Marxism and
Literature

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Introduction

This book is written in a time of radical change. Its subject, Marxism and Literature, is part of this change. Even twenty years ago, and especially in the English-speaking countries, it would have been possible to assume, on the one hand, that Marxism is a settled body of theory or doctrine, and, on the other hand, that literature is a settled body of work, or kinds of work, with known general qualities and properties. A book of this kind might then reasonably have explored problems of the relations between them or, assuming a certain relationship, passed quickly to specific applications. The situation is now very different. Marxism, in many fields, and perhaps especially in cultural theory, has experienced at once a significant revivel and a related openness and flexibility of theoretical development. Literature, meanwhile, for related reasons, has become problematic in quite new ways.

The purpose of this book is to introduce this period of active development, and to do so in the only way that seems appropriate to a body of thinking still in movement, by attempting at once to clarify and to contribute to it. This involves, necessarily, reviewing earlier positions, both Marxist and non-Marxist. But what is offered is not a summary; it is both a critique and an argument.

One way of making clear my sense of the situation from which this book begins is to describe, briefly, the development of my own position, in relation to Marxism and to literature, which, between them, in practice as much as in theory, have occupied most of my working life. My first contacts with Marxist literary argument occurred when I came to Cambridge to read English in 1939: not in the Faculty but in widespread student discussion. I was already relatively familiar with Marxist, or at least socialist and communist, political and economic analysis and argument. My experience of growing up in a working-class family had led me to accept the basic political position which they supported and clarified. The cultural and literary arguments, as I then encountered them, were in effect an extension from this, or a mode of affiliation to it. I did not then closely realize this. The dependence, I believe, is still not generally
realized, in its full implications. Hardly anyone becomes a Mar-
xist for primarily cultural or literary reasons, but for compelling
social or economic reasons. In the urgencies of the thirties or
of thought and certain defining propositions are picked up and
necessarily having much independent substance and indeed
argument. This is how I would now describe my own position as
a student between 1939 and 1941, in which a confident but
rather academic work, until the incompatibility — fairly easily
established — became a problem not for campaigns or
myself, for myself and for anything that I
shared with the, dominant tones of that English Marxist argu-
mation was what I would now call, still with respect, a radical
and original rather more (and to its advantage) with making literature
literature to the lives of the majority of our people. At the
relatively narrow, and there were many problems and kinds of it
did not connect and which it could therefore often only dis-
miss. As the consequent difficulties emerged, in the areas of
ally concerned, I began sensing and defining a set of problems
which have since occupied most of my work. Exceptionally
later forties and early fifties, I tried to discover an area of studies
in which some of these questions might be answered, and some
continuing to share most of its political and economic positions,
but carrying on my own cultural and literary work and inquiry at
book Club and Society and, in the present context, in its
chapter on 'Marxism and Culture'.
But from the mid-fifties new formations were emerging, nota-
bly what came to be called the New Left. I found, at this time, an
immediate affinity with my own kind of cultural and literary
work (in positions which had in fact been latent as part of the
work in Politics and Letters in 1947 and 1948; positions which
remained undeveloped because the conditions for such a forma-
tion did not then fully exist). I found also, and especially, the
thinking which was different, in some respects radically differ-
ent, from what I and most people in Britain knew as Marxism.
There was contact with older work that had never come our way — that of Lukács and of Brecht, for example. There was
new contemporary work in Poland, in France, and in Britain
itself. And while some of this work was exploring new ground, much of it, just as interestingly, was seeing Marxism as itself a
historical development, with highly variable and even alterna-
tive positions.
I began then reading widely in the history of Marxism, trying
especially to trace the particular formation, so decisive in cul-
tural and literary analysis, which I now recognize as having
been primarily systematized by Plekhanov, with much support
from the later work of Engels, and popularized by dominant
tendencies in Soviet Marxism. To see that theoretical formation
clearly, and to trace its hybridization with a strong, radical
populism, was to understand both my respect for and my dis-
tance from what I had hitherto known as Marxism tout court. It
was also to gain a sense of the degree of selection and interpre-
tation which, in relation both to Marx and to the whole long
Marxist argument and inquiry, that familiar and orthodox posi-
tion effectively represented. I could then read even the English
Marxists of the thirties differently, and especially Christopher
Caudwell. It is characteristic that the argument about Caudwell,
which I had followed very carefully in the late forties and early
fifties, had centred on the question characteristic of the style of
that orthodox tradition: 'are his ideas Marxist or not?'. It is a style
that has persisted, in some corners, with confident assertions
that this or that is or is not a Marxist position. But now that I
knew more of the history of Marxism, and of the variety of
selective and alternative traditions within it, I could at last get
free of the model which had been such an obstacle, whether in
certainty or in doubt: the model of fixed and known Marxist
positions, which in general had only to be applied, and the
responding dismissal of all other kinds of thinking as non-
Marxist, revisionist, neo-Hegelian, or bourgeois. Once the cen-
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tal body of thinking was itself seen as active, developing, unfinished, and persistently contentious. Many of the questions were open again, and, as a matter of fact, my respect for the body of thinking as a whole, including the orthodox traditions now seen as a tendency within it, significantly and decisively increased. I have come to see more and more clearly its radical differences from other bodies of thinking, but at the same time its complex connections with them, and its many unresolved problems.

