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This book will argue the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts. It conceives of the political perspective not as some supplementary method, not as an optional auxiliary to other interpretive methods current today – the psychoanalytic or the myth-critical, the stylistic, the ethical, the structural – but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation.

This is evidently a much more extreme position than the modest claim, surely acceptable to everyone, that certain texts have social and historical – sometimes even political – resonance. Traditional literary history has, of course, never prohibited the investigation of such topics as the Florentine political background in Dante, Milton's relationship to the schismatics, or Irish historical allusions in Joyce. I would argue, however, that such information – even where it is not recontained, as it is in most instances, by an idealistic conception of the history of ideas – does not yield interpretation as such, but rather at best its (indispensable) preconditions.

Today this properly antiquarian relationship to the cultural past has a dialectical counterpart which is ultimately no more satisfactory; I mean the tendency of much contemporary theory to rewrite selected texts from the past in terms of its own aesthetic and, in particular, in terms of a modernist (or more properly post-modernist) conception of language. I have shown elsewhere¹ the ways in which such “ideologies of the text” construct a straw man or inessential term – variously called the “readerly” or the “realistic” or the “referential” text – over against which the essential term – the “writerly” or modernist or “open” text, *écriture* or textual productivity – is defined and with which it is seen as a decisive break. But Croce's great dictum that “all history is contemporary history” does not mean that all history is *our* contemporary history; and the problems begin when your epistemological break begins to displace itself in time according to your own current interests, so that Balzac may stand for unenlightened representationality when you are concerned to bring out everything that is “textual” and modern in Flaubert, but turns into something else when, with Roland Barthes in *S/Z*, you have decided to rewrite Balzac as Philippe Sollers, as sheer text and *écriture*.

This unacceptable option, or ideological double bind, between antiquarianism and modernizing “relevance” or projection demonstrates that the old dilemmas of historicism – and in particular, the question of the claims of monuments from distant and even archaic moments of the cultural past on a culturally different present² – do not go away just because we choose to ignore them. Our presupposition, in the analyses that follow, will be that only a genuine philosophy of history is capable of respecting the specificity and radical difference of the social and cultural past while disclosing the solidarity of its polemics and passions, its forms, structures, experiences, and struggles, with those of the present day.

But genuine philosophies of history have never been numerous, and few survive in workable, usable form in the contemporary world of consumer capitalism and the multinational system. We will have enough occasion, in the pages that follow, to emphasize the methodological interest of Christian historicism and the theological origins of the first great hermeneutic system in the Western tradition, to be permitted the additional observation that the Christian philosophy of history which emerges full blown in Augustine’s *City of God* (a.d. 413-426) can no longer be particularly binding on us. As for the philosophy of history of a heroic bourgeoisie, its two principal variants – the vision of progress that emerges from the ideological struggles of the French Enlightenment, and that organic populism or nationalism which articulated the rather different historicity of the central and Eastern European peoples and which is generally associated with the name of Herder – are neither of them extinct, certainly, but are at the very least both discredited under their hegemonic embodiments in positivism and classical liberalism, and in nationalism respectively.

My position here is that only Marxism offers a philosophically coherent and ideologically compelling resolution to the dilemma of historicism evoked above. Only Marxism can give us an adequate account of the essential *mystery* of the cultural past, which, like Tiresias drinking the blood, is momentarily returned to life and warmth and allowed once more to speak, and to deliver its long-forgotten message in surroundings utterly alien to it. This mystery can be reenacted only if the human adventure is one; only thus – and not through the hobbies of antiquarianism or the projections of the modernists – can we glimpse the vital claims upon us of such long-dead issues as the seasonal alternation of the economy of a primitive tribe, the passionate disputes about the nature of the Trinity, the conflicting models of the *polis* or the universal Empire, or, apparently closer to us in time, the dusty parliamentary and journalistic polemics of the nineteenth-century nation states. These matters can recover their original urgency

for us only if they are retold within the unity of a single great collective story; only if, in however disguised and symbolic a form, they are seen as sharing a single fundamental theme – for Marxism, the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity⁴. It is in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative, in restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history, that the doctrine of a political unconscious finds its function and its necessity.

From this perspective the convenient working distinction between cultural texts that are social and political and those that are not becomes something worse than an error: namely, a symptom and a reinforcement of the reification and privatization of contemporary life. Such a distinction reconfirms that structural, experiential, and conceptual gap between the public and the private, between the social and the psychological, or the political and the poetic, between history or society and the “individual”, which – the tendential law of social life under capitalism – maims our existence as individual subjects and paralyzes our thinking about time and change just as surely as it alienates us from our speech itself. To imagine that, sheltered from the omnipresence of history and the implacable influence of the social, there already exists a realm of freedom – whether it be that of the microscopic experience of words in a text or the ecstasies and intensities of the various private religions – is only to strengthen the grip of Necessity over all such blind zones in which the individual subject seeks refuge, in pursuit of a purely individual, a merely psychological, project of salvation. The only effective liberation from such constraint begins with the recognition that there is nothing that is not social and historical – indeed, that everything is “in the last analysis” political.

The assertion of a political unconscious proposes that we undertake just such a final analysis and explore the multiple paths that lead to the unmasking of cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts. It projects a rival hermeneutic to those already enumerated; but it does so, as we shall see, not so much by repudiating their findings as by arguing its ultimate philosophical and methodological priority over more specialized interpretive codes whose insights are strategically limited as much by their own situational origins as by the narrow or local ways in which they construe or construct their objects of study.

Still, to describe the readings and analyses contained in the present work as so many *interpretations*, to present them as so many exhibits in the construction of a new *hermeneutic*, is already to announce a whole polemic program, which must necessarily

come to terms with a critical and theoretical climate variously hostile to these slogans.⁵ It is, for instance, increasingly clear that hermeneutic or interpretive activity has become one of the basic polemic targets of contemporary post-structuralism in France, which – powerfully buttressed by the authority of Nietzsche – has tended to identify such operations with historicism, and in particular with the dialectic and its valorization of absence and the negative, its assertion of the necessity and priority of totalizing thought. I will agree with this identification, with this description of the ideological affinities and implications of the ideal of the interpretive or hermeneutic act; but I will argue that the critique is misplaced.

Indeed, one of the most dramatic of such recent attacks on interpretation – *The Anti-Oedipus*, by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari – quite properly takes as its object not Marxian, but rather Freudian, interpretation, which is characterized as a reduction and a rewriting of the whole rich and random multiple realities of concrete everyday experience into the contained, strategically pre-limited terms of the family narrative – whether this be seen as myth, Greek tragedy, “family romance”, or even the Lacanian structural version of the Oedipus complex. What is denounced is therefore a system of allegorical interpretation in which the data of one narrative line are radically impoverished by their rewriting according to the paradigm of another narrative, which is taken as the former’s master code or Ur-narrative and proposed as the ultimate hidden or unconscious *meaning* of the first one. The thrust of the argument of the *Anti-Oedipus* is, to be sure, very much in the spirit of the present work, for the concern of its authors is to reassert the specificity of the political content of everyday life and of individual fantasy-experience and to reclaim it from that reduction to the merely subjective and to the status of psychological projection which is even more characteristic of American cultural and ideological life today than it is of a still politicized France.

[...]

Nonetheless, the distinction argued by Deleuze and Guattari, between “old-fashioned” interpretation and contemporary “deconstruction”, suggests a useful means for sorting out the various critical or interpretive methods with which we must now come to terms. Leaving aside for the moment the possibility of any genuinely immanent criticism, we will assume that a criticism which asks the question “What does it mean?” constitutes something like an allegorical operation in which a text is systematically *rewritten* in terms of some fundamental master code or “ultimately determining instance”. On this view, then, all “interpretation” in the narrower sense demands the forcible or imperceptible transformation of a given text into an allegory of its particular master code or “transcendental signified”: the discredit into which interpretation has fallen is thus at one with the disrepute visited on allegory itself.

Yet to see interpretation this way is to acquire the instruments by which we can force a given interpretive practice to stand and yield up its name, to blurt out its master code and thereby reveal its metaphysical and ideological underpinnings. It should not, in the present intellectual atmosphere, be necessary laboriously to argue the position that every form of practice, including the literary-critical kind, implies and presupposes a form of theory; that empiricism, the mirage of an utterly nontheoretical practice, is a contradiction in terms; that even the most formalizing kinds of literary or textual analysis carry a theoretical charge whose denial unmasks it as ideological. Unfortunately, such a position, which we will take for granted in what follows, must always be reargued and refought. We will now, however, move on to the even more outrageous assertion that the working theoretical framework or presuppositions of a given method are in general the ideology which that method seeks to perpetuate. Thus, in another place, I have suggested that even so apparently ahistorical a “method” as the older New Criticism presupposes a specific “vision” or “theory” of history.⁶ I will here go much further than this, and argue that even the most innocently formalizing readings of the New Criticism have as their essential and ultimate function the propagation of this particular view of what history is. Indeed, no working model of the functioning of language, the nature of communication or of the speech act, and the dynamics of formal and stylistic change is conceivable which does not imply a whole philosophy of history.

