

“Literature and History”

By: Terry Eagleton

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ABOUT ESSAYIST

Terry Eagleton

Birth : 22 February 1943

British critic, born in Salford, educated at Trinity College, Cambridge; he became Warton Professor of English Literature at Oxford. A lively and committed literary reviewer, Eagleton's abiding interest, as a Marxist from a working-class Catholic background, has been in what he calls the politics of power, and more precisely, in the influence of buried or denied historical conditions on works of art and views of literature.

In Exiles and Emigrés (1970) he makes connections between biographical facts and fictional themes in modern writing. Later work, like Walter Benjamin (1981) and The Rape of Clarissa (1982), elegantly combines Marxist thought with developing Continental literary theory and philosophy. Eagleton's best-known book, much read by students both tempted and baffled by the new terms of literary debate, is his witty and polemical Literary Theory: An Introduction (1983), a survey which is also a statement of theory's current account.

Perhaps less widely read, but more substantial, is The Ideology of the Aesthetic (1990), a sustained pursuit of a sequence of ideas, from Kant to Adorno, to their various philosophical and literary lairs.

A controversial figure, Eagleton has seen his role as that of challenging orthodoxies, including the orthodoxy of relativism, or of simple, unreflecting opposition to all versions of truth or order. Recent works include Ideology: An Introduction (1991), Heathcliff and the Great Hunger (1995), and the script for Derek Jarman's film Wittgenstein (1993).

This is the opening chapter of Terry Eagleton's Book Marxism and Literary Criticism published in 1976. The major focus in this essay is to understand the relationship between literature and history but from a marxist point of view.

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels are famous for theories in politics and economics. But Marx had written literary pieces like lyrical poetry, unfinished novels, fragments of drama etc. These works of art have never been published because he had more important work at hand. He was well acquainted with literature from Aeschylus and Sophocles to the artists of his own time period. He also paid attention to form, style as well as to content.

Marxist Criticism focuses on “Sociology of Literature”. It is giving importance to the social status, customs and era of the authors when they wrote their work. It even focuses on the value of audience; how much the audience is educated and other aspects which can affect the literary taste of the audience/reader of the time. He once stated the aim of “Sociology of Literature” i.e. to explain the literary work more fully. It means grasping the forms, styles and meanings as the products of a particular history and that's why Marx called his own artistic work 'artistic whole'.