It was in this situation that I felt the excitement of contact with more new Marxist work: the later work of Lukács, the later work of Sartre, the developing work of Goldmann and of Althusser, the variable and developing syntheses of Marxism and some forms of structuralism. At the same time, within this significant new activity, there was further access to older work, notably that of the Frankfurt School (in its most significant period in the twenties and thirties) and especially the work of Walter Benjamin; the extraordinarily original work of Antonio Gramsci; and, as a decisive element of a new sense of the tradition, newly translated work of Marx and especially the Grundrisse. As all this came in, during the sixties and early seventies, I often reflected, and in Cambridge had direct cause to reflect, on the contrast between the situation of the socialist student of literature in 1960 and in 1970. More generally I had reason to reflect on the contrast for any student of literature, in a situation in which an argument that had drifted into deadlock was, or could be, redirected.

In the early seventies I began discussing these issues in lectures and classes in Cambridge: at first with some opposition from some of my Faculty colleagues, who knew (but did not know what Marxism and Literature amounted to). But this matter was less than the fact that my own long and often internal and solitary debate with what I had known as Marxism now took its place in a serious and extending international inquiry. I had opportunities to extend my discussions in Italy, in Scandinavia, in France, in North America, and in Germany, and with visitors from Hungary, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union. This book is the result of that period of discussion, in an international context in which I have had the sense, for the first time in my life, of belonging to a sphere and dimension of work in which I could feel at home. But I have felt, at every point, the history of the previous thirty-five years, during which any consolation I might once have been developing in complacency I could not resist the temptation of remembering each unrecorded contact, throughout, with Marxist ideas and arguments.

That individual history may be of some significance in relation to the development of Marxism and of thinking about Marxism in Britain during that period. But it has a more immediate relevance to the character of this book, and to its organization. In my first part I survey and analyse four basic concepts: 'culture', 'language', 'literature', and 'ideology'. None of these is exclusively a Marxist concept, though Marxist thinking has contributed to them; at times significantly, in general unevenly. I examine specifically Marxist uses of the concepts, but I am concerned also to locate them within more general developments. This follows from the intellectual history I have described, in that I am concerned to see different forms of Marxist thinking as interactive with other forms of thinking, rather than as a separated history, either sacred or never. At the same time, the re-examination of these fundamental concepts, and especially those of language and of literature, opens the way to the subsequent critique and contribution. In the second part, I analyse and discuss the key concepts of Marxist cultural theory, on which — and this is an essential part of my argument — Marxist literary theory seems to me in practice to depend. It is not only an analysis of elements of a body of thinking; it explores significant variations and, at particular points and especially in its later chapters, introduces concepts of my own. In my third part, I again extend the discussion, into questions of literary theory, in which variants of Marxism are now interactive with other related and at times alternative kinds of thinking, to each part, while presenting analysis and discussion of key elements and variants of Marxist thinking, I am concerned also to develop a position which, as a matter of theory, I have arrived at over the years. This differs, at several key points, from what is most widely known as Marxist theory, but from many of its variants. It is a position which can be briefly described as cultural materialism: a theory of the specificities of material cultural and literary production within historical materialism. Its details belong to the argument as a whole, but I must say, at this point, that it is, in my view, a Marxist theory, and indeed that in
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R.W.
1. Culture