In the present work, we will be less concerned with those modes of formal or stylistic, purely textual, analysis which are generally strategically limited to lyric poetry than with the various types of “strong” rewritings implied by interpretations that identify themselves as such and wear a particular label. Yet we must make some initial place

for what is still the predominant form of literary and cultural criticism today, in spite of its repudiation by every successive generation of literary theorists (each for a different reason). This is what we will call *ethical* criticism, and it constitutes the predominant code in terms of which the question “What does it mean?” tends to be answered. Ethical analysis is a vaster category than two other currently stigmatized types of thinking that it includes and subsumes: metaphysical thought, which presupposes the possibility of questions about the “meaning” of life (even where these questions are answered in the negative, by the various existentialisms), and so-called humanism, which is always grounded on a certain conception of “human nature”⁷. In its narrowest sense, ethical thought projects as permanent features of human “experience”, and thus as a kind of “wisdom” about personal life and interpersonal relations, what are in reality the historical and institutional specifics of a determinate type of group solidarity or class cohesion. We will return at some length, in the next chapter, to the way in which all ethics lives by exclusion and predicates certain types of Otherness or evil; that these must ultimately have political consequences is obvious, and one of the subthemes of the present work will indeed be the temptation of ethics to recontain itself by assigning hostile and more properly political impulses to the ultimate negative category of *ressentiment*.

Still, it may strike the reader as paradoxical or even perverse to characterize the bulk of garden-variety literary criticism today as “ethical”, by which we normally understand a moralizing, or moralistic, didactic gesture of the type presumably extinct with the *Scrutiny* group if not with the Victorian age. This is to misrecognize the dominant form taken by ethics in our own situation, which is essentially psychological and psychologizing, even where it appeals for its authority to this or that version of psychoanalysis. Here notions of personal identity, myths of the reunification of the psyche, and the mirage of some Jungian “self” or “ego” stand in for the older themes of moral sensibility and ethical awareness and reconfirm the aptness of that other contemporary continental theme which, as we shall see further in the Chapter 3, turns upon the critique of the “center” and the “centered” self. Still, these various post-structural motifs should not be understood as a wholesale endorsement of post-structuralism, the anti-Marxist character of which is increasingly evident in France today. On the contrary, I will argue that only the dialectic provides a way for “decentering” the subject concretely, and for transcending the “ethical” in the direction of the political and the collective.

Interpretation proper – what we have called “strong” rewriting, in distinction from the

weak rewriting of ethical codes, which all in one way or another project various notions of the unity and the coherence of consciousness – always presupposes, if not a conception of the unconscious itself, then at least some mechanism of mystification or repression in terms of which it would make sense to seek a latent meaning behind a manifest one, or to rewrite the surface categories of a text in the stronger language of a more fundamental interpretive code. This is perhaps the place to answer the objection of the ordinary reader, when confronted with elaborate and ingenious interpretations, that the text means just what it says. Unfortunately, no society has ever been quite so mystified in quite so many ways as our own, saturated as it is with messages and information, the very vehicles of mystification (language, as Talleyrand put it, having been given us in order to conceal our thoughts). If everything were transparent, then no ideology would be possible, and no domination either: evidently that is not our case. But above and beyond the sheer fact of mystification, we must point to the supplementary problem involved in the study of cultural or literary texts, or in other words, essentially, of narratives: for even if discursive language were to be taken literally, there is always, and constitutively, a problem about the “meaning” of narrative as such; and the problem about the assessment and subsequent formulation of the “meaning” of this or that narrative is the hermeneutic question, which leaves us as deeply involved in our present inquiry as we were when the objection was raised.

It can be argued that all of the original philosophical systems or positions in recent times have in one way or another projected a hermeneutic which is specific to them. Thus, I have argued in another place that most classical structuralisms practice a hermeneutic whose master code or interpretive key is simply Language itself.⁹ Meanwhile, a phenomenological criticism not unrelated to the various existentialisms found a master code in the experience and thematics of temporality: a thematics which seems oddly dated, an experience which no longer seems particularly obsessive, in the post-modernist world of today.

But it is clear that the most influential and elaborate interpretive system of recent times is that of psychoanalysis, which may indeed lay claim to the distinction of being the only really new and original hermeneutic developed since the great patristic and medieval system of the four senses of scripture. So great has been the suggestiveness of the Freudian model that terms and secondary mechanisms drawn from it are to be found strewn at great distance from their original source, pressed into the service of quite unrelated systems, and not least in the following pages.

To come to some ultimate reckoning with psychoanalysis would require us radically to historicize Freudianism itself, and to reach a reflexive vantage point from which the historical and social conditions of possibility both of Freudian method and of its objects of study came into view. This is not achieved simply by resituating Freud in the Vienna and the Central Europe of his period, although such material is clearly of the greatest interest.¹³

To return to that new event which was the emergence of psychoanalysis, it should be clear that the autonomization of the family as a private space within the nascent public sphere of bourgeois society, and as the “specialization” by which childhood and the family situation are qualitatively differentiated from other biographical experiences, are only features of a far more general process of social development, which also includes the autonomization of sexuality. Freud’s object of study is, to be sure, less sexuality as such than desire and its dynamics as a whole; but once again, the precondition for the articulation and analysis of the mechanisms of desire according to such key themes or signifiers as the phallus, castration, the primal scene, the psychosexual stages, narcissism, repression, Eros vs. Thanatos, and the like – which can be taken as the thematics of the Freudian hermeneutic – lies in the preliminary isolation of sexual experience, which enables its constitutive features to carry a wider symbolic meaning. The psychoanalytic demonstration of the sexual dimensions of overtly nonsexual conscious experience and behavior is possible only when the sexual “dispositive” or apparatus has by a process of isolation, autonomization, specialization, developed into an independent sign system or symbolic dimension in its own right; as long as sexuality remains as integrated into social life in general as, say, eating, its possibilities of symbolic extension are to that degree limited, and the sexual retains its status as a banal inner-worldly event and bodily function. Its symbolic possibilities are dependent on its preliminary exclusion from the social field. As for primitive sexuality, if we were able imaginatively to grasp the symbolic trajectory that leads from tattoos and ritual mutilation to the constitution of erogenous zones in modern men and women¹⁴, we would have gone a long way toward sensing the historicity of the sexual phenomenon.

As I have suggested above, however, the sexual and its thematics are to be considered as the occasion for the Freudian hermeneutic, and as the source of its particular semiotic or symbolic system, rather than its fundamental mechanism. Indeed, this structural rift in the psychoanalytic hermeneutic between its interpretive code and its basic functioning model (or models, for Freud proposed a whole series of

them throughout his career¹⁵) may explain the paradoxical situation of Freudian criticism today, about which we may affirm that the only people still seriously interested in it are the Freudians themselves, at the same time that the prestige and influence of the Freudian oeuvre and of psychoanalysis as a method and a model has never been so immense at any moment of its history. Having learned the Freudian lesson about sexual symbolism, in other words, our interest has been satisfied in this specialized area and can be displaced onto the more general but also more burning question of interpretation itself, and the contribution that such fundamental hermeneutic manuals as *The Interpretation of Dreams* and *Jokes and the Unconscious* have made to it.

The center around which the Freudian interpretive system turns is not sexual experience but rather wish-fulfillment, or its more metaphysical variant, “desire”, posited as the very dynamic of our being as individual subjects. Is it necessary to stress the dependence of this “discovery” on the increasing abstraction of experience in modern society? Yet the same might be said of other interpretive themes developed during this period, and in particular the meditation, from Nietzsche to Weber, on the nature of value as such. The Nietzschean “transvaluation of all values” and also Weber’s own notion of “value-free science” (commonly misconstrued as neutral scientific “objectivity”¹⁶) constitute so many attempts to project some Archimedean standpoint outside of social life, from which the inner-worldly values of the latter might be abstracted and studied in a kind of experimental or laboratory isolation. Like the rather different Freudian abstractions, then, such conceptions of value are subjectively possible only on the basis of some preliminary objective dissociation within action or behavior itself; and in a later chapter we will see how strongly Joseph Conrad’s work is marked by the dialectic of value, which unexpectedly reveals him to be the contemporary of both Nietzsche and Weber.

For with the coming of secular society and the desacralization of life paths and of the various rituals of traditional activity, with the new mobility of the market and the freedom of hesitation before a whole range of professions as well as the even more fundamental and increasingly universal commodification of labor power (on which the central discovery of the labor theory of value was itself dependent), it became possible for the first time to separate the unique quality and concrete content of a particular activity from its abstract organization or end, and to study the latter in isolation. To claim that Freud’s conception of wish-fulfillment is a late stage in this process of abstraction (and that it has as epistemological predecessors the Marxian theory of

labor power, and the subsequent Nietzschean and Weberian conceptions of value) is simply to observe that you cannot talk about wish-fulfillment or desire except by way of a powerful abstraction performed on a host of concrete and irreducible wishes or desires; and the possibility of performing such a conceptual abstraction subjectively is dependent on the preliminary objective realization of such a process within the raw materials or objects of study. We can think abstractly about the world only to the degree to which the world itself has already become abstract.

