenin*, London, New Left Books, 1970, p. 86.

working-class movement in this period. Those who have struggled in defence of Marxism have found it necessary to walk again, slowly and painfully, roads that Marx believed had been travelled along once and for all.

It is within this framework that I intend to approach the problem of the reconstruction of a Marxist theory of literature. For here the fragmentariness that marks Marx's work in every field is at its most frustrating; the fundamental texts are not merely unpublished, they are unwritten. Though up to 1837 Marx's main interests were in literature and literary criticism, his subsequent discoveries – first of Hegelian philosophy, then of the revolutionary potential of the working class – never gave him the time to write systematically on literary questions. The planned essay on 'Religion and Art' of 1842, the critique of the aesthetics of Friedrich Vischer, which he was invited to write in 1857, the long-nursed project of a major study on Balzac – none of these was ever taken beyond the stage of rough notes on reading.

Such fragmentariness in the source material is an open invitation to an anecdotal approach. A work like Peter Demetz's *Marx, Engels and the Poets*⁶, in many ways a useful compilation of Marx's views on literature, is ultimately trivial because it confines itself to a study of the individual Marx. For Marx's 'tastes' in literature are, unless located in a total theory, of barely greater interest than his taste in tobacco.

Moreover, to accept Marx's views on literature at their fragmentary face value is to open the door to the notion that, in certain fields at least, Marxism requires to be supplemented by some alien worldview. Not only is such a belief the very essence of 'revisionism', but it abets the attempt to reduce Marxism from a total revolutionary theory into mere political and economic technique. Candidates for the role of complementing Marxism in the establishment of a dialectical materialist have included such distinguished names as Darwin, Kant and Aristotle.

Neither Stalinism nor Social Democracy have much to say that will assist us in constructing a Marxist theory of literature. Social Democracy reduces Marxism to the level of technique; literature and art can be left to the sphere of private taste, or at most conceived of as possible recipients of state aid. Social Democracy might, *a la rigueur*, express a view on admission charges for museums; it has nothing to say on the content of those museums. Stalinism maintains the total claim and ambitions of Marxism, but in the form of aiming at a functional and ultimately conservative control over literary theory and practice.

Yet just because literature is, as it were 'marginal' to the main concerns of revolutionary politics, it has been an area in which significant issues of Marxist theory have been raised. The total claims of the dominant Marxist

⁶ P. Demetz, *Marx, Engels and the Poets*, University of Chicago Press, 1967.

ideology in the Soviet Union have meant that the 'literary' opposition – from Ehrenburg to Solzhenitsyn – has played a role quite unthinkable for creative writers in Western capitalism. Or, to take a different aspect, we might cite the career of Georg Lukács, who after, in effect, withdrawing from political controversy in the mid-twenties, used the oblique means of literary criticism to continue his investigations into the questions of consciousness and totality in Marxist theory.

The disintegration of the Stalinist monolith over the last two decades has made possible a much more sophisticated level of discussion. It is now barely possible that anyone should take seriously the kind of pseudo-Marxist hack-work that flourished in 1950; for example:

Very near the top of what I have, in the past, rather indelicately called the 'cultural dung heap of reaction' sits Franz Kafka, one of the major Olympians in that curious shrine the so-called 'new critics' and their Trotskyite colleagues have erected.... Kafka... is concerned only with proving that a certain type of human being is so like a cockroach that it is entirely plausible for him to up to wake up one morning and discover a natural metamorphosis has taken place.⁷

The battle against 'dogmatism' has been fought – and won – in a series of works ranging from the magnificent concrete analyses of Goldmann in *Le Dieu Caché* to the crude liberal eclecticism of Roger Garaudy.

But as yet no total Marxist theory of literature has been established; most writers have developed one aspect of the total problematic in a one-sided manner, rather than seeking to lay bare the total dynamics of the literary process – the experience and commitment of the individual writer, the particular form and mode of expression of the work, the world-view belonging to a particular social group embodied therein, and the way in which the work is received by, and functions within the consciousness of, its audience.

In the coming period the defence of the great writers of the past against reductionist philistinism is no longer the main problem. A Marxist theory of literature will have to contribute to an understanding of the whole process of disintegration and replacement of bourgeois culture. A recent article by Hans Magnus Enzensberger argues incisively that many of even the most sophisticated Marxist theories of culture were narrow and conservative in their preoccupations, and hence failed to confront the central problems facing revolutionaries in the present period.

With a single great exception, that of Walter Benjamin (and in his footsteps, Brecht), Marxists have not understood the consciousness industry and have been aware only of its bourgeois-capitalist dark side and not of its socialist possibilities. An author like Georg Lukács is a perfect example of this theoretical and practical backwardness. Nor are the works of Horkheimer and Adorno free of a nostalgia which clings to early bourgeois media.... The inadequate understanding which Marxists have shown of the media and the questionable use they have made of them has produced a vacuum in Western industrialized

⁷ H. Fast, *Literature and Reality*, International Publishers, 1950, pp. 9-10.

countries into which a stream of non-Marxist hypotheses and practices has consequently flowed.⁸

This raises issues beyond the scope of this paper. But even in the narrower field of 'literature' in the strict sense, there is a wide range of theories of literature laying claim to Marxism. Probably the fullest and most coherently exposed is in the work of Georg Lukács, the importance of Lukács's work can hardly be overestimated; he puts the category of totality at the centre of his method, and uses this to ground a comprehension of the relation between form and content. But at the same time Lukács (in his literary criticism from the thirties on) underplays the revolutionary dimension to Marxist thought. He stresses the location of a Marxist aesthetic in a historical continuity, rather than bringing out its radical break with previous notions.

Great art, genuine realism and humanism are inextricably united. And the unifying principle is what we have been emphasizing: concern for man's integrity. Humanism is fundamental to Marxist aesthetics. We stress once again that Marx and Engels were not the first to make humanism the crux of an aesthetic outlook. Here, too, Marx and Engels were continuing the work of the outstanding representatives of philosophic and artistic thought and raising it to a qualitatively higher level of development. On the other hand, since they were not the initiators, but the culmination of a long development they are far more consequent in their humanism.⁹

Lukács, quite correctly, uses this framework to show the literary value of such figures as Balzac and Goethe, notwithstanding their lack of overt political commitment. But he has little to offer in the way of a positive revolutionary task for literature. The choice seems to be limited to 'critical realism' – for which it is sufficient to show 'readiness to respect the perspective of socialism – or 'socialist realism' – to which the most fulsome praise is given for presenting 'a being whose humanity nothing could disfigure or destroy'.¹⁰ As a result, certain major writers get short shrift at Lukács's hands; for example, Zola, one of the most magnificent portrayals of the working class engaged in collective action, or Brecht, who made a serious attempt to integrate Marxism into the form and content of creative writing.