At the very centre of a major area of modern thought and practice, which it is habitually used to describe, is a concept, 'culture', which in itself, through variation and complication, embodies not only the issues but the contradictions through which it has developed. The concept at once fuses and confuses the radically different experiences and tendencies of its formation. It is then impossible to carry through any serious cultural analysis without reaching towards a consciousness of the concept itself: a consciousness that must be, as we shall see, historical. This hesitation, before what seems the richness of developed theory and the fullness of achieved practice, has the awkwardness, even the gaucherie, of any radical doubt. It is literally a moment of crisis: a jolt in experience, a break in the sense of history, forcing us back from so much that seemed positive and available — all the ready insertions into a crucial argument, all the accessible entries into immediate practice. Yet the insight cannot be sealed over. When the most basic concepts — the concepts, as it is said, from which we begin — are suddenly seen to be not concepts but problems, not analytic problems either but historical movements that are still unresolved, there is no sense in listening to their sonorous summons or their resounding clashes. We have only, if we can, to recover the substance from which their forms were cast.

Society, economy, culture: each of these 'areas', now tagged by a concept, is a comparatively recent historical formulation. 'Society' was active fellowship, company, 'common doing', before it became the description of a general system or order.

'Economy' was the management of a household and then the management of a community before it became the description of a perceived system of production, distribution, and exchange.

'Culture', before these transitions, was the growth and tending of crops and animals, and by extension the growth and tending of human faculties. In their modern development the three concepts did not move in step, but each, at a critical point, was affected by the movement of the others. At least this is how we may now see their history. But in the run of the real changes what was being put into the new ideas, and to some extent fixed
The problem of what is ‘social’ that the dominant development of ‘society’ has left unresolved. Are we to understand ‘culture’ as ‘the arts’, as ‘a system of meanings and values’, or as a ‘whole way of life’, and how are these to be related to ‘society’ and the ‘economy’? The questions have to be asked, but we are unlikely to be able to answer unless we recognize the problem which was inherent in the concepts ‘society’ and ‘economy’ and which have been passed on to concepts like ‘culture’ by the abstraction and limitation of those terms.

The concept of ‘culture’, when it is seen in the broad context of historical development, exerts a strong pressure against the limited terms of all the other concepts. That is always its advantage; it is always also the source of its difficulties, both in definition and comprehension. Until the eighteenth century it was still a term of process: the culture of something—crops, animals, minds. The decisive changes in ‘society’ and ‘economy’ had begun earlier, in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; much of their essential development was complete before ‘culture’ came to include its new and elusive meanings. These cannot be understood unless we realize what had happened to ‘society’ and ‘economy’; but equally none can be fully understood unless we examine a decisive modern concept which by the eighteenth century needed a new word—civilization.

The notion of ‘civilizing’, as bringing men within a social organization, was of course already known; it rested on civil and civic, and its aim was expressed in the adjective ‘civil’ as orderly, educated, or polite. It was positively extended, as we have seen, in the concept of ‘civil society’. But ‘civilization’ was to mean more than this. It expressed two senses which were historically linked: an achieved state, which could be contrasted with barbarianism, but now also an achieved state of development, which implied historical process and progress. This was the new historical rationality of the Enlightenment, in fact combined with a self-referencing celebration of an achieved condition of refinement and order. It was this combination that was to be problematic. The developmental perspective of the characteristic eighteenth-century Universal History was of course a significant advance; it was the crucial step beyond the relatively static (‘timeless’) conception of history which had depended on religious or metaphysical assumptions. Men had made their
own history, in this special sense: that they (or some of them) had achieved 'civilisation'. This process was secular and _post-enlightenment_, and in that sense historical. But at the same time it was a history that had calcified in an achieved state: in practice the metropolitan civilisation of England and France. The insistence of British culture on the achievements and stages of this process in turn led to understanding, on the other hand, that could only be justified by the extension and triumph of these achieved values.