From the point of view of a political hermeneutic, measured against the requirements of a “political unconscious”, we must conclude that the conception of wish-fulfillment remains locked in a problematic of the individual subject and the individual psychobiography which is only indirectly useful to us. The Lacanian rewriting of Freud should not be read as a mere variant on that Freudian hermeneutic, but rather a substantial and reflexive shift from the Freudian proposition about the nature of the dynamics of the subject (wish-fulfillment) to the interrogation of that problematic itself, foregrounding the category of the subject and studying the process whereby this psychic reality (consciousness) – as well as its buttressing ideologies and illusions (the feeling of personal identity, the myth of the ego or the self, and so forth) – become rigorous and self-imposed limitations on Freud’s notion of individual wish-fulfillment. But the ideology of desire in its most fully realized forms is less an interpretive mode than a whole world-view, a genuine metaphysic, at its most resonant and attractive in its most extreme and grandiose versions, such as that, rich with death and the archaic, of Freud’s own late metapsychology, with its vision of the immortal struggle between Eros and Thanatos. Such “theories” certainly rewrite the work; in the various ideologies of desire that have been proposed from Georges Bataille to Deleuze, and passing through such American variants as Norman O. Brown, the object of commentary is effectively transformed into an allegory whose master narrative is the story of desire itself, as it struggles against a repressive reality, convulsively breaking through the grids that were designed to hold it in place or, on the contrary, succumbing to repression and leaving the dreary wasteland of *aphanasis* behind it. At this level, it is to be wondered whether we have to do with a mere interpretation any longer, whether it is not a question here of the production of a whole new aesthetic object, a whole new mythic narrative. It is clear at least that such allegories of desire (generally the products of the Freudian Left) have a great deal more in common with Jungianism and myth criticism proper than they do with the older orthodox Freudian analyses. To such allegories of desire, indeed, may be applied Norman Holland’s powerful critique of myth criticism as a whole, about which he observes that it works

only if we have been told the work is mythic ahead of time, the unquestionable “resonance” of the mythic rewriting presupposing not the operation of some mythic unconscious but rather our own preliminary conscious “set” toward the reading in question.¹⁷

Yet, it will be observed, even if the theory of desire is a metaphysic and a myth, it is one whose great narrative events – repression and revolt – ought to be congenial to a Marxist perspective, one whose ultimate Utopian vision of the liberation of desire and of libidinal transfiguration was an essential feature of the great mass revolts of the 1960s in Eastern and Western Europe as well as in China and the United States. But precisely because of this, and more particularly on account of the theoretical as well as political difficulties encountered by the sequels to these movements as they tried to adapt to the very different circumstances of the present period, such myths must be carefully reexamined. If they have affinities with Marxism, they have even greater ones with anarchism, with whose vital renewal today a contemporary Marxism must also come to terms.

The theoretical objection to the theory of desire has for the most part taken the form of a critique of the notion of transgression on which such theories are inevitably based. It is as though “genuine” desire needed repression in order for us to come to consciousness of it as such: but then in that case desire must always be transgressive, must always have a repressive norm or law through which to burst and against which to define itself. Yet it is a commonplace that transgressions, presupposing the laws or norms or taboos against which they function, thereby end up precisely reconfirming such laws. (For example, blasphemy not only requires you to have a strong sense of the sacred quality of the divine name, but may even be seen as a kind of ritual by which that strength is reawakened and revitalized.) From the point of view of interpretation, what this means is that desire is always outside of time, outside of narrative: it has no content, it is always the same in its cyclical moments of emergence, and the event in question takes on historicity only to the degree that the context of the explosion, the nature of that particular and historical repressive apparatus, knows specification.

What is more damaging, from the present perspective, is that desire, like its paler and more well behaved predecessor, wish-fulfillment, remains locked into the category of the individual subject, even if the form taken by the individual in it is no longer the ego or self, but rather the individual body. We must now argue this objective more

consequently, since the need to transcend individualistic categories and modes of interpretation is in many ways the fundamental issue for any doctrine of the political unconscious, of interpretation in terms of the collective or associative. We will do so, however, by shifting from the Freudian hermeneutic to a quite different interpretive system, comparable only to the psychoanalytic one in the persistence of just such a valorization of desire. This is the archetypal system of Northrop Frye, which has the additional interest for us of conceiving of the function of culture explicitly in social terms.

I have suggested elsewhere that ideology leaves its mark on myth criticism insofar as the latter proposes an unbroken continuity between the social relations and narrative forms of primitive society and the cultural objects of our own.¹⁸ For Marxism, on the contrary, it is the radical break between the two social formations which must be stressed, if we are to begin to grasp the degree to which capitalism has effectively dissolved all the older forms of collective relations, leaving their cultural expressions and their myths as incomprehensible to us as so many dead languages or undecipherable codices. In the present context, however, Frye's work comes before us as a virtual contemporary reinvention of the four-fold hermeneutic associated with the theological tradition.

Indeed, in this sense the trajectory of our discussion, from Freud to Northrop Frye, is an emblematic one: for any contemporary reevaluation of the problem of interpretation, the most vital exchange of energies inevitably takes place between the two poles of the psychoanalytic and the theological, between the rich and concrete practice of interpretation contained in the Freudian texts and dramatized in the diagnostic genius of Freud himself, and the millenary theoretical reflection on the problems and dynamics of interpretation, commentary, allegory, and multiple meanings, which, primarily organized around the central text of the Bible, is preserved in the religious tradition.¹⁹

The greatness of Frye, and the radical difference between his work and that of the great bulk of garden-variety myth criticism, lies in his willingness to raise the issue of community and to draw basic, essentially social, interpretive consequences from the nature of religion as collective representation. In so doing, Frye rejoins, although he would probably not enjoy the association, that more positive approach to religious symbolism which in the nineteenth century succeeded the essentially negative and destructive stance toward it of the Enlightenment, whose sapping of the ideological

foundations of the *ancien régime* involved a systematic demystification and debunking of religious phenomena and a clear perception of the legitimizing relationship between what the philosophes conceived as “error” and “superstition” and the arbitrary power of hierarchical political institutions. But for thinkers as diverse as Feuerbach and Durkheim – the one emerging from the radicalism of pre-1848 Germany, the other within a still unstable Third Republic anxiously and in a conservative spirit meditating on the sources of social stability in general – the “illusions” of religion were to be read as the complement of a positive social functionality, and decoded as the figure and the projection of an essentially human energy – whether the latter is grasped as that full and nonalienated development of the human personality and of human potentialities which was the supreme value of German idealism, or, in the case of Durkheim, as a symbol for and confirmation of the organic human community. To be sure, any doctrine of figurality must necessarily be ambiguous: a symbolic expression of a truth is also, at the same time, a distorted and disguised expression, and a theory of figural expression is also a theory of mystification or false consciousness. Religion is thus here the distorted or symbolic coming to consciousness of itself, of the human community, and the critic’s distance from religious figures will vary depending on whether, as is the case with Feuerbach (and with Hegel), stress is laid on its symbolic and alienating function, or whether, as in Durkheim’s far more retrospective and anthropological account, its vocation as the locus of group identity is foregrounded.²⁰ The religious figures then become the symbolic space in which the collectivity thinks itself and celebrates its own unity; so that it does not seem a very difficult next step, if, with Frye, we see literature as a weaker form of myth or a later stage of ritual, to conclude that in that sense all literature, no matter how weakly, must be informed by what we have called a political unconscious, that all literature must be read as a symbolic meditation on the destiny of community.

Yet it is precisely this second step which Frye, on the one hand powerfully arguing it, then in a curious afterthought seems once more to withdraw; and this movement of recontainment, this impulse to stem the possibilities of collective and social interpretation which his hermeneutic had seemed to open, will serve us as a strategic occasion on which to interrogate religious hermeneutics in general. In this respect, Frye’s restructuring of the traditional medieval four levels of meaning is instructive and symptomatic: it will be recalled that his “Theory of Symbols” rewrites the older fourfold scheme as four “phases”: the Literal and Descriptive; the Formal; the Mythical or Archetypal; and the Anagogic. By phase, Frye means to designate not so much an interpretive code of a distinct type, as a certain type of attention – what we will shortly

term the “horizon” or the “set” of the reading mind toward one particular order of textual phenomena, “a sequence of contexts or relationships in which the whole work of literary art can be placed”²¹ such that this particular context determines a particular type of interpretation. His first two phases, the Literal and the Formal, remain essentially particular modalities of the attention of the reading mind, the first an attention to verbal organization and to the order of language, the second marking the shift to something like a phenomenological awareness of content as image, of the work’s vocation to convey a symbolic structure or symbolic world by way of the first-level verbal constructions.

It is only at the third level, the Mythical or Archetypal, on which the concepts of both desire and society make their appearance that we reach interpretation proper. As in the medieval system, however, these have been somehow liberated or generated by the first two levels (which are for Frye the enabling institution of literature): “The archetypal critic studies the poem as part of poetry, and poetry as part of the total human imitation of nature that we call civilization. Civilization is not merely an imitation of nature, and it is impelled by the force that we have just called desire. [...] [Desire] is neither limited to nor satisfied by objects, but is the energy that leads human society to develop its own form. Desire in this sense is the social aspect of what we met on the literal level as emotion, an impulse towards expression which would have remained amorphous if the poem had not liberated it by providing the form of its expression [or in other words, the Second or Formal Phase]. The form of desire, similarly, is liberated and made apparent by civilization. The efficient cause of civilization is work, and poetry in its social aspect has the function of expressing, as a verbal hypothesis, a vision of the goal of work and the forms of desire.”²²

And Frye goes on to enumerate some of the privileged archetypes, “the city, the garden, the farm, the sheep-fold, and the like, as well as human society itself”²³, through which a symbolic or a heightened consciousness of the collective expresses itself.