The importance of Lukács's work is that it subsumes literature into epistemology, thereby asserting the relevance of literature as one means, specific but not unique, in which man comprehends the world. What seems lacking in the Lukácsian method is the notion of the unity of knowledge and action central to Marxist epistemology. Paradoxically, this unity has been brought out most clearly by writers who had entered into a tactical alliance with Marxism rather than basing themselves fully on the ground of Marxism. Thus, when Sartre wrote *Quest-ce que la Littérature?* in 1947 he

⁸ H. M. Enzensberger, 'The Consciousness Industry', *New Left Review*, 64, pp. 27-9

⁹ G. Lukács, *Writer and Critic*, London, Merlin, 1970, p. 86.

¹⁰ G. Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, London, Merlin, 1963, p. 92; 'Solzhenitsyn and the New Realism', *Socialist Register* 1965, p. 208.

still had a highly ambiguous attitude to Marxist philosophy. But he comprehended quite clearly the nature of writing as a revolutionary act.

Thus, in speaking, I reveal the situation by my very project of changing it; I reveal it to myself and to others *in order* to change it; I strike it through the heart, I pierce it and fix it under their gaze; at present I have it at my disposition, with every word I say I commit myself a little more in the world and at the same time I emerge a little more out of it because I am transcending it towards the future. Thus, the prose-writer is a man who has chosen a certain mode of secondary action which might be called action by revelation. It is therefore legitimate to ask him this second question: what aspects of the world do you want to reveal, what change do you want to bring to the world by this revelation? The 'committed' writer knows that speech is action: he knows that to reveal is to change and that one cannot reveal without the project of changing. He has abandoned the impossible dream of making an impartial portrayal of Society and the human condition, Man is the being to which no other being, not even God, can remain impartial.¹¹

The surrealists offer another example of a tendency which, while being far from accepting Marxism, as a whole, was interested in developing its revolutionary implications. Thus, René Crevel (a surrealist and member of the French Communist Party, who committed suicide in 1935 after Ehrenburg had destroyed any hope of a united front of artists by a vicious attack on surrealism) wrote a critique of realism which diverges sharply from the notion of realism as developed in the Lukácsian tradition, but which seems rooted in, for example the *Theses on Feuerbach*:

Not to try to act on the external world, to accept it as it is, in itself, to accept to become as it is, out of hypocrisy, opportunism or cowardice, to camouflage oneself in the colours of the surroundings, that is Realism.¹²

Of course, the dichotomy is not absolute. Other important Marxists locate themselves on ground intermediate between the two positions outlined above. Gramsci is one example. Another is Trotsky, who in *Literature and Revolution* demolished the *proletcult* notion of a radical break with bourgeois culture, and yet by sponsoring the unfortunately stillborn International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art showed that he accepted the notion of 'revolutionary art'.

My aim here is not, however, to trace the tortuous and fragmented history of Marxist theories of literature. It is simply to suggest that all of these theories, to a greater or lesser extent, because of their own internal structure or because of the political context in which they arose, represent one-sided abstractions from the totality of Marx's world-view. The quest for the 'total Marx' implies an attempt to go beyond these one-sided positions.

¹¹ J.-P. Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la Littérature?*, Paris, Gallimard, 1964, pp. 29-30

¹² R. Crevel, *Le Clavecin de Diderot*, Paris, Pauvert, 1966, p. 77.

This paper does not claim to have solved the problem. The question cannot be resolved by producing an obscure text like a rabbit out of a hat. Certainly, the question is never systematically confronted in Marx's work. Even in the early works extended treatments of literary topics are few and far between, and in the later works the approach becomes ever more allusive. All that I want to try to show here is that there do exist in Marx's works – notably in the *Grundrisse* – the components on which such a theory could be constructed.

At first sight, of course, one is presented with a mass of apparent contradictions. One of the most striking is that between two texts written at almost the same time, in the middle period of Marx's life (the period of the *Grundrisse*). In the *Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) Marx sets out a brief formulation of the 'guiding thread' of his studies:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. . . . With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of the conflict and fight it out.¹³

However, in the 'Introduction' which stands at the beginning of the *Grundrisse*, and which Marx decided against publishing, there is an incomplete digression on Greek art which appears at first sight to diverge sharply from the position developed in the preceding text, and to lay much greater stress on the autonomy of the work of art:

It is well known that certain periods of the highest development of art stand in no direct connection to the general development of society, or to the material basis and skeleton structure of its organization. Witness the example of the Greeks as compared with the modern nations, or even Shakespeare. As regards certain forms of art, e.g. the epos, it is admitted that they can never be produced in the universal epoch-making form as soon as art as such has come into existence; in other words, that in the domain of art certain important forms of it are possible only at a low stage of its development. If that be true of the mutual relations of different forms of art within the domain of art itself, it is far less surprising that the same is true of the relation of art as a whole to the general

¹³ Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, I, p. 363.

development of society. The difficulty lies only in the general formulation of these contradictions. No sooner are they specified than they are explained.

Let us take for instance the relation of Greek art, and that of Shakespeare's time, to our own. It is a well-known fact that Greek mythology was not only the arsenal of Greek art, but also the very ground from which it had sprung. Is the view of nature and of social relations which shaped Greek imagination and Greek art possible in the age of automatic machinery and railways and locomotives and electric telegraphs? Where does Vulcan come in as against Roberts & Co.? Jupiter, as against the lightning conductor? and Hermes, as against the *Crédit Mobilier*? All mythology masters and dominates and shapes the forces of nature in and through the imagination; and hence it disappears as soon as man gains mastery over the forces of nature. What becomes of the Goddess Fama side by side with Printing House Square? Greek art presupposes the existence of Greek mythology, i.e. that nature and even the form of society are wrought up in popular fancy in an unconsciously artistic fashion. That is its material. Not, however, any mythology taken at random, nor any accidental unconsciously artistic elaboration of nature (including under the latter all objects, hence also society). Egyptian mythology could never be the soil or womb which would give birth to Greek art. But in any event, there had to be a mythology. In no event could Greek art originate in a society which excludes any mythological explanation of nature, any mythological attitude towards it or which requires of the artist an imagination free from mythology.