This position, already under heavy attack from older religious and metaphysical systems and their associated notions of order, became vulnerable in new ways. The two decisive responses of a modern kind were, first, the idea of culture, offering a different sense of human growth and development, and, second, the idea of socialism, offering a social and historical criticism of and alternative to 'civilisation' and 'civil society' as fixed and achieved conditions. The extensions, transfers, and overlaps between all these and modern concepts, and between them and residual concepts of much older kinds, have been quite exceptionally complex. 'Civilization' and 'culture' (especially in its common early form as 'cultivation') were in effect, in the late eighteenth century, interchangeable terms. Each carried the problematic double sense of an achieved state and of an achieved state of development. Their eventual divergence has several causes. First, there was the attack on 'civilisation' as superficial; on 'artificial' as distinct from a 'natural' state; on the cultivation of 'external' properties—pettiness and luxury—as against more 'human' needs and impulses. This attack, from Rousseau on through the Romantic movement, was the basis of one important alternative sense of 'culture'—as a process of 'inner' or 'spiritual' development as distinct from 'external' development. The primary effect of this alternative was to associate culture with religion, art, the family and personal life, as distinct from, or actually opposed to, 'civilization' or 'society' in its new abstract and general sense. It was from this sense, though not always with its full implications, that 'culture' as a general process of 'inner' development was extended to include a descriptive sense of the means and works of such development: that is, 'culture' as a general classification of 'the arts' and religion, and the institutions and practices of meanings and values. Its relations with 'society' were then problematic, for these were evidently 'social' institutions and practices but were seen as distinct from the aggregates of general and 'external' institutions and practices now commonly called 'society'. The difficulty was ordinarily negotiated by relating 'culture', even where it was evidently social in practice, to the 'inner life' in its most accessible, secular forms: 'subjectivity', the 'imagination', and in these terms 'the individual'. The religious emphasis weakened, and was replaced by what was in effect a metaphysics of subjectivity and the imaginative process. 'Culture', or more specifically 'art' and 'literature' (themselves newly generalized and abstracted), were seen as the deepest record, the deepest impulse, and the deepest resource of the 'human spirit'. 'Culture' was then at once the secularization and the liberalization of earlier metaphysical forms, its agencies and processes were distinctively human, and were generalized as subjective, but certain quasi-metaphysical forms: the imagination', 'creativity', 'inspiration', 'the aesthetic', and the new positive sense of 'myth'—were in effect composed into a new pantheon.

This original break had been with 'civilization' in its assumed 'external' sense. But as secularization and liberalism continued, there was a related pressure on the concept of 'civilization' itself. This reached a critical point during the rapid development of industrial society and its prolonged social and political conflicts. In one view this process was part of the continuing development of civilization: a new and higher social order. But in another view civilization was the achieved state which these new developments were threatening to destroy. 'Civilization' then became an ambiguous term, denoting on the one hand enlightened and progressive development and on the other hand an achieved and threatened state, becoming increasingly retrospective and often in practice identified with the received glories of the past. In the latter sense 'civilization' and 'culture' again overlapped, as received states rather than as continuing processes. Thus, a new battery of forces was ranged against both culture and civilization: materialism, commercialism, democracy, socialism.

Yet 'culture', meanwhile, underwent yet another development. This is especially difficult to trace but is certainly important, since it led to 'culture' as a social—indeed specifically
Here, against the grain of the time, the 'natural sciences' are rejected but the 'human sciences' given a startling new emphasis. We can know what we have made, indeed know by the fact of making. The specific interpretations which Vico then offered are now of little interest, but his description of a mode of development which was at once, and interactively, the shaping of societies and the shaping of human minds by probably the effective origin of the general social sense of 'culture'. The concept itself was remarkably advanced by Herder, in Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind (1784-88). He accepted the emphasis on the historical self-development of humanity, but argued that this was much too complex to be reduced to the evolution of a single principle, and especially to something so abstract as 'reason'; and, further, that it was much too variable to be reduced to a progressive unilinear development culminating in 'European civilization'. It was necessary, he argued, to speak of 'cultures' rather than 'culture', so as to acknowledge variability and within any culture to recognize the complexity and variability of its shaping forces. The specific interpretations he then offered, in terms of 'organic' peoples and nations, and against the 'external universalism' of the enlightenment, are elements of the Romantic movement and of little active interest. But the idea of a fundamental social process which shapes specific and distinct 'ways of life' is the effective origin of the comparative social sense of 'culture' and its now necessary plural cultures.