Yet paradoxically this level – which the medieval theorists called the anagogic level, and in which the ultimate allegorical coding in terms of the destiny of the human race was achieved – is not yet for Frye the outer limit of what the literary text can do, not yet the final form of “what once, what each time, was *said*, when meaning appeared new, when meaning was at its fullest”²⁵

Thus, not only does Frye's Blakean anagogy rejoin by a paradoxical movement that whole metaphysic of desire of which we spoke above; the very concept of apocalypse as the end of history and the culminating struggle of the collectivity is here curiously redirected, rechanneled and indeed recontained, by the image of Blakean absolute "man" and transfigured body projected out upon the universe. Yet equally paradoxically, the association lends Frye's metaphysic of desire a kind of collective and Utopian resonance which the more purely Freudian versions of the metaphysic lacked: when we come to it from the more purely anarchistic and individualizing limits of the left Freudians, this transfigured libidinal body glows and expands with all the political energies of a Blake engraving, and makes it clear that the program of libidinal revolution is political only to the degree that it is itself the figure for social revolution. Yet this movement of figurality is precisely what from the other point of view the arrangement of Frye's allegorical levels recontains: for, being the final "phase" of the allegory, the image of the cosmic body cannot stand for anything further, for anything other than itself. Its figural and political momentum is broken, and the collective content of the image has been reprivatized in the henceforth purely individual terms of the isolated body and the merely personal ecstasy.

This is not to suggest that a Marxian hermeneutic can do without the symbolism and the impulse of libidinal transfiguration. Indeed, radical politics has traditionally alternated between these two classical options or "levels", between the image of the triumph of the collectivity and that of the liberation of the "soul" or "spiritual body"; between a Saint-Simonian vision of social and collective engineering and a Fourieresque Utopia of libidinal gratification; between a 1920s Leninist formulation of communism as "the Soviets plus electrification" and some more properly Marcusean 1960s celebration of an instinctual "body politic". The problem is not merely that of the respective priorities of these two "levels", not merely interpretive and hermeneutic, but also practical and political, as the fate of the countercultural movement of the 1960s demonstrates.

As far as Frye's own allegorical method is concerned, its terminological uncertainties may stand as something like an implicit self-critique. We have seen above that in the system of the medieval four levels of scripture, the third, that of the individual soul is designated as the *moral* level, while it is the fourth or last level - which embraces the whole history of the human race and the last judgment - that is termed the *anagogical* one. In Frye's appropriation of this system, the terms have been reversed: what Frye calls the Mythical or Archetypal level is that of the community - what the medieval

exegetes called the *anagogical* – and is now positioned as a third level or phase subsumed under the final one, that of the libidinal body (which Frye, however, designates as the *Anagogical level*²⁶). This terminological shift is thus a significant strategic and ideological move, in which political and collective imagery is transformed into a mere relay in some ultimately privatizing celebration of the category of individual experience. The essentially historical interpretive system of the church fathers has here been recontained, and its political elements turned back into the merest figures for the Utopian realities of the individual subject.

A social hermeneutic will, on the contrary, wish to keep faith with its medieval precursor in just this respect, and must necessarily restore a perspective in which the imagery of libidinal revolution and of bodily transfiguration once again becomes a figure for the perfected community. The unity of the body must once again prefigure the renewed organic identity of associative or collective life, rather than, as for Frye, the reverse. Only the community, indeed, can dramatize that self-sufficient intelligible unity (or “structure”) of which the individual body, like the individual “subject”, is a decentered “effect”, and to which the individual organism, caught in the ceaseless chain of the generations and the species, cannot, even in the most desperate Renaissance or Neoplatonic visions off hermaphroditism (or in their contemporary counterpart, the Deleuze-Guattari “bachelor machine”), lay claim.

III

At this point it might seem appropriate to juxtapose a Marxist method of literary and cultural interpretation with those just outlined, and to document its claims to greater adequacy and validity. For better or for worse, however, as I warned in the Preface, this obvious next step is not the strategy projected by the present book, which rather seeks to argue the perspectives of Marxism as necessary preconditions for adequate literary comprehension. Marxist critical insights will therefore here be defended as something like an ultimate *semantic* precondition for the intelligibility of literary and cultural texts. Even this argument, however, needs a certain specification: in particular we will suggest that such semantic enrichment and enlargement of the inert givens and materials of a particular text must take place within three concentric frameworks,

which mark a widening out of the sense of the social ground of a text through the notions, first, of political history, in the narrow sense of punctual event and a chroniclelike sequence of happenings in time; then of society, in the now already less diachronic and time-bound sense of a constitutive tension and struggle between social classes; and, ultimately, of history now conceived in its vastest sense of the sequence of modes of production and the succession and destiny of the various human social formations, from prehistoric life to whatever far future history has in store for us.²⁷

These distinct semantic horizons are, to be sure, also distinct moments of the process of interpretation, and may in that sense be understood as dialectical equivalents of what Frye has called the successive “phases” in our reinterpretation – our rereading and rewriting – of the literary text. What we must also note, however, is that each phase or horizon governs a distinct reconstruction of its object, and construes the very structure of what can now only in a general sense be called “the text” in a different way.

Thus, within the narrower limits of our first, narrowly political or historical, horizon, the “text”, the object of study, is still more or less construed as coinciding with the individual literary work or utterance. The difference between the perspective enforced and enabled by this horizon, however, and that of ordinary *explication de texte*, or individual exegesis, is that here the individual work is grasped essentially as a *symbolic act*.

When we pass into the second phase, and find that the semantic horizon within which we grasp a cultural object has widened to include the social order, we will find that the very object of our analysis has itself been thereby dialectically transformed, and that it is no longer construed as an individual “text” or work in the narrow sense, but has been reconstituted in the form of the great collective and class discourses of which a text is little more than an individual *parole* or utterance. Within this new horizon, then, our object of study will prove to be the *ideologeme*, that is, the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes.

When finally, even the passions and values of a particular social formation find themselves placed in a new and seemingly relativized perspective by the ultimate horizon of human history as a whole, and by their respective positions in the whole complex sequence of the modes of production, both the individual text and its ideologemes know a final transformation, and must be read in terms of what I will call

the *ideology of form*, that is, the symbolic messages transmitted to us by the coexistence of various sign systems which are themselves traces or anticipations of modes of production.

The general movement through these three progressively wider horizons will largely coincide with the shifts in focus of the final chapters in this book, and will be felt, although not narrowly and programmatically underscored, in the methodological transformations determined by the historical transformations of their textual objects, from Balzac to Gissing to Conrad.

We must now briefly characterize each of these semantic or interpretive horizons. We have suggested that it is only in the first narrowly political horizon - in which history is reduced to a series of punctual events and crises in time, to the diachronic agitation of the year-to-year, the chroniclelike annals of the rise and fall of political regimes and social fashions, and the passionate immediacy of struggles between historical individuals - that the "text" or object of study will tend to coincide with the individual literary work or cultural artifact. Yet to specify this individual text as a symbolic act is already fundamentally to transform the categories with which traditional *explication de texte* (whether narrative or poetic) operated and largely still operates.

The model for such an interpretive operation remains the readings of myth and aesthetic structure of Claude Lévi-Strauss as they are codified in his fundamental essay "The Structural Study of Myth"²⁹. Already on the purely formal level, then, this visual text has been grasped as a contradiction by way of the curiously provisional and asymmetrical resolution it proposes for that contradiction.

Lévi-Strauss's "interpretation" of this formal phenomenon may now, perhaps overhastily, be specified. Caduveo are a hierarchical society, organized in three endogamous groups or castes. In their social development, as in that of their neighbors, this nascent hierarchy is already the place of the emergence, if not of political power in the strict sense, then at least of relations of domination: the inferior status of women, the subordination of youth to elders, and the development of a hereditary aristocracy. Yet whereas this latent power structure is, among the neighboring Guana and Bororo, masked by a division into moieties which cuts across the three castes, and whose exogamous exchange appears to function in a nonhierarchical, essentially egalitarian way, it is openly present in Caduveo life, as surface inequality and conflict. The social institutions of the Guana and Bororo, on the

other hand, provide a realm of appearance, in which real hierarchy and inequality are dissimulated by the reciprocity of the moieties, and in which, therefore, “asymmetry of class is balanced [...] by symmetry of ‘moieties’”.

As for the Caduveo, “they were never lucky enough to resolve their contradictions, or to disguise them with the help of institutions artfully devised for that purpose. On the social level, the remedy was lacking [...] but it was never completely out of their grasp. It was within them, never objectively formulated, but present as a source of confusion and disquiet. Yet since they were unable to conceptualize or to live this solution directly, they began to dream it, to project it into the imaginary. [...] We must therefore interpret the graphic art of Caduveo women, and explain its mysterious charm as well as its apparently gratuitous complication, as the fantasy production of a society seeking passionately to give symbolic expression to the institutions it might have had in reality, had not interest and superstition stood in the way.”³⁰ In this fashion, then, the visual text of Caduveo facial art constitutes a symbolic act, whereby real social contradictions, insurmountable in their own terms, find a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm.