Looking at it from another side is Achilles possible side by side with powder and lead? Or is the *Iliad* at all compatible with the printing press and even printing machines? Do not singing and reciting and the muses necessarily go out of existence with the appearance of the printer's bar, and do not, therefore, the prerequisites of epic poetry disappear?

But the difficulty is not in grasping the idea that Greek art and epos are bound up with certain forms of social development. It lies understanding why they still constitute for us a source of aesthetic enjoyment and in certain respects prevail as the standard and model beyond attainment.

A man cannot become a child again unless he becomes childish. But does he not enjoy the artless ways of the child, and must he not strive to reproduce its truth on a higher plane? Is not the character of every epoch revived, perfectly true to nature, in the child's nature? Why should the childhood of human society, where it had obtained its most beautiful development, not exert an eternal charm as an age that will never return? There are ill-bred children and precocious children. Many of the ancient nations belong to the latter class. The Greeks were normal children. The charm their art has for us does not conflict with the primitive character of the social order from which it had sprung. It is rather the product of the latter, and is due rather to the fact that the immature social conditions under which the art arose and under which alone it could appear can never return.¹⁴

This passage has posed considerable problems to commentators. Demetz, for example, sees it in terms of an unresolved conflict between Marx's 'economic determinist' theory and his personal good taste:

This unexpected elegy on the golden but irretrievably lost days of Greek myth only conceals the fact that Marx studiously avoids the real problem – the contradiction between his theory of the dependence of art upon economics, and his personal faith in the timeless value of the Greek achievement. Marx knew

¹⁴ McLellan, pp. 44-46.

that a theory of historical causality must be essentially free from value judgments; the productive relationships arising in particular epochs of art can be described, but an incisive value judgment can hardly be based upon mere descriptions of variable relationships.¹⁵

Such a separation of fact and value judgement is merely a transposition to the aesthetic sphere of the long-established criticism of Marx that sees a fundamental dichotomy between the 'scientific' and 'moral' elements in his thought.¹⁶ To accept this would be to reduce Marx's work to triviality, as well as surrendering to the bourgeois notion of the autonomy – and hence logically the irrelevance – of artistic creation. For if all that we have in Marx's comments on works of literature is an expression of his "good taste" – necessarily defined by reference to a set of prior existing standards – then we might as well leave the whole matter to the sentimental biographers.

But even Marxist comments on this passage often fail to resolve the question. Lukács, for example, uses the passage to demonstrate Marx's emphasis on the 'law of uneven development'. On the one hand, this means a recognition of objective standards in aesthetics:

He saw in those periods of extraordinary creative activity (the Greeks, Shakespeare) objective culminations in the development of art and... he considered artistic value as objectively recognizable and definable. Transformation of this profound dialectical theory into relativistic, vulgar sociology means the degradation of Marxism into the mire of bourgeois ideology.

At the same time, it shows that Marx was far removed from mechanical materialism.

In absolute opposition to vulgar Marxism, historical materialism recognizes that ideological development does not move in a mechanical and predetermined parallel with the economic progress of society. It has certainly never been inevitable in the history of primitive communism and of class societies (societies about which Marx and Engels wrote) that every economic and social upsurge be accompanied by a flourishing of literature, art, and philosophy; it is certainly not inevitable that a society on a high social level have a literature, art and philosophy at a higher stage of evolution than a society on a lower level.¹⁷

The defence of Marxism against mechanistic and relativistic distortions is, of course, vital, but in itself, it solves nothing. Merely to talk, as Lukács does, of 'uneven development' (or, as Garaudy does, of the 'relative autonomy of superstructures')¹⁸, does not resolve the question of the complex but concrete mediations between the work of art and the society in which it functions.

The essence of this relationship is class struggle. As Marx puts it in the *Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* - usually

¹⁵ Demetz, op. cit., p. 70.

¹⁶ Cf. L. Goldmann, 'Is there a Marxist Sociology?', *International Socialism*, 34.

¹⁷ *Writer and Critic*, pp.56, 66-67.

¹⁸ R. Garaudy, *D'un réalisme sans rivages*, Paris, Plon, 1966, p. 265.

regarded as being more 'deterministic' than the unpublished *Introduction* – we are dealing with 'the legal, political, aesthetic or philosophic – in short ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and *fight it out.*'¹⁹

For any notion which sees different artistic forms and genres as corresponding simply to different historical phases necessarily implies an evolutionary and not a revolutionary view of history, one in which stages succeed each other, as it were, automatically. Such views of history were, of course, current among such technocratic elitist reformists as the Saint-Simonians whose notion of 'Progress' Marx attacked sharply. He can have had little patience with the sort of formulations developed in French Utopian circles which reduced the question of literature to one of evolutionary appropriateness, for example such comments as those of Boulland, a disciple of the Utopian Buchez:

Tragedy, classical or Romantic, and whether Racinian or Shakespearean in form, tragedy is dead. It no longer corresponds to any need and must disappear, yielding place to the *drame*.²⁰

As Marx pointed out in another important manuscript of the middle period of his life, *Theories of Surplus Value*, things are not so simple. Capitalism cannot be seen merely as part of a process of ongoing progress; on the contrary, certain aspects of capitalism are positively regressive in a historical context.

For instance, capitalist production is hostile to certain branches of spiritual production, for example art and poetry. If this is left out of account, it opens the way to the illusion of the French in the eighteenth century which has been so beautifully satirized by Lessing. Because we are further ahead than the ancients in mechanics, etc. why shouldn't we be able to make an epic too? And the *Henriade* in place of the *Iliad*!²¹

And thus, to see the passage about Greek art in the 'General Introduction' to the *Grundrisse* as a lapse by Marx, a concession to his personal taste and love of Greek culture, is not merely to disregard the essential concerns of a dialectical view of history with contradiction and struggle it is also to ignore the rest of the *Grundrisse*. For in the more thorough treatment of Greek society further on in the manuscript, Marx shows that, however much he may admire Greek civilization, he is quite able to locate this admiration within a dialectical understanding of the significance and limitations of Greek society.