The complexity of the concept of 'culture' is then remarkable. It became a catchword of 'inner' process, specialized to its presumed agencies in 'intellectual life' and 'the arts'. It became also a noun of general process, specialized to its presumed configurations in 'whole ways of life'. It played a crucial role in definitions of 'the arts' and 'the humanities', from the first sense. It played an equally crucial role in definitions of the 'human sciences' and the 'social sciences', in the second sense. Each tendency is ready to deny any proper use of the concept to the other, its spirit of many attempts at reconciliation. In any modern theory of culture, but perhaps especially in a Marxist theory, this complexity is a source of great difficulty. The problem of knowing, at the outset, whether this would be a theory of 'the arts and intellectual life' in their relations to 'society', or a theory of the social
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process which creates specific and different 'ways of life', is only the most obvious problem.

The first substantial problem is in attitudes towards 'civilization'. Here the decisive intervention of Marxism was the analysis of 'civil society', and what within its terms was known as 'civilization', as a specific historical form: bourgeois society as created by the capitalist mode of production. This provided an indispensable critical perspective, but it was still largely contained within the assumptions which had produced the concept: that of a progressive secular development, most obviously, but also that of a broadly uniform development. Bourgeois society and capitalist production were at once heavily attacked and seen as historically progressive (the latter in reversed terms, as in "the bourgeoisie ... has made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilized ones").

Commodified (53). Socialism would supercede them as the next and higher stage of development.

It is important to compare this inherited perspective with other elements in Marxism and on the radical and socialist movements which preceded it. Often, especially in the earlier movements, influenced by an alternative tradition, including the radical critique of 'civilization', it was not the progressive secular development, but the fundamentally contradictory character of this development that was decisive. 'Civilization' had produced not only wealth, order, and refinement, but as part of the same process, poverty, disorder, and degradation. It was attacked for its 'arti-

ficiality'—its glaring contrasts with a 'natural' or 'human' order. The values upheld against it were not those of the new higher stage of development, but of an essential human brotherhood, often expressed as something to be recovered as well as gained. These two tendencies in Marxism, and in the wider socialist movement, have often been brought together, but in theory and especially in the analysis of subsequent historical practice need to be radically distinguished.

The next decisive innovation of Marxism was the rejection of what Marx called 'idealist historiography', and in that sense of the theoretical procedures of the Enlightenment. History was not seen (or not always or privately seen) as the overcoming of ignorance and superstition by knowledge and reason. What that account and perspective excluded was material history, the history of labour, industry as the 'open book of the human

faculties'. The original notion of 'man making his own history' was given a new radical content by this emphasis on 'man making himself' through producing his own means of life. For all its difficulties in detailed demonstration this was the most important intellectual advance in all modern social thought. It offered the possibility of overcoming the dichotomy between 'society' and 'nature', and of discovering new constitutive relationships between 'society' and 'economy'. As a specification of the basic element of the social process of culture it was a recovery of the wholeness of history. It made in its definition the decisive inclusion of that material history which had been excluded from the 'so-called' history of civilization, which is all a history of religious and states'. Marx's own history of capitalism is the most eminent example.

But there are difficulties within this achievement. Its emphasis on social process, on a constitutive kind, was qualified by the persistence of an earlier kind of rationalism, related to the assumption of progressive uniform development, as in one version of the discovery of the 'scientific laws' of society. This weakened the constitutive and strengthened a more instrumental perspective. Again, the stress on material history, especially within the necessary polemics of its establishment, was in one special way compromised. Instead of making cultural history material, which was the next radical move, it was made dependent, after 'superstructure', a realm of 'men' ideas, beliefs, arts, customs, determined by the basic material history. What matters here is not only the element of reduction; it is the reproduction, in an altered form, of the separation of 'culture' from material social life, which had been the dominant tendency in idealist cultured thought. Thus the full possibilities of the concept of culture as a constitutive social process creating specific and different 'ways of life', which could have been remarkably deepened by the emphasis on a material social process, were for a long time missed, and were often in practice superseded by an abstracting universalism. At the same time the significance of the other alternative concept of culture, defining 'intellectual life' and 'the arts', was compromised by its apparent reduction to 'superstructural' status, and was left to be developed by those who, in the very process of idealizing it, broke its necessary connections with society and history, and, in the areas of psychology, art, and belief, developed a powerful


2. Language

A definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world. The received major categories—"world," "reality," "nature," "human"—may be understood or related to the category "language," but it is now a commonplace to observe that all categories, including the category "language," are themselves constructions in language, and can thus only with an effort, and within a particular system of thought, be separated from language for relational inquiry. Such efforts and such systems, nevertheless, constitute a major part of the history of thought. Many of the problems which have emerged from this history are relevant to Marxism, and in certain areas Marxism itself has contributed to them, by extension from its basic revaluation, in historical materialism, of the received major categories. Yet it is significant that, by comparison, Marxism has contributed very little to thinking about language itself. The result has been either that limited and undeveloped versions of language as a "reflection" of reality have been taken for granted, or that propositions about language, developed within or in the terms of other and often antagonistic, systems of thought, have been synthesized with Marxist propositions about other kinds of activity, in ways which are not only ultimately untenable but, in our own time, radically limiting to the strength of the social propositions. The effects on cultural theory, and in particular on thinking about literature, have been especially marked.

The key moments which should be of interest to Marxism in the development of thinking about language are, first, the emphasis on language as activity and, second, the emphasis on the history of language. Neither of these positions, on its own, is enough to restate the whole problem. It is the conjunction and consequent evaluation of each position that remains necessary. But in different ways and with significant practical results, each position transformed those habitual conceptions of language which depended on and supported relatively static ways of thinking about human beings in the world.

The major emphasis on language as activity began in the eighteenth century, in close relation to the idea of men having
made their own society, which we have seen as a central element in the new concept of 'culture'. In the previously dominant tradition, through all its variations, 'language' and 'reality' had been decisively separated, so that philosophical inquiry was from the beginning an inquiry into the connections between these apparently separate orders. The pre-Socratic unity of the logos, in which language was seen as at one with the order of the world and of nature, with divine and human law, and with reason, had been decisively broken and in effect forgotten. The radical distinction between 'language' and 'reality', as between 'consciousness' and 'the material world', corresponding to actual and practical divisions between 'mental' and 'physical' activity, had become so habitual that serious attention seemed naturally concentrated on the exceptionally complicated consequent relations and connections. Plato's major inquiry into language (in the Cratylus) was centred on the problem of the correctness of naming, in which the interrelation of 'word' and 'thing' can be seen to originate either in 'nature' or in 'convention'. Plato's solution was in effect the foundation of idealist thought: there is an intermediate but constitutive realm, which is neither 'word' nor 'thing', but 'form', 'essence', or 'idea'. The investigation of either 'language' or 'reality' was then always, at root, an investigation of these constitutive (metaphysical) forms.

Yet, given this basic assumption, far-reaching inquiries into the uses of language could be undertaken in particular and specialized ways. Language as a way of constituting reality could be studied as logic. Language as an accessible segment of reality, especially in its development in writing, could be studied as grammar. In the sense of its formal and 'external' shape. Finally, within the distinction between language and reality, language could be conceived as an instrument used by men for specific and distinguished purposes, and these could be studied in rhetoric and in the associated poetics. Through prolonged academic and scholastic development, two of these branches of language study—logic, grammar, and rhetoric—though formally associated in the medieval trivium, became specific and eventually separated disciplines. Thus though they made major practical advances, they either foreclosed examination of the form of the basic distinction between 'language' and 'reality', or determined the grounds, and especially the terms, in which such an examination might be made.

This is notably the case with the important medieval concept of sign, which has been so remarkably reinterpreted in modern linguistic thought. 'Sign', from Latin signum, a mark or token, is intrinsically a concept based on a distinction between 'language' and 'reality'. It is an interposition between 'word' and 'thing' which repeats the Platonic interposition of 'form', 'essence', or 'idea', but now in accessible linguistic terms. Thus in Buridan 'natural signs' are the universal means by which individual signs of reality and these are matched, by convention, with the artificial signs which are physical sounds or letters. Given this starting-point, important investigations of the activity of language (but not of language as an activity) could be undertaken: for example, the remarkable speculative grammars of medieval thought, in which the power of sentences and of the modes of construction which underlay and complicated simple empirical notions of 'naming' was described and investigated. Meanwhile, however, the trivium itself, and especially grammar and rhetoric, moved into relatively formal, though immensely learned, demonstrations of the properties of a given body of 'classical' written material. What was later to be known as 'literary study', and from the early fourteenth century as 'criticism', developed from this powerful, prestigious, and limited mode.

Yet the whole question of the distinction between 'language' and 'reality' was eventually forced into consciousness, initially in a surprising way. Descartes, in reinforcing the distinction and making it more precise, and in demanding that the criterion of connection should be not metaphysical or conventional but grounded in scientific knowledge, provoked new questions by the very force of his scepticism about the obvious. It was in response to Descartes that Vico proposed his criterion that we can have full knowledge only of what we can ourselves make or do. In one decisive respect this response was wrong. Since men have not in any obvious sense made the physical world, a powerful new conception of scientific knowledge was ruled out a priori and was, as before, reserved to God. Yet on the other hand, by insisting that we can understand society because we have made it, indeed that we understand it not abstractly but in the very process of making it, and that the activity of language is central in this process, Vico opened a whole new dimension. It was and is difficult to grasp this dimension, initially
because Vico embedded it in what can be read as a schematic account of the stages of language development: the notorious three stages of divine, heroic, and human. Rousseau, repeating these three stages as "historical" and interpreting them as stages of declining vigour, gave a form of argument to the Romantic Movement—the revival of literature as a revival of the 'original', 'primal' power of language. But this at once obscured the newly active sense of history (specializing it to regeneration and ultimately, as this failed, to reaction) and the newly active sense of language, which in being specialized to literature could be marked off as a special case, a special entity, a special function, leaving the non-literary relations of language to reality as conventional and as allegorized as before. To take Vico's three stages literally, or indeed as 'stages' at all, is to lose sight, as he did, of the dimension he had opened. For what was crucial, in his account of language, was that it emerged only at the human stage, the divine being that of mutes ceremonies and rituals and the heroic that of gestures and signs. Verbal language is then distinctively human; indeed, constitutively human. This was the point taken up by Herder, who opposed any notion of language being 'given' to man (as by God) and, in effect, the apparently continuous and natural history of language being 'added' to man, as a special kind of acquisition or tool. Language is then, positively, a distinctively human opening of and opening to the world: not a distinguishable or instrument-tent but a constitutive faculty. Historically this emphasis on language as constitutive, like the closely related emphasis on human development as culture, must be seen as an attempt both to preserve some idea of the generally human, in face of the analytical and empirical procedures of a powerfully developing natural science, and to assert an idea of human creativity, in face of the increased understanding of the properties of the physical world, and of consequently causal explanations from them. As such this whole tendency was in constant danger of becoming simply a new kind of idealism—"humanity" and 'creativity' being projected as essences—while the tendencies it opposed moved towards a new kind of objective materialism. This specific fiction, so fatal in its consequences, was in effect undone by a newly conventional distinction between 'art' (literature)—the sphere of 'humanity' and 'creativity'—and 'science' ('positive knowledge')—the knowable dimension of the physical world and of physical human beings within it. Each of the key terms—'art', 'literature', and 'science', together with the associated 'culture' and with such a newly necessary specialization as 'esthetic' and the radical distinction of 'experience' and 'experiment