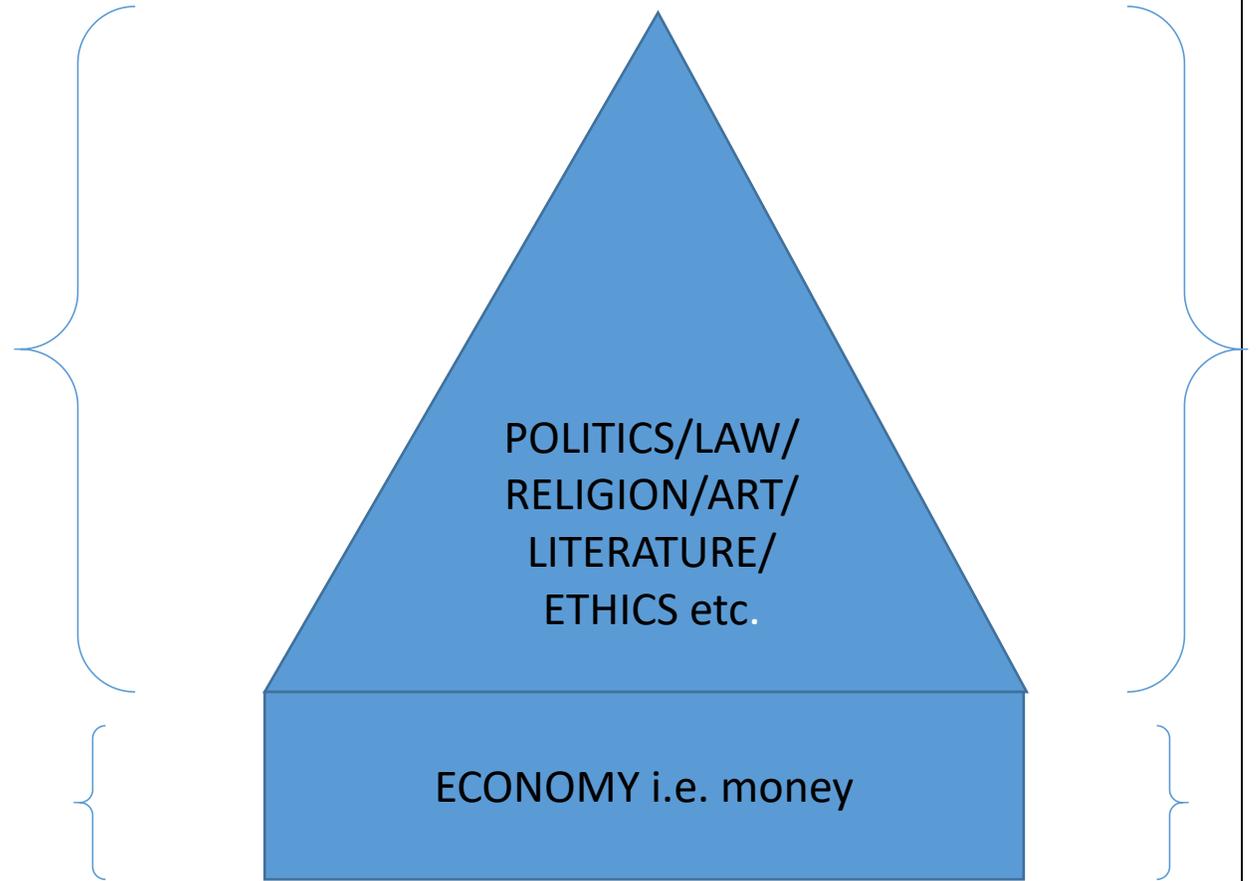
Painter Henri Matisse once remarked “all arts bear the imprint of its historical epoch, but the great is that in which this imprint is most deeply marked”.

Marxist Criticism takes it to a further level. It focuses not on “historical approach to literature but insists in its revolutionary understanding of history itself”. This approach is clearly cited in Marx and Engels' The German Ideology , “ the production of ideas, concepts and consciousness is interlinked with the material interactions of man, language and real life”. It means that there is a strong connection between the literature and the history and current time social life of man. They state “consciousness does not determine life; life determines consciousness”.

Human beings have so many relations in life. Acc. to the productivity of those relations, the economic aspects of the society are defined. On that base of economy

SUPERSTRUCTURE

BASE



In simple words, economic status of man's life helps in creating social superstructure which further creates the thinking or consciousness of people of the time and results in the form of literature of particular type. All the definite forms of consciousness i.e. politics, religion, ethics, aesthetics (lit.) are the parts of superstructure and marxists call this "ideology".

Economically strong people constitute ideology of the time and coin literature as a medium to provide legitimacy to their power and acts of exploitation. Ideology does not constitute the main thinking of the time but it is the thinking of the powerful and rich people who want exploited ones to feel that the exploitation is either genuine or it does not exist. To do this, they use or can say, misuse literature or art as an effective tool.

As underprivileged are not free to choose their 'relations of productivity' (i.e. job or work) and they are not economically sound, so they surrender to this ideology and as a result the ideology becomes 'the ideology' of the age and finds its expression in their literature.

Marxist Criticism tries to explain the ideology underlying a work of art. No art piece is created in isolation or vacuum. Every writer when he writes a novel or drama gives an account of the society and its ideology and author's perception of and reaction to that ideology.

If one wants to understand that novel properly then it is required to comprehend historical situation of the novelist first. Its actually an experience of the

ideology which is in front of the reader in a concrete form i.e. novel or drama.