Thus, the ancient conception, in which man always appears (in however narrowly national, religious or political a definition) as the aim of production, seems very much more exalted than the modern world, in which production is the very aim of man and wealth the aim of production. In fact, however, when the narrow bourgeois form has been peeled away, what is wealth, if not the

¹⁹ Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, I, p 363 (emphasis added).

²⁰ Quoted in D. O. Evans, *Social Romanticism in France*, London, O.U.P., 1951, p.86.

²¹ K. Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1963, I, 285.

universality of needs, capacities, enjoyments, productive powers, etc., of individuals, produced in universal exchange? What, if not the full development of human control over the forces of nature those of his own nature as well as those of so-called 'nature'? What, if not the absolute elaboration of his creative dispositions, without any preconditions other than antecedent historical evolution which makes the totality of this evolution – i.e. the evolution of all human power as such, unmeasured by any *previously established* yardstick – an end in itself? What is this, if not a situation where man does not reproduce himself in any determined form, but produces his totality? Where he does seek to remain something formed by the past, but is in the absolute movement of becoming? In bourgeois political economy – and in the epoch of production to which it corresponds – this complete elaboration of what lies within man, appears as the total alienation, and the destruction of all fixed, one-sided purpose as the sacrifice of the end in itself to a wholly external compulsion. Hence in one way the childlike world of the ancients appears to be superior; and this is so, in so far as we seek for closed shape, form and established limitation. The ancients provide a narrow satisfaction. whereas the modern world leaves us unsatisfied, or, where it appears to be satisfied with itself, is vulgar and mean.²²

Of course, as far as literary production is concerned, the mediations are not developed. At most we get a few sentences that open up the possibility of a class analysis of a particular writer or work. In the history of Marxist literary theory, one of the most important objects of such study has been Balzac, and the Marxist understanding of Balzac's 'realism' has drawn on the pregnant remarks of Engels in his letter to Margaret Harkness²³ where he judges Balzac 'a far greater master of realism than all the Zolas', and shows how Balzac, 'politically a legitimist' was 'compelled to go against his own class sympathies and political prejudices' and 'saw the necessity of the downfall of his favourite nobles and described them as people deserving no better fate'. That Marx was also concerned with this as a problem of class epistemology, recognizing that a figure identified with the old order might see the new order more perceptively than the new order's own ideologists, is shown by a passing remark in the *Grundrisse*, though one which deals with the history of economic ideas and not of literature. Here Marx contrasts the view of the individual in Adam Smith and Ricardo with that of the eighteenth-century English [Scottish] economist Sir James Steuart:

This illusion has been characteristic of every new epoch in the past. Steuart, who, as an aristocrat, stood more firmly on historical ground and was in many respects opposed to the spirit of the eighteenth century, escaped this simplicity of view.²⁴

Of course, the issues raised by Marx were not new ones. The notions of 'art for art's sake', of the social mission of art, of art as a product of social institutions – and even of 'proletarian literature' – were commonplace among the Romantic writers in France in the 1830s and 1840s and Marx

²² Hobsbawm, pp. 84-5.

²³ April, 1988; quoted in Marx and Engels, *Literature and Art*, Bombay, Current Book House, 1956, pp. 35-8.

²⁴ McLellan, p. 17.

can scarcely have been unaware of the debates or of the false dichotomies around which most of them hinged.

One of the most remarkable studies of how a work of art transcends the intentions of the writer, and of the implicitly revolutionary nature of great art is an essay by Marx's friend, Heinrich Heine, whose influence on Marx's ideas in general, and especially on his views of literature, would be well worth extended study. In his commentary on Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* Heine argues that even if Shakespeare himself accepted anti-Semitic prejudices, the play itself is profoundly on the side of the oppressed:

I am forced to include *The Merchant of Venice* among the tragedies, although its frame is embellished with the gayest masks, pictures of satyrs and cupids, and the poet actually intended this to be a comedy. Perhaps Shakespeare wished to present an unmitigated werewolf for the amusement of the crowd, an abhorrent mythical creature that thirsts for blood, in the end loses his daughter and his ducats, and is made ridiculous into the bargain. But the poet's genius, the universal spirit which reigned in him, was always stronger than his own will, and so it happened that despite the exaggerated burlesque, he embodies in Shylock a justification of the hapless sect which for mysterious reasons has been burdened by Providence with the hatred on the part of the lower and higher rabble, and would not always requite this hatred with love.

But what am I saying? The genius of Shakespeare rises above the petty quarrels of the two religious sects, and his drama in reality exhibits neither Jews nor Christians, but oppressors and oppressed, and the madly agonized jubilation of the latter when they can repay their arrogant tormentors with interest for insults inflicted on them.

... Truly, Shakespeare would have been writing against Christianity, if he had let it be embodied in these characters who are hostile to Shylock, and yet are hardly worthy of untying shoelaces. Bankrupt Antonio is a nerveless creature, without energy, without strength to hate, and hence also without strength to love, a gloomy insect-heart, whose flesh really is good for nothing but 'to bait fish withal'.

... Truly, except for Portia, Shylock is the most respectable character in the entire play. He loves money; he does not conceal this love, but cries it aloud in the market-place. But there is something he esteems above money, it is satisfaction for his injured feelings, the just retribution for unspeakable insults; and though offered ten times the loan, he refuses, and does not rue the three thousand or ten times the three thousand ducats, so long as he can buy a pound of the flesh of his enemy's heart.²⁵

To explain this capacity of great literature, even without the author's conscious intention or knowledge, to stand on the side of the oppressed, is a central problem of Marxist theory – and practice. It is of deep relevance to broader issues of revolutionary class-consciousness.

The basic problem for any theory of literature that claims to locate literature in the social totality is to see literature as being simultaneously the subject and object of social inquiry. On the one hand, any 'social

²⁵ From *Shakespeare's Girls and Women* (1839), quoted in *It Will be a Lovely Day*, Berlin, Seven Seas Publishers, 1965, pp 252-6

science' worthy of the name must be able to strip away the bourgeois mythology of the autonomy of art and individual creativity, and show art to be governed by the general laws of the social process. On the other hand, if art is to be raised above the level of decorative triviality implied in the notion of 'art for art's sake', it must be conceived of as a means by which man understands himself in society. To take only the former aspect means to see art simply as 'product' or 'reflection'; the most developed version of this approach is the determinist positivism of Hippolyte Taine and his followers. On the other hand, to see art only as the subject of social investigation will almost inevitably imply a relapse into moralism, viewing the work only in terms of the 'message' that can be extracted from it like a kernel from a nut. Paradoxically, both extremes will tend to be an overestimation of content at the expense of form.

For a Marxist theory which seeks to comprehend literature both as socially defined and as revolutionary practice, this duality is essential. The problem is perhaps most pregnantly summed up in a phrase of Lukács – though one not originally written with reference to literature: "Reality can only be understood and penetrated as a totality, and only a subject which is itself a totality is capable of this penetration."²⁶

The notion that artistic phenomena are not merely passive products of human activity but act back on humanity and transform it is one that runs throughout Marx's work. Already in the 1844 manuscripts he formulated the point as follows: "music alone awakens in man the sense of music, and .. the most beautiful music has no sense for the unmusical ear."²⁷

In the *Grundrisse* the point is developed for artistic activity in general:

The object of art, as well as any other product, creates an artistic public, appreciative of beauty. Production thus produces not only an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object.²⁸

The point is, moreover, incorporated into Marx's view of human activity in general:

The act of reproduction itself changes not only the objective conditions – e.g. transforming village into town, the wilderness into agricultural clearings, etc. – but the producers change with it, by the emergence of new qualities, by transforming and developing themselves in production, forming new powers and new conceptions, new modes of intercourse, new needs, and new speech.²⁹

The germ of a total theory is here; the development, with the rich concrete grasp of mediation of which Marx would have been capable, is not. It is therefore necessary to examine the scattered components of the theory as they are developed here and there in Marx's work.

²⁶ G. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, London, Merlin, 1971.

²⁷ K. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Moscow, F.L.P.H., 1961, p.108.

²⁸ McLellan, p. 26.

²⁹ Hobsbawm, p. 93.

There is nothing specifically Marxist about the notion that works of literature can, in part at least, be explained as products of particular social formations. The notion can be traced back almost indefinitely into the history of ideas; certainly, it is already developed in the abbé Du Bos's *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture* of 1719. Theories of the social basis of literature were commonplace in France in the Romantic period—one need name only Mme. de Staël, Constant, Hugo or Villemain. In Germany Herder, Lessing and then Hegel had all approached the problem, as well as Heine, whose influence on Marx was quite considerable, and who, particularly in works such as *Religion and Philosophy in Germany* (1835) made an important contribution to the social analysis of culture.

Nor – contrary to the normal claims of bourgeois academic commentators – is the Marxist theory of literature distinguished from other attempts to elucidate the social determination of literature by its more ambitious and all-embracing claims. The most far-reaching pretensions for a sociology of literature and art were not those of Marx or any subsequent Marxist, but one of Marx's contemporaries, the French positivist Hippolyte Taine. Taine, who claimed to make a synthesis of French empiricism and Hegelian philosophy, but was always a detached conservative, claimed:

When we have considered race, milieu and moment, that is, the internal motivation, the external pressure and the impulse already acquired, we have exhausted, not only all the real causes, but indeed all the possible causes of motion.³⁰

It is hard to imagine any Marxist neglecting 'relative autonomy' to this extent.

In fact, while Marx's notion of 'superstructure' implies the social determination of literature, he spent remarkably little time actually demonstrating this determination. It would be quite alien to the whole spirit of Marx to recruit him to the now fashionable discipline of the sociology of literature. Marx almost always refers to literature in passing, rather than systematically, and his main concern is not to assert determination, but rather to show that, since literature is rooted in the social process, it is relevant to the comprehension of that process. In demonstrating this relevance, Marx is concerned with literature as a form of consciousness; sometimes he sees it as a source of documentation; more often, and more interestingly, as an embodiment of ideology.

In *Capital* – and even more so in the *Grundrisse*, where Marx often seems to worry a theme to death with his obsessive concern for detail he draws on his vast range of reading in every field. In particular, in dealing with the ancient world, he calls his literary knowledge into service. In the *Grundrisse* chapter on money, history, economics and literature mingle with chemistry and metallurgy in a section (on the metals used for money)

³⁰ H. Taine, *Introduction a l'Histoire de la Littérature Anglaise*, Manchester University Press, 1936, p. 46.

more remarkable for its thoroughness than its central theoretical importance. Within one page of this section Marx quotes, not only such nineteenth-century scholars as William Jacob, Germain Garnier and Dureau de la Malle, but also Hesiod, Lucretius, Herodotus, Homer and Pliny, all strung one after the other without differentiation.³¹ It is typical of Marx's approach that the evidence from creative literature is not set aside as separate – either elevated as a higher historic truth, or lowered as merely fictional – but seen as part of the process of men becoming aware of their own social reality.

Literary evidence is, of course, less drawn on for the references to modern society, but where Marx does quote, for example, Balzac, he treats him just as though he were any other authority:

Thus, for instance, Balzac, who so thoroughly studied every shade of avarice, represents the old usurer Gobseck as in his second childhood when he begins to heap up a hoard of commodities.

In a society ruled by capitalist production, even the non-capitalist producer is dominated by capitalist conceptions. In his last novel, *Les Paysans*, Balzac, who is generally remarkable for his profound grasp of actual conditions, aptly describes how the little peasant, in order to retain the good will of his usurer, performs many small tasks gratuitously for him and fancies that he does not give him anything for nothing, because his own labour does not cost him any cash outlay.³²

But Marx does not see literature merely as a fund of incidental documentary sources (like the witness at the Fanny Hill trial who argued that the novel was a valuable source of information on eighteenth-century tea-drinking habits). Literature is one form in which the ideas of a social class can be crystallized, and requires to be interpreted as such. The fullest account of the concept of the literary representatives of a social class is given by Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

Just as little must one imagine that the democratic representatives are indeed all shop-keepers or enthusiastic champions of shopkeepers. According to their education and their individual position they may be as far apart as heaven from earth. What makes them representatives of the petty-bourgeoisie is the fact that in their minds they do not get beyond the limits which the latter do not get beyond in life, that they are consequently driven, theoretically, to the same problems and solutions to which material interest and social position drive the latter practically. This is, in general, the relationship between the *political* and *literary representatives* of a class and the class they represent.³³

This is not a deterministic formulation. Rather it posits a structural homology between the world-view of a social class and the work of a writer who – for whatever individual or social reason – does not go beyond the limits of this world-view. Thus, Marx can quote Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* as offering an early formulation of the notion of exchange value:

³¹ *Fondements*, I, 121.

³² K. Marx, *Capital*, Moscow, Progress, 1961 ff.; I, 589; III, 39.

³³ *Selected Works*, I, 275.

The value of a thing / Is just as much as it will bring.³⁴

In the *Grundrisse*, developing a critique of the individualism central to bourgeois ideology, Marx points to the fact that in the eighteenth century there is a narrow dividing line between economics and fantasy, and that Ricardo and Smith start with the same presuppositions as adventure stories after the manner of *Robinson Crusoe*:

The individual and isolated hunter or fisher who forms the starting point with Smith and Ricardo belongs to the insipid illusions of the eighteenth century. They are adventure stories which do not by any means represent, as students of the history of civilization imagine, a reaction against over-refinement and a return to a misunderstood natural life. They are no more based on such a naturalism than is Rousseau's *contrat social*, which makes naturally independent individuals come into contact and have mutual intercourse by contract. They are the fiction and only the aesthetic fiction of the small and great adventure stories.³⁵

The germs of a Marxist critique of the eighteenth-century novel are present here.

Marx is even more explicit in his critique of the individualist premises of bourgeois literature when dealing with a work that has direct political implications. In the 1869 Preface to *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* he compares his own pamphlet to Victor Hugo's satire *Napoléon le Petit*:

Victor Hugo confines himself to bitter and witty invective against the responsible publisher of the *coup d'état*. The event itself appears in his work like a bolt from the blue. He sees in it only the violent act of a single individual. He does not notice that he makes this individual great instead of little by ascribing to him a personal power of initiative such as would be without parallel in world history.³⁶

But if works of literature are embodiments of ideology, they are embodiments which have a particular form, and the analysis of this form is relevant and significant. Marx is always aware of the specificity of artistic representations of reality; in discussing the 'Method of Political Economy' in the *Grundrisse* he notes:

The whole, as it appears in our heads as a thought-aggregate, is the product of a thinking mind which grasps the world in the only way open to it, a way which differs from the one employed by the artistic, religious or practical mind.³⁷

One of the most important specific qualities of literature is, of course, its use of language. Marx's comments on language are, in general, as cryptic and fragmentary as his comments on literature, but clearly any development of a Marxist theory of literature would have to give close attention to the literary use of language. Wilhelm Liebknecht, in his

³⁴ *Capital*, I, 36.

³⁵ McLellan, pp. 16-17.

³⁶ *Selected Works*, I, 244.

³⁷ McLellan, p. 35.

reminiscences of Marx, associates Marx's literary interests with his preoccupation with rigour and precision in the use of language.

Marx attached extraordinary value to pure correct expression and in Goethe, Lessing, Shakespeare, Dante and Cervantes, whom he read every day, he had chosen the greatest masters. He showed the most painstaking conscientiousness in regard to purity and correctness of speech. Marx was a severe purist – he often searched long and laboriously for the correct expression.³⁸

This is not a purely anecdotic point about Marx. Ideology is embodied in and transmitted through language, and especially through imagery. Throughout his work Marx shows profound sensitivity to imagery, and although he abandoned writing poetry as a very young man, something of the poet's concern for imagery remains with him. It is noteworthy that some of Marx's ideas seem to have first originated in the form of images; for example, his youthful tragedy *Oulanem* contains lines that seem to express a premonition of the notion of 'reification':

*Ha, Ewigkeit! Das ist ein ew'ger Schmerz,
Ein unaussprechlich unermess'ner Tod!
Schnöd Kunstwerk, uns zum Hohn ersonnen,
Wie Uhrwerk, blindmechanisch aufgezogen,
Des Zeitenraums Kalendernarr zu sein,
Zu sein, damit doch irgendwas geschieht
Zerfall'n, damit doch irgendwas zerfällt!*

(Ha, eternity! That is an eternal pain,
An unspeakably immeasurable death!
Vile artifice, invented to our scorn,
Like clockwork, blindly and mechanically wound up,
To be the fool of time,
To be, just so that something happens,
Decayed, just so that something decays!]³⁹

And so, in the *Grundrisse*, as Marx strives to decipher and unravel the various formulations of the bourgeois world-view, he examines the imagery that has been used to embody this world-view. For example, in considering bourgeois theories of money, he looks at the various analogies that have been used to try to comprehend the nature of money and circulation:

To compare money with blood – as suggested by the word 'circulation' – is just about as apt as Menenius Agrippa's comparison between the patricians and the stomach. It is no less false to compare money with language. It is not the case that ideas are transmuted in language in such a way that their particular nature disappears and their social character exists alongside them in language, as prices exist alongside goods. Ideas do not exist apart from language. Ideas that have

³⁸ Karl Marx, *His Life and Work, Reminiscences* by Paul Lafargue and Wilhelm Liebknecht, quoted in *Literature and Art*, p. 125.

³⁹ Quoted in Demetz, op. cit., p.54. NB The translation from the German has been slightly amended for this version, the 4th line *wie* was translated as 'we', but the subject of the description is 'eternity' and 'wie' means 'like,' or 'as', not 'we' (Wir). (Joe Sabatini)

first to be translated from their native language into a foreign language in order to circulate, in order to be exchangeable, constitute a slightly closer analogy; but the analogy here lies not in the language, but in their being a *foreign* language.⁴⁰

Later on, in the same section, Marx examines the whole problem of the mystique of money, the imagery with which it has been surrounded in various cultures, and in particular in the context of different religions.⁴¹

The application to literature is not developed; what we have here is the embryo of a Marxist theory of imagery, a theory still awaiting elaboration.

The poet's language does not merely embody ideology; by crystallizing it it can help to transcend it. There is, for example, a passage from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, which Marx returns to almost obsessively – in the 1844 *Manuscripts*, in the original draft of the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and in *Capital* itself.⁴²

Gold? Yellow, glittering, precious gold? No, gods,
I am no idle votarist. Roots, you clear heavens!
Thus much of this will make black white, foul fair,
Wrong right, base noble, old young, coward valiant,
Ha, you gods! why this? What, this, you gods why, this
Will lug your priests and servants from your sides,
Pluck stout men's pillows from below their heads -
This yellow slave
Will knit and break religions, bless th'accurs'd,
Make the hoar leprosy ador'd, place thieves
And give them title, knee, and approbation,
With senators on the bench.

The paradoxes and images of the text go beyond the simple reflection of values in early capitalist England; they go beyond what any economist could have formulated at the time. As a result, Marx would quote Shakespeare as though he had been an economist who made a fundamental discovery about the 'exchangeability of all products'; 'It is the bringing to a common level of different things, which is the significance that already Shakespeare gave to money'.⁴³

If literature were no more than crystallized ideology, it would already have an important place in Marx's investigations of the bourgeois world-view. But Marx is not a reductionist, even though isolated remarks could be used as the basis of a reductionist approach. For he gives great importance to the active power of the human mind.

In the *Grundrisse* Marx brings out forcibly the essentially mystifying nature of bourgeois ideology.

The vulgar materialism of the economists makes them see the social relations of production of men and the resulting determinations for things as so many

⁴⁰ McLellan, p. 71.

⁴¹ *Fondements*, I, 172-4.

⁴² *Timon of Athens*, Act IV, Scene III; *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, pp. 137-9; *Fondements*, II, 594-5; *Capital*, I, 32. (The actual passage quoted varies slightly between the texts.)

⁴³ McLellan, p. 71.

relationships depending on the *natural properties* of things. In fact, this materialism is no less vulgar idealism; it is even a fetishism, since it attributes to things social relations which are supposed to be inherent in them and thus introduces a mystification into them.⁴⁴

But the mystification is never total. Marx would have had little sympathy for the manipulation thesis common among many on the modern left, which exalts bourgeois ideology to the level of omnipotence, and sees every intellectual or artistic product within capitalist society as in some sense corrupted by that society and its values.

On the contrary, Marx always stresses that the creative artist is able to liberate himself from the categories of the society he lives in. In fact – to a certain extent at least – he liberates himself by the very fact of engaging in artistic activity. For Marx brings out again and again in his writings the fundamental hostility of capitalist society to any kind of aesthetic activity, and therefore the essentially subversive nature of all art under capitalism.

It is clear that in the early manuscripts there is a strong aesthetic component in Marx's critique of capitalist society and its values.

Thus political economy – despite its worldly and wanton appearance – is a true moral science, the most moral of all the sciences. Self Denial, the denial of life and of all human needs, is its cardinal doctrine. The less you eat, drink and read books; the less you go to the theatre, the dance hall, the public-house; the less you think, love, theorize, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you save – the *greater* becomes your treasure which neither moths nor dust will devour – your *capital*.⁴⁵

But this analysis of the radically anti-aesthetic nature of bourgeois society is not just a theme of the young 'humanistic' Marx – it recurs again and again throughout his writings. In the *Communist Manifesto* it is expressed in agitation form:

The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science into its paid wage-labourers.⁴⁶

In the *Grundrisse* there are many illustrations of this theme. Marx notes how even in the Middle Ages, money had no respect for 'sacred objects'. 'There no longer remains anything sublime or sacred, since money can buy everything'.⁴⁷ And on a more mundane level, he comments on the absurdity of the fact that: "certain theatre managers thus engage female singers for a whole season, not in order to present them on the stage, but to prevent them appearing in a rival theatre."⁴⁸

Likewise, in his critique of the ideological representatives of bourgeois society, Marx frequently points out that the categories of bourgeois social

⁴⁴ *Fondements*, II, 205.

⁴⁵ *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, p. 119

⁴⁶ *Selected Works*, I, 36.

⁴⁷ *Fondements*, II, 387.

⁴⁸ *Fondements*, I, 231-2.

science are quite incapable of coping with aesthetic phenomena. Thus, in the long and devastating footnote on Bentham in the first volume of *Capital*, he notes that for Bentham 'Artistic criticism is "harmful" because it disturbs worthy people in their enjoyment of Martin Tupper, etc.'⁴⁹ And in *Theories of Surplus Value*, where he examines the distinction between productive and unproductive labour, he frequently instances artistic creation as something only partially accounted for by this distinction.

It follows from what has been said that the designation of labour as *productive* labour has absolutely nothing to do with the *determinate* content of the labour, its special utility, or the particular use-value in which it manifests itself.

The same kind of labour may be productive or unproductive.

For example, Milton, who wrote *Paradise Lost* for five pounds, was an *unproductive labourer*. On the other hand, the writer who turns out stuff for his publisher in factory style, is a *productive labourer*. Milton produced *Paradise Lost* for the same reason that a silk worm produces silk. It was an activity of *his* nature. Later he sold the product for £5. But the literary proletarian of Leipzig who fabricates books (for example, *Compendia of Economics*) under the direction of his publisher, is a *productive labourer*.⁵⁰

The preceding extracts show how prophetically sensitive Marx was to trends towards the commercialization of art and literature now immeasurably more developed than in the mid-nineteenth century.

The analysis of the nature of artistic production thus becomes a central element in Marx's explanation of labour under capitalism. Thus, he notes in the stage of 'handicraft labour' that 'here labour is still half the expression of artistic creation, half its own reward, etc.'⁵¹ And artistic creation is able to serve as an example in terms of which non-alienated labour can be conceived:

This does not mean that labour can be made merely a joke, or amusement, as Fourier naively expressed it in shop-girl terms. Really free labour, the composing of music for example, is at the same time damned serious and demands the greatest effort.⁵²

Literature and art are, therefore, in capitalist society subversive by their very nature. But subversive is not a synonym of revolutionary; one of the contradictions of our own period is that there is so much that is subversive of the established order, but so little that is effectively revolutionary. The question that still remains is whether Marx's writings contain any indications as to the possibilities and conditions for revolutionary literature.

There is no explicit theory of revolutionary literature in Marx's work. It would be both futile and dishonest to pretend that there is. What can be said with some certainty is that the picture given by Peter Demetz, who

⁴⁹ *Capital*, I, 610.

⁵⁰ *Theories of Surplus Value*, I, 401.

⁵¹ Hobsbawm, p. 98.

⁵² McLellan, p. 124.

sees Marx as a 'serious and thoroughly conservative connoisseur', to be contrasted with Engels, who was in some sense a precursor of 'socialist realism', is totally and grotesquely false.⁵³

In reply to the questionnaire on his tastes prepared by his daughters Laura and Jenny, Marx names as his favourite prose writer, not as one might have expected, the conservative Balzac, but the radical eighteenth century *philosophe* Diderot, for whom he expressed great admiration elsewhere.⁵⁴ (In general Marx's admiration for the French eighteenth-century thinkers and writers has not been sufficiently stressed.) He spoke admiringly of Cobbett as 'England's greatest political writer of this century'.⁵⁵ His friendship for and intellectual debt to Heinrich Heine has already been mentioned.

Although Marx was critical of the actual achievement of Lassalle in *Franz von Sickingen*, he was in no doubt as to his approval in principle of the attempt to give artistic form to the problems of the revolutionary movement.

The conflict chosen is not only tragic, but is the tragic conflict which basically wrecked the revolutionary party in 1848-49. I can therefore only express my full approval of making this the central theme of a modern tragedy.⁵⁶

And Marx was anxious, not only to involve the poet Ferdinand Freiligrath in the activity of the Communist League, but to encourage him to write political poetry for the political press.⁵⁷

But these indications that Marx was not hostile to the notion of 'committed' or even 'revolutionary' literature are in themselves of limited value. It is in Marx's thought, as a whole, that we must seek the basis of a theory of revolutionary literature.

A good starting point would be the formulation of Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* – a fundamental underpinning of the theory of the revolutionary party but with other latent implications – of the asymmetry between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie:

For when confronted by the overwhelming resources of knowledge, culture, and routine which the bourgeoisie undoubtedly possesses and will continue to possess as long as it remains the ruling class, the only effective superiority of the proletariat, its only decisive weapon is its ability to see the social totality as a concrete historical totality; to see the reified forms as processes between men; to see the immanent meaning of history that only appears negatively in the contradictions of abstract forms, to raise its positive side to consciousness and to put it into practice.⁵⁸

⁵³ Demetz, op. cit., pp. 127-8.

⁵⁴ In *Literature and Art*, p. 128; cf. also *ibid.*, p. 69.

⁵⁵ *Theories of Surplus Value*, II, 120.

⁵⁶ Letter to Lassalle, 19 April 1859, in *Literature and Art*, p. 40.

⁵⁷ Cf. Demetz, op. cit., pp. 90-101.

⁵⁸ *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 197.

The achievement of such demystifying totality is the basic criterion by which any revolutionary literature must be judged.

Another text that would repay study in this respect is the highly suggestive opening section of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, where Marx draws the distinction between the way in which the bourgeois revolution derives its symbolism and mythology from the past, whereas the proletarian revolution cannot do this, but must function in a different way.

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition in regard to the past. Earlier revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to drug themselves concerning their own content. In order to arrive at its own content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead. There the phrase went beyond the content; here the content goes beyond the phrase.⁵⁹

Unfortunately we can only guess at what Marx meant by this 'poetry from the future'.⁶⁰

All this, however, is very abstract. A literary practitioner could well dismiss it as irrelevant to the problems of his practice. It is in the relation of form and content that the real problematic of revolutionary writing emerges.

The best Marxist criticism has, of course, given considerable attention to the unity of form and content. For example, Lucien Goldmann has written, commenting on the inadequacy of previous attempts to establish a sociology of the novel:

Basically, since the novel was, throughout the first phase of its history, a biography and a social chronicle, it has always been possible to show that the social chronicle more or less reflected the society of the age, and in order to make that observation it really is not necessary to be a sociologist.⁶¹

In an article on the Prussian press censorship written in 1842, Marx stresses the active, and thereby the revolutionary nature of style and form:

*A style is my property, my spiritual individuality. Le style, c'est l'homme. Indeed! The law permits me to write, only I am supposed to write in a style different from my own. I may show the profile of my mind, but first I must show the prescribed mien. What man of honour will not blush at this effrontery and rather hide his head under his toga?*⁶²

⁵⁹ *Selected Works*, I, 249-50.

⁶⁰ NB – it is possibly a play on words against Wagner's essay *Zukunftsmusik*, or 'Music of the Future' and debates in musical discourse stemming back to the 1850s (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_of_the_Future). He also uses the phrase 'music of the future' in a sarcastic vein at one point in *Capital I*. (Joe Sabatini)

⁶¹ L. Goldmann, *Pour une Sociologie du Roman*, Paris, Gallimard, 1964, pp. 33-4.

⁶² Easton and Guddat (eds.), *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, New York, Doubleday Anchor, 1967, p. 71.

Though the tone of this is not wholly that of the mature Marx, the essential point remains valid. It is through the imposition of form that the writer plays the active role of organizing reality in a particular and significant way.

But the unity of form and content is not for Marx something automatic. Form is not directly generated by content, but may have its own history, its own qualities. Certainly, Marx did not underestimate the complex and difficult mediations involved in literary practice. But it is in the establishment of a relationship between form and content that the essence of artistic activity consists.

The analysis of precious metals, subjects and incarnations of the monetary relationships, is not alien to political economy, any more than the study of colours and marble is to the sphere of painting and sculpture.⁶³

It is clear, for example, that the three unities, as the French dramatists under Louis XIV constructed them theoretically, were based on misunderstood Greek drama (and the writings of Aristotle as the leading exponent of classic Greek drama). On the other hand, it is equally clear that they understood the three unities in accordance with their own art needs. Hence they clung to this so-called 'classical' drama long after Dacier and others had correctly interpreted Aristotle for them."⁶⁴

This understanding of the unity of form and content, by stressing the active nature of artistic creation in structuring and interpreting the world, is the corollary of the unity of theory and practice. It is absent from positivistic and formalist theories of literature precisely because they do not accept such a unity of theory and practice.

The possibility of a theory of revolutionary literature in Marx, then, lies only in a handful of cryptic allusions. Like other topics – the revolutionary party, and even, to some extent, the state – Marx did not develop them because of lack of time, or because he did not regard them as of immediate importance. But in this century, some of the greatest literary talents – Brecht, Sartre, Breton – have turned to Marxism in order to develop the revolutionary potential of their own artistic vision. A Marxist theory of revolutionary literature is now a topic of present concern, and despite all that has been written since, there is still no better place to start than with Marx himself.

⁶³ *Fondements*, I, 111-12.

⁶⁴ Letter to Lassalle, 22 July 1861, in *Literature and Art*, p. 19.