This interpretive model thus allows us a first specification of the relationship between ideology and cultural texts or artifacts: a specification still conditioned by the limits of the first, narrowly historical or political horizon in which it is made. We may suggest that from this perspective, ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production; rather the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal “solutions” to unresolvable social contradictions.

Lévi-Strauss’s work also suggests a more general defense of the proposition of a political unconscious than we have hitherto been able to present, insofar as it offers the spectacle of so-called primitive peoples perplexed enough by the dynamics and contradictions of their still relatively simple forms of tribal organization to project decorative or mythic resolutions of issues that they are unable to articulate conceptually. But if this is the case for precapitalist and even pre-political societies, then how much more must it be true for the citizen of the modern *Gesellschaft*, faced with the great constitutional options of the revolutionary period, and with the corrosive and tradition-annihilating effects of the spread of a money and market economy, with the changing cast of collective characters which oppose the bourgeoisie, now to an embattled aristocracy, now to an urban proletariat, with the great fantasms of the

various nationalisms, now themselves virtual “subjects of history” of a rather different kind, with the social homogenization and psychic constriction of the rise of the industrial city and its “masses”, the sudden appearance of the great transnational forces of communism and fascism, followed by the advent of the superstates and the onset of that great ideological rivalry between capitalism and communism, which, no less passionate and obsessive than that which, at the dawn of modern times, seethed through the wars of religion, marks the final tension of our now global village? It does not, indeed, seem particularly farfetched to suggest that these texts of history, with their fantasmatic collective “actants”, their narrative organization, and their immense charge of anxiety and libidinal investment, are lived by the contemporary subject as a genuine politico-historical *pensée sauvage* which necessarily informs all of our cultural artifacts, from the literary institutions of high modernism all the way to the products of mass culture. Under these circumstances, Lévi-Strauss’s work suggests that the proposition whereby all cultural artifacts are to be read as symbolic resolutions of real political and social contradictions deserves serious exploration and systematic experimental verification. It will become clear in later chapters of this book that the most readily accessible formal articulation of the operations of a political *pensée sauvage* of this kind will be found in what we will call the structure of a properly political *allegory*, as it develops from networks of topical allusion in Spenser or Milton or Swift to the symbolic narratives of class representatives or “types” in novels like those of Balzac. With political allegory, then, a sometimes repressed ur-narrative or master fantasy about the interaction of collective subjects, we have moved to the very borders of our second horizon, in which what we formerly regarded as individual texts are grasped as “utterances” in an essentially collective or class discourse.

We cannot cross those borders, however, without some final account of the critical operations involved in our first interpretive phase. We have implied that in order to be consequent, the will to read literary or cultural texts as symbolic acts must necessarily grasp them as resolutions of determinate contradictions; and it is clear that the notion of contradiction is central to any Marxist cultural analysis, just as it will remain central in our two subsequent horizons, although it will there take rather different forms. The methodological requirement to articulate a text’s fundamental contradiction may then be seen as a test of the completeness of the analysis: this is why, for example, the conventional sociology of literature or culture, which modestly limits itself to the identification of class motifs or values in a given text, and feels that its work is done when it shows how a given artifact “reflects” its social background, is utterly unacceptable. Meanwhile, Kenneth Burke’s play of emphases, in which a symbolic act

is on the one hand affirmed as a genuine *act*, albeit on the symbolic level, while on the other it is registered as an act which is “merely” symbolic, its resolutions imaginary ones that leave the real untouched, suitably dramatizes the ambiguous status of art and culture.

Still, we need to say a little more about the status of this external reality, of which it will otherwise be thought that it is little more than the traditional notion of “context” familiar in older social or historical criticism. The type of interpretation here proposed is more satisfactorily grasped as the rewriting of the literary text in such a way that the latter may itself be seen as the rewriting or restructuration of a prior historical or ideological *subtext*, it being always understood that that “subtext” is not immediately present as such, not some common-sense external reality, nor even the conventional narratives of history manuals, but rather must itself always be (re)constructed after the fact. The literary or aesthetic act therefore always entertains some active relationship with the Real; yet in order to do so, it cannot simply allow “reality” to persevere inertly in its own being, outside the text and at distance. It must rather draw the Real into its own texture, and the ultimate paradoxes and false problems of linguistics, and most notably of semantics, are to be traced back to this process, whereby language manages to carry the Real within itself as its own intrinsic or immanent subtext. Insofar, in other words, as symbolic action – what Burke will map as “dream”, “prayer”, or “chart”³¹ – is a way of doing something to the world, to that degree what we are calling “world” must inhere within it, as the content it has to take up into itself in order to submit it to the transformations of form. The symbolic act therefore begins by generating and producing its own context in the same moment of emergence in which it steps back from it, taking its measure with a view toward its own projects of transformation. The whole paradox of what we have here called the subtext may be summed up in this, that the literary work or cultural object, as though for the first time, brings into being that very situation to which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction. It articulates its own situation and textualizes it, thereby encouraging and perpetuating the illusion that the situation itself did not exist before it, that there is nothing but a text, that there never was any extra- or con-textual reality before the text itself generated it in the form of a mirage. One does not have to argue the reality of history: necessity, like Dr. Johnson’s stone, does that for us. That history – Althusser’s “absent cause”, Lacan’s “Real” – is *not* a text, for it is fundamentally non-narrative and nonrepresentational; what can be added, however, is the proviso that history is inaccessible to us except in textual form, or in other words, that it can be approached only by way of prior (re)textualization. Thus, to insist on

either of the two inseparable yet incommensurable dimensions of the symbolic act without the other: to overemphasize the active way in which the text reorganizes its subtext (in order, presumably, to reach the triumphant conclusion that the “referent” does not exist); or on the other hand to stress the imaginary status of the symbolic act so completely as to reify its social ground, now no longer understood as a subtext but merely as some inert given that the text passively or fantasmatically “reflects” – to overstress either of these functions of the symbolic act at the expense of the other is surely to produce sheer ideology, whether it be, as in the first alternative, the ideology of structuralism, or, in the second, that of vulgar materialism.

Still, this view of the place of the “referent” will be neither complete nor methodologically usable unless we specify a supplementary distinction between several types of subtext to be (re)constructed. We have implied, indeed, that the social contradiction addressed and “resolved” by the formal prestidigitation of narrative must, however reconstructed, remain an absent cause, which cannot be directly or immediately conceptualized by the text. It seems useful, therefore, to distinguish, from this ultimate subtext which is the place of social *contradiction*, a secondary one, which is more properly the place of ideology, and which takes the form of the *aporia* or the *antinomy*: what can in the former be resolved only through the intervention of praxis here comes before the purely contemplative mind as logical scandal or double bind, the unthinkable and the conceptually paradoxical, that which cannot be unknotted by the operation of pure thought, and which must therefore generate a whole more properly narrative apparatus – the text itself – to square its circles and to dispel, through narrative movement, its intolerable closure. Such a distinction, positing a system of antinomies as the symptomatic expression and conceptual reflex of something quite different, namely a social contradiction, will now allow us to reformulate that coordination between a semiotic and a dialectical method, which was evoked in the preceding section. The operational validity of semiotic analysis, and in particular of the Greimassian semiotic rectangle³², derives, as was suggested there, not from its adequacy to nature or being, nor even from its capacity to map all forms of thinking or language, but rather from its vocation specifically to model ideological closure and to articulate the workings of binary oppositions, here the privileged form of what we have called the antinomy. A dialectical reevaluation of the findings of semiotics intervenes, however, at the moment in which this entire system of ideological closure is taken as the symptomatic projection of something quite different, namely of social contradiction.

We may now leave this first textual or interpretive model behind, and pass over into the second horizon, that of the social. The latter becomes visible, and individual phenomena are revealed as social facts and institutions, only at the moment in which the organizing categories of analysis become those of social class. I have in another place described the dynamics of ideology in its constituted form as a function of social class³³: suffice it only to recall here that for Marxism classes must always be apprehended relationally, and that the ultimate (or ideal) form of class relationship and class struggle is always dichotomous. The constitutive form of class relationships is always that between a dominant and a laboring class: and it is only in terms of this axis that class fractions (for example, the petty bourgeoisie) or ec-centric or dependent classes (such as the peasantry) are positioned. To define class in this way is sharply to differentiate the Marxian model of classes from the conventional sociological analysis of society into strata, subgroups, professional elites and the like, each of which can presumably be studied in isolation from one another in such a way that the analysis of their “values” or their “cultural space” folds back into separate and independent *Weltanschauungen*, each of which inertly reflects its particular “stratum”. For Marxism, however, the very content of a class ideology is relational, in the sense that its “values” are always actively in situation with respect to the opposing class, and defined against the latter: normally, a ruling class ideology will explore various strategies of the *legitimation* of its own power position, while an oppositional culture or ideology will, often in covert and disguised strategies, seek to contest and to undermine the dominant “value system”.

This is the sense in which we will say, following Mikhail Bakhtin, that within this horizon class discourse – the categories in terms of which individual texts and cultural phenomena are now rewritten – is essentially *dialogical* in its structure.³⁵

Within this new horizon, then, the basic formal requirement of dialectical analysis is maintained, and its elements are still restructured in terms of *contradiction* (this is essentially, as we have said, what distinguishes the relationality of a Marxist class analysis from static analysis of the sociological type). Where the contradiction of the earlier horizon was univocal, however, and limited to the situation of the individual text, to the place of a purely individual symbolic resolution, contradiction here appears in the form of the dialogical as the irreconcilable demands and positions of antagonistic classes. Here again, then, the requirement to prolong interpretation to the point at which this ultimate contradiction begins to appear offers a criterion for the completeness or insufficiency of the analysis.

Yet to rewrite the individual text, the individual cultural artifact, in terms of the antagonistic dialogue of class voices is to perform a rather different operation from the one we have ascribed to our first horizon. Now the individual text will be refocused as a *parole*, or individual utterance, of that vaster system, or *langue*, of class discourse. The individual text retains its formal structure as a symbolic act: yet the value and character of such symbolic action are now significantly modified and enlarged. On this rewriting, the individual utterance or text is grasped as a symbolic move in an essentially polemic and strategic ideological confrontation between the classes, and to describe it in these terms (or to reveal it in this form) demands a whole set of different instruments.

For one thing, the illusion or appearance of isolation or autonomy which a printed text projects must now be systematically undermined. Indeed, since by definition the cultural monuments and masterworks that have survived tend necessarily to perpetuate only a single voice in this class dialogue, the voice of a hegemonic class, they cannot be properly assigned their relational place in a dialogical system without the restoration or artificial reconstruction of the voice to which they were initially opposed, a voice for the most part stifled and reduced to silence, marginalized, its own utterances scattered to the winds, or reappropriated in their turn by the hegemonic culture.

This is the framework in which the reconstruction of so-called popular cultures must properly take place – most notably, from the fragments of essentially peasant cultures: folk songs, fairy tales, popular festivals, occult or oppositional systems of belief such as, magic and witchcraft. Such reconstruction is of a piece with the reaffirmation of the existence of marginalized or oppositional cultures in our own time, and the reaudition of the oppositional voices of black or ethnic cultures, women’s and gay literature, “naïve” or marginalized folk art, and the like. But once again, the affirmation of such nonhegemonic cultural voices remains ineffective if it is limited to the merely “sociological” perspective of the pluralistic rediscovery of other isolated social groups: only an ultimate rewriting of these utterances in terms of their essentially polemic and subversive strategies restores them to their proper place in the dialogical system of the social classes. Thus, for instance, Bloch’s reading of the fairy tale, with its magical wish-fulfillments and its Utopian fantasies of plenty and the *pays de Cocagne*³⁷

Moreover, the stress on the dialogical then allows us to reread or rewrite the hegemonic forms themselves; they also can be grasped as a process of the

reappropriation and neutralization, the cooptation and class transformation, the cultural universalization, of forms which originally expressed the situation of “popular”, subordinate, or dominated groups. So the slave religion of Christianity is transformed into the hegemonic ideological apparatus of the medieval system; while folk music and peasant dance find themselves transmuted into the forms of aristocratic or court festivity and into the cultural visions of the pastoral; and popular narrative from time immemorial – romance, adventure story, melodrama, and the like – is ceaselessly drawn on to restore vitality to an enfeebled and asphyxiating “high culture”. Just so, in our own time, the vernacular and its still vital sources of production (as in black language) are reappropriated by the exhausted and media-standardized speech of a hegemonic middle class. In the aesthetic realm, indeed, the process of cultural “universalization” (which implies the repression of the oppositional voice, and the illusion that there is only one genuine “culture”) is the specific form taken by what can be called the process of legitimation in the realm of ideology and conceptual systems.

Still, this operation of rewriting and of the restoration of an essentially dialogical or class horizon will not be complete until we specify the “units” of this larger system. The linguistic metaphor (rewriting texts in terms of the opposition of a *parole* to a *langue*) cannot, in other words, be particularly fruitful until we are able to convey something of the dynamics proper to a class *langue* itself, which is evidently, in Saussure’s sense, something like an ideal construct that is never wholly visible and never fully present in any one of its individual utterances. This larger class discourse can be said to be organized around minimal “units” which we will call *ideologemes*. The advantage of this formulation lies in its capacity to mediate between conceptions of ideology as abstract opinion, class value, and the like, and the narrative materials with which we will be working here. The ideologeme is an amphibious formation, whose essential structural characteristic may be described as its possibility to manifest itself either as a pseudoidea – a conceptual or belief system, an abstract value, an opinion or prejudice – or as a protonarrative, a kind of ultimate class fantasy about the “collective characters” which are the classes in opposition. This duality means that the basic requirement for the full description of the ideologeme is already given in advance: as a construct it must be susceptible to both a conceptual description and a narrative manifestation all at once. The ideologeme can of course be elaborated in either of these directions, taking on the finished appearance of a philosophical system on the one hand, or that of a cultural text on the other; but the ideological analysis of these finished cultural products requires us to demonstrate each one as a complex work of transformation on that ultimate raw material which is the ideologeme in

question. The analyst's work is thus first that of the identification of the ideologeme, and, in many cases, of its initial naming in instances where for whatever reason it had not yet been registered as such. The immense preparatory task of identifying and inventorying such ideologemes has scarcely even begun, and to it the present book will make but the most modest contribution: most notably in its isolation of that fundamental nineteenth-century ideologeme which is the "theory" of *ressentiment*, and in its "unmasking" of ethics and the ethical binary opposition of good and evil as one of the fundamental forms of ideological thought in Western culture. However, our stress here and throughout on the fundamentally narrative character of such ideologemes (even where they seem to be articulated only as abstract conceptual beliefs or values) will offer the advantage of restoring the complexity of the transactions between opinion and protonarrative or libidinal fantasy. Thus we will observe, in the case of Balzac, the generation of an overt and constituted ideological and political "value system" out of the operation of an essentially narrative and fantasy dynamic; the chapter on Gissing, on the other hand, will show how an already constituted "narrative paradigm" emits an ideological message in its own right without the mediation of authorial intervention.

This focus or horizon, that of class struggle and its antagonistic discourses, is, as we have already suggested, not the ultimate form a Marxist analysis of culture can take. The example just alluded to - that of the seventeenth-century English revolution, in which the various classes and class fractions found themselves obliged to articulate their ideological struggles through the shared medium of a religious master code - can serve to dramatize the shift whereby these objects of study are reconstituted into a structurally distinct "text" specific to this final enlargement of the analytical frame. For the possibility of a displacement in emphasis is already given in this example: we have suggested that within the apparent unity of the theological code, the fundamental difference of antagonistic class positions can be made to emerge. In that case, the inverse move is also possible, and such concrete semantic differences can on the contrary be focused in such a way that what emerges is rather the all-embracing unity of a single code which they must share and which thus characterizes the larger unity of the social system. This new object - code, sign system, or system of the production of signs and codes - thus becomes an index of an entity of study which greatly transcends those earlier ones of the narrowly political (the symbolic act), and the social (class discourse and the ideologeme), and which we have proposed to term the historical in the larger sense of this word. Here the organizing unity will be what the Marxian tradition designates as a *mode of production*.

I have already observed that the “problematic” of modes of production is the most vital new area of Marxist theory in all the disciplines today; not paradoxically, it is also one of the most traditional, and we must therefore, in a brief preliminary way, sketch in the “sequence” of modes of production as classical Marxism, from Marx and Engels to Stalin, tended to enumerate them.³⁸ These modes, or “stages” of human society, have traditionally included the following: primitive communism or tribal society (the horde), the *gens* or hierarchical kinship societies (neolithic society), the Asiatic mode of production (so-called Oriental despotism), the *polis* or an oligarchical slaveholding society (the ancient mode of production), feudalism, capitalism, and communism (with a good deal of debate as to whether the “transitional” stage between these last – sometimes called “socialism” – is a genuine mode of production in its own right or not). What is more significant in the present context is that even this schematic or mechanical conception of historical “stages” (what the Althusserians have systematically criticized under the term “historicism”) includes the notion of a cultural dominant or form of ideological coding specific to each mode of production. Following the same order these have generally been conceived as magic and mythic narrative, kinship, religion or the sacred, “politics” according to the narrower category of citizenship in the ancient city state, relations of personal domination, commodity reification, and (presumably) original and as yet nowhere fully developed forms of collective or communal association.

Before we can determine the cultural “text” or object of study specific to the horizon of modes of production, however, we must make two preliminary remarks about the methodological problems it raises. The first will bear on whether the concept of “mode of production” is a synchronic one, while the second will address the temptation to use the various modes of production for a classifying or typologizing operation, in which cultural texts are simply dropped into so many separate compartments.

Indeed, a number of theorists have been disturbed by the apparent convergence between the properly Marxian notion of an all-embracing and all-structuring mode of production (which assigns everything within itself – culture, ideological production, class articulation, technology – a specific and unique place), and non-Marxist visions of a “total system” in which the various elements or levels of social life are programmed in some increasingly constricting way. Weber’s dramatic notion of the “iron cage” of an increasingly bureaucratic society⁴⁰, but also more traditional “synchronic” accounts of the cultural programming of a given historical “moment”, such as those that have variously been proposed from Vico and Hegel to Spengler and Deleuze – all such

monolithic models of the cultural unity of a given historical period have tended to confirm the suspicions of a dialectical tradition about the dangers of an emergent “synchronic” thought, in which change and development are relegated to the marginalized category of the merely “diachronic”, the contingent or the rigorously nonmeaningful (and this, even where, as with Althusser, such models of cultural unity are attacked as forms of a more properly Hegelian and idealistic “expressive causality”). This theoretical foreboding about the limits of synchronic thought can perhaps be most immediately grasped in the political area, where the model of the “total system” would seem slowly and inexorably to eliminate any possibility of the *negative* as such, and to reintegrate the place of an oppositional or even merely “critical” practice and resistance back into the system as the latter’s mere inversion. In particular, everything about class struggle that was anticipatory in the older dialectical framework, and seen as an emergent space for radically new social relations, would seem, in the synchronic model, to reduce itself to practices that in fact tend to reinforce the very system that foresaw and dictated their specific limits. This is the sense in which Jean Baudrillard has suggested that the “total-system” view of contemporary society reduces the options of resistance to anarchist gestures, to the sole remaining ultimate protests of the wildcat strike, terrorism, and death. Meanwhile, in the framework of the analysis of culture also, the latter’s integration into a synchronic model would seem to empty cultural production of all its antisystemic capacities, and to “unmask” even the works of an overtly oppositional or political stance as instruments ultimately programmed by the system itself.

It is, however, precisely the notion of a series of enlarging theoretical horizons proposed here that can assign these disturbing synchronic frameworks their appropriate analytical places and dictate their proper use. This notion projects a long view of history which is inconsistent with concrete political action and class struggle only if the specificity of the horizons is not respected; thus, even if the concept of a mode of production is to be considered a synchronic one (and we will see in a moment that things are somewhat more complicated than this), at the level of historical abstraction at which such a concept is properly to be used, the lesson of the “vision” of a total system is for the short run one of the structural limits imposed on praxis rather than the latter’s impossibility.

The theoretical problem with the synchronic systems enumerated above lies elsewhere, and less in their analytical framework than in what in a Marxist perspective might be called their infrastructural regrounding. Historically, such systems have

tended to fall into two general groups, which one might term respectively the hard and soft visions of the total system. The first group projects a fantasy future of a “totalitarian” type in which the mechanisms of domination – whether these are understood as part of the more general process of bureaucratization, or on the other hand derive more immediately from the deployment of physical and ideological force – are grasped as irrevocable and increasingly pervasive tendencies whose mission is to colonize the last remnants and survivals of human freedom – to occupy and organize, in other words, what still persists of Nature objectively and subjectively (very schematically, the Third World and the Unconscious).

This group of theories can perhaps hastily be associated with the central names of Weber and Foucault; the second group may then be associated with names such as those of Jean Baudrillard and the American theorists of a “post-industrial society”⁴¹. For this second group, the characteristics of the total system of contemporary world society are less those of political domination than those of cultural programming and penetration: not the iron cage, but rather the *société de consommation* with its consumption of images and simulacra, its free-floating signifiers and its effacement of the older structures of social class and traditional ideological hegemony. For both groups, world capitalism is in evolution toward a system which is not socialist in any classical sense, on the one hand the nightmare of total control and on the other the polymorphous or schizophrenic intensities of some ultimate counterculture (which may be no less disturbing for some than the overtly threatening characteristics of the first vision). What one must add is that neither kind of analysis respects the Marxian injunction of the “ultimately determining instance” of economic organization and tendencies: for both, indeed, economics (or political economy) of that type is in the new total system of the contemporary world at an end, and the economic finds itself in both reassigned to a secondary and nondeterminant position beneath the new dominant of political power or of cultural production respectively.

There exist, however, within Marxism itself precise equivalents to these two non-Marxian visions of the contemporary total system: rewritings, if one likes, of both in specifically Marxian and “economic” terms. These are the analyses of late capitalism in terms of *capitalogic*⁴³, respectively; and while this book is clearly not the place to discuss such theories at any length, it must be observed here that both, seeing the originality of the contemporary situation in terms of systemic tendencies *within* capitalism, reassert the theoretical priority of the organizing concept of the mode of production which we have been concerned to argue.

We must therefore now turn to the second related problem about this third and ultimate horizon, and deal briefly with the objection that cultural analysis pursued within it will tend toward a purely typological or classificatory operation, in which we are called upon to “decide” such issues as whether Milton is to be read within a “precapitalist” or a nascent capitalist context, and so forth. I have insisted elsewhere on the sterility of such classificatory procedures, which may always, it seems to me, be taken as symptoms and indices of the repression of a more genuinely dialectical or historical practice of cultural analysis. This diagnosis may now be expanded to cover all three horizons at issue here, where the practice of homology, that of a merely “sociological” search for some social or class equivalent, and that, finally, of the use of some typology of social and cultural systems, respectively, may stand as examples of the misuse of these three frameworks. Furthermore, just as in our discussion of the first two we have stressed the centrality of the category of contradiction for any Marxist analysis (seen, within the first horizon, as that which the cultural and ideological artifact tries to “resolve”, and in the second as the nature of the social and class conflict within which a given work is one act or gesture), so too here we can effectively validate the horizon of the mode of production by showing the form contradiction takes on this level, and the relationship of the cultural object to it.

Before we do so, we must take note of more recent objections to the very concept of the mode of production. The traditional schema of the various modes of production as so many historical “stages” has generally been felt to be unsatisfactory, not least because it encourages the kind of typologizing criticized above, in political quite as much as in cultural analysis. (The form taken in political analysis is evidently the procedure which consists in “deciding” whether a given conjuncture is to be assigned to a moment within feudalism – the result being a demand for bourgeois and parliamentary rights – or within capitalism – with the accompanying “reformist” strategy – or, on the contrary, a genuine “revolutionary” moment – in which case the appropriate revolutionary strategy is then deduced.)

On the other hand, it has become increasingly clear to a number of contemporary theorists that such classification of “empirical” materials within this or that abstract category is impermissible in large part because of the level of abstraction of the concept of a mode of production: no historical society has ever “embodied” a mode of production in any pure state (nor is *Capital* the description of a historical society, but rather the construction of the abstract concept of capitalism). This has led certain contemporary theorists, most notably Nicos Poulantzas⁴⁴, to insist on the distinction

between a “mode of production” as a purely theoretical construction and a “social formation” that would involve the description of some historical society at a certain moment of its development. This distinction seems inadequate and even misleading, to the degree that it encourages the very empirical thinking which it was concerned to denounce, in other words, subsuming a particular or an empirical “fact” under this or that corresponding “abstraction”. Yet one feature of Poulantzas’ discussion of the “social formation” may be retained: his suggestion that every social formation or historically existing society has in fact consisted in the overlay and structural coexistence of *several* modes of production all at once, including vestiges and survivals of older modes of production, now relegated to structurally dependent positions within the new, as well as anticipatory tendencies which are potentially inconsistent with the existing system but have not yet generated an autonomous space of their own.

But if this suggestion is valid, then the problems of the “synchronic” system and of the typological temptation are both solved at one stroke. What is synchronic is the “concept” of the mode of production; the moment of the historical coexistence of several modes of production is not synchronic in this sense, but open to history in a dialectical way. The temptation to classify texts according to the appropriate mode of production is thereby removed, since the texts emerge in a space in which we may expect them to be crisscrossed and intersected by a variety of impulses from contradictory modes of cultural production all at once.

Yet we have still not characterized the specific object of study which is constructed by this new and final horizon. It cannot, as we have shown, consist in the concept of an individual mode of production (any more than, in our second horizon, the specific object of study could consist in a particular social class in isolation from the others). We will therefore suggest that this new and ultimate object may be designated, drawing on recent historical experience, as *cultural revolution*, that moment in which the coexistence of various modes of production becomes visibly antagonistic, their contradictions moving to the very center of political, social, and historical life. The incomplete Chinese experiment with a “proletarian” cultural revolution may be invoked in support of the proposition that previous history has known a whole range of equivalents for similar processes to which the term may legitimately be extended. So the Western Enlightenment may be grasped as part of a properly bourgeois cultural revolution, in which the values and the discourses, the habits and the daily space, of the *ancien régime* were systematically dismantled so that in their place could be set

the new conceptualities, habits and life forms, and value systems of a capitalist market society. This process clearly involved a vaster historical rhythm than such punctual historical events as the French Revolution or the Industrial Revolution, and includes in its *longue durée* such phenomena as those described by Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* - a work that can now in its turn be read as a contribution to the study of the bourgeois cultural revolution, just as the corpus of work on romanticism is now repositioned as the study of a significant and ambiguous moment in the resistance to this particular "great transformation", alongside the more specifically "popular" (precapitalist as well as working-class) forms of cultural resistance.

But if this is the case, then we must go further and suggest that all previous modes of production have been accompanied by cultural revolutions specific to them of which the neolithic "cultural revolution", say, the triumph of patriarchy over the older matriarchal or tribal forms, or the victory of Hellenic "justice" and the new legality of the *polis* over the vendetta system are only the most dramatic manifestations. The concept of cultural revolution, then - or more precisely, the reconstruction of the materials of cultural and literary history in the form of this new "text" or object of study which is cultural revolution - may be expected to project a whole new framework for the humanities, in which the study of culture in the widest sense could be placed on a materialist basis.

This description is, however, misleading to the degree to which it suggests that "cultural revolution" is a phenomenon limited to so-called "transitional" periods, during which social formations dominated by one mode of production undergo a radical restructuring in the course of which a different "dominant" emerges. The problem of such "transitions" is a traditional crux of the Marxian problematic of modes of production, nor can it be said that any of the solutions proposed, from Marx's own fragmentary discussions to the recent model of Etienne Balibar, are altogether satisfactory since in all of them the inconsistency between a "synchronic" description of a given system and a "diachronic" account of the passage from one system to another seems to return with undiminished intensity. But our own discussion began with the idea that a given social formation consisted in the coexistence of various synchronic systems or modes of production, each with its own dynamic or time scheme - a kind of metasynchronicity, if one likes - while we have now shifted to a description of cultural revolution which has been couched in the more diachronic language of systemic transformation. I will therefore suggest that these two

apparently inconsistent accounts are simply the twin perspectives which our thinking (and our presentation or *Darstellung* of that thinking) can take on this same vast historical object. Just as overt revolution is no punctual event either, but brings to the surface the innumerable daily struggles and forms of class polarization which are at work in the whole course of social life that precedes it, and which are therefore latent and implicit in “prerevolutionary” social experience, made visible as the latter’s deep structure only in such “moments of truth” – so also the overtly “transitional” moments of cultural revolution are themselves but the passage to the surface of a permanent process in human societies, of a permanent struggle between the various coexisting modes of production. The triumphant moment in which a new systemic dominant gains ascendancy is therefore only the diachronic manifestation of a constant struggle for the perpetuation and reproduction of its dominance, a struggle which must continue throughout its life course, accompanied at all moments by the systemic or structural antagonism of those older and newer modes of production that resist assimilation or seek deliverance from it. The task of cultural and social analysis thus construed within this final horizon will then clearly be the rewriting of its materials in such a way that this perpetual cultural revolution can be apprehended and read as the deeper and more permanent constitutive structure in which the empirical textual objects know intelligibility.

Cultural revolution thus conceived may be said to be beyond the opposition between synchrony and diachrony, and to correspond roughly to what Ernst Bloch has called the *Ungleichzeitigkeit* (or “nonsynchronous development”) of cultural and social life.⁴⁵ Such a view imposes a new use of concepts of periodization, and in particular of that older schema of the “linear” stages which is here preserved and canceled all at once. We will deal more fully with the specific problems of periodization in the next chapter: suffice it to say at this point that such categories are produced within an initial diachronic or narrative framework, but become usable only when that initial framework has been annulled, allowing us now to coordinate or articulate categories of diachronic origin (the various distinct modes of production) in what is now a synchronic or metasynchronic way.

We have, however, not yet specified the nature of the textual object which is constructed by this third horizon of cultural revolution, and which would be the equivalent within this dialectically new framework of the objects of our first two horizons – the symbolic act, and the ideologeme or dialogical organization of class discourse. I will suggest that within this final horizon the individual text or cultural

artifact (with its appearance of autonomy which was dissolved in specific and original ways within the first two horizons as well) is here restructured as a field of force in which the dynamics of sign systems of several distinct modes of production can be registered and apprehended. These dynamics – the newly constituted “text” of our third horizon – make up what can be termed *the ideology of form*, that is, the determinate contradiction of the specific messages emitted by the varied sign systems which coexist in a given artistic process as well as in its general social formation.

What must now be stressed is that at this level “form” is apprehended as content. The study of the ideology of form is no doubt grounded on a technical and formalistic analysis in the narrower sense, even though, unlike much traditional formal analysis, it seeks to reveal the active presence within the text of a number of discontinuous and heterogeneous formal processes. But at the level of analysis in question here, a dialectical reversal has taken place in which it has become possible to grasp such formal processes as sedimented content in their own right, as carrying ideological messages of their own, distinct from the ostensible or manifest content of the works; it has become possible, in other words, to display such formal operations from the standpoint of what Louis Hjelmslev will call the “content of form” rather than the latter’s “expression”, which is generally the object of the various more narrowly formalizing approaches. The simplest and most accessible demonstration of this reversal may be found in the area of literary genre. Our next chapter, indeed, will model the process whereby generic specification and description can, in a given historical text, be transformed into the detection of a host of distinct generic messages – some of them objectified survivals from older modes of cultural production, some anticipatory, but all together projecting a formal conjuncture through which the “conjuncture” of coexisting modes of production at a given historical moment can be detected and allegorically articulated.

Meanwhile, that what we have called the ideology of form is something other than a retreat from social and historical questions into the more narrowly formal may be suggested by the relevance of this final perspective to more overtly political and theoretical concerns; we may take the much debated relation of Marxism to feminism as a particularly revealing illustration. The notion of overlapping modes of production outlined above has indeed the advantage of allowing us to short-circuit the false problem of the priority of the economic over the sexual, or of sexual oppression over that of social class. In our present perspective, it becomes clear that sexism and the patriarchal are to be grasped as the sedimentation and the virulent survival of forms of

alienation specific to the oldest mode of production of human history, with its division of labor between men and women, and its division of power between youth and elder. The analysis of the ideology of form, properly completed, should reveal the formal persistence of such archaic structures of alienation – and the sign systems specific to them – beneath the overlay of all the more recent and historically original types of alienation – such as political domination and commodity reification – which have become the dominants of that most complex of all cultural revolutions, late capitalism, in which all the earlier modes of production in one way or another structurally coexist. The affirmation of radical feminism, therefore, that to annul the patriarchal is the most *radical* political act – insofar as it includes and subsumes more partial demands, such as the liberation from the commodity form – is thus perfectly consistent with an expanded Marxian framework, for which the transformation of our own dominant mode of production must be accompanied and completed by an equally radical restructuring of all the more archaic modes of production with which it structurally coexists.

With this final horizon, then, we emerge into a space in which History itself becomes the ultimate ground as well as the untranscendable limit of our understanding in general and our textual interpretations in particular. This is, of course, also the moment in which the whole problem of interpretive priorities returns with a vengeance, and in which the practitioners of alternate or rival interpretive codes – far from having been persuaded that History is an interpretive code that includes and transcends all the others – will again assert “History” as simply one more code among others, with no particularly privileged status. This is most succinctly achieved when the critics of Marxist interpretation, borrowing its own traditional terminology, suggest that the Marxian interpretive operation involves a thematization and a reification of “History” which is not markedly different from the process whereby the other interpretive codes produce their own forms of thematic closure and offer themselves as absolute methods.

It should by now be clear that nothing is to be gained by opposing one reified theme – History – by another – Language – in a polemic debate as to ultimate priority of one over the other. The influential forms this debate has taken in recent years – as in Jürgen Habermas’ attempt to subsume the “Marxist” model of production beneath a more all-embracing model of “communication” or inter-subjectivity⁴⁷ – are based on the misconception that the Marxian category of a “mode of production” is a form of technological or “productionist” determinism.

It would seem therefore more useful to ask ourselves, in conclusion, how History as a ground and as an absent cause can be conceived in such a way as to resist such thematization or reification, such transformation back into one optional code among others. We may suggest such a possibility obliquely by attention to what the Aristotelians would call the generic satisfaction specific to the form of the great monuments of historiography, or what the semioticians might call the “history-effect” of such narrative texts. Whatever the raw material on which historiographic form works (and we will here only touch on that most widespread type of material which is the sheer chronology of fact as it is produced by the rote-drill of the history manual), the “emotion” of great historiographic form can then always be seen as the radical restructuration of that inert material, in this instance the powerful reorganization of otherwise inert chronological and “linear” data in the form of Necessity: why what happened (at first received as “empirical” fact) had to happen the way it did. From this perspective, then, causality is only one of the possible tropes by which this formal restructuration can be achieved, although it has obviously been a privileged and historically significant one. Meanwhile, should it be objected that Marxism is rather a “comic” or “romance” paradigm, one which sees history in the salvational perspective of some ultimate liberation, we must observe that the most powerful realizations of a Marxist historiography – from Marx’s own narratives of the 1848 revolution through the rich and varied canonical studies of the dynamics of the Revolution of 1789 all the way to Charles Bettelheim’s study of the Soviet revolutionary experience – remain visions of historical Necessity in the sense evoked above. But Necessity is here represented in the form of the inexorable logic involved in the determinate failure of all the revolutions that have taken place in human history: the ultimate Marxian presupposition – that socialist revolution can only be a total and worldwide process (and that this in turn presupposes the completion of the capitalist “revolution” and of the process of commodification on a global scale) – is the perspective in which the failure or the blockage, the contradictory reversal or functional inversion, of this or that local revolutionary process is grasped as “inevitable”, and as the operation of objective limits.

History is therefore the experience of Necessity, and it is this alone which can forestall its thematization or reification as a mere object of representation or as one master code among many others. Necessity is not in that sense a type of content, but rather the inexorable *form* of events; it is therefore a narrative category in the enlarged sense of some properly narrative political unconscious which has been argued here, a retextualization of History which does not propose the latter as some new

representation or “vision”, some new content, but as the formal effects of what Althusser, following Spinoza, calls an “absent cause”. Conceived in this sense, History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its “ruses” turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention. But this History can be apprehended only through its effects, and never directly as some reified force. This is indeed the ultimate sense in which History as ground and untranscendable horizon needs no particular theoretical justification: we may be sure that its alienating necessities will not forget us, however much we might prefer to ignore them.