But marxist critics do not provide one to one relationship between ideology and art. There are so many aspects which affect literature. Engels himself stated that there are various elements in superstructure that influence literature.

It will be totally wrong if we say that only money creates literature. 'Base', no doubt, affects literature very strongly but elements like politics, religion which are the part of 'superstructure' also counter-affect the literature actively. Though they cannot change the history itself but are very important to history and cannot be ignored.

Marx tried to explain that one to one relation between 'base' and 'superstructure'. He has taken example from art. He asks why do we like Greek Literature even now after so many centuries?

The answer is because it is our nostalgia or an age to which we could not return to just like we love our childhood memories as an adult because we know that we can not revisit that time period.

Second question he asks why is Greek literature so grand?

He answers this in his work Grundrisse. He says that Greek literature is grand because the society was very simple and free from materialism or capitalistic approach (i.e. money-mindedness).

As a result, people were closer to Nature and so they produced great literature.

These two questions show that money and literature (ideology and literature) or 'base' and 'superstructure' do not possess one to one relationship but he also states that in future will be capitalistic society, then there will be one to one relationship between money and literature.

From Grundrisse , again a question arises about our relation with the art of the past. Work of art written centuries ago is still relevant to us. Why is it so? The societies were so different from us ,even the people.

The answer is our history links us with the art. The harmony with Nature that we find in their work attracts us. History does not mean the age to which a writer belonged but it includes all the works, writers till the time of that particular writer.

Bertolt Brecht states Dickens can not be studied properly only by referring to Victorian era but by considering all the writers till his time. He further gives the answer that we like plays from past because they show what was close and proper to us.

As far as the relationship between base and superstructure, it is not as simple as it seems to be. There is no direct relationship between these. If one tries to find out the one then that is called 'vulgar marxist criticism'.

Marx gives an example of such criticism : if T.S.Eliot's The Wasteland is taken as spiritual emptiness of bourgeois (feudal lords) ideology as a result of crisis of imperialist capitalism after World War I.

Proper marxist criticism is taking all aspects into consideration to understand Eliot's The Wasteland like its structure , theme, internal complexity, symbols, images, philosophy, anthropology etc. To understand base and superstructure, elements like author's class, ideological forms available to him, his relation to literary forms, spirituality, myths, aesthetics etc. are equally important. Marxist criticism looks for the conjuncture of all the elements which have gone into

the making of the work of art.

Literature and Ideology

What is the meaning of ideology for a marxist critic? Engels says that "art is richer and more opaque than political and economic theory because it is less purely ideological". Ideology is the way, man play and live out their roles in the society. It is the way of showing things to the readers without revealing the truth. This raises a question what is the relationship between literature and ideology?

There are two views. One is vulgar marxist view i.e. all literature are expressions of the ideology prevailing in their times.

Second view is of Ernest Fisher i.e. art not only shows the ideology of the time but also gives the insight into the reality/truth which ideology actually tries to hide from the view.

These two are the simplest explanations but Louis Althusser states, "art can not be reduced to ideology". No doubt, both show the imaginary ways in which people experience the world but art distances itself from ideology and lets readers perceive the ideology from which it springs.

Althusser says that art does not help us in seeing the reality which ideology tries to hide because true knowledge is only 'scientific knowledge'. Science and art deals with same thing but in different ways.

Science provides theory of a situation while art gives a real experience of the situation.

Art enables readers to see the real nature of ideology which is scientific in itself. This idea is made clear by Pierre Machrrey when he distinguishes between ideology and literature. A writer takes ideology and then tries to shape it according to literature and this changes it into something different. It means in order to give ideology an acceptable literary definite form, writer makes it "the ideological illusion" and as a result art distances itself from ideology.

A truly scientific criticism tries to explain a work in the light of the ideological structure and also shows how literary work has changed that ideological structure. Such criticism is found in Lenin's analysis of Tolstoy's works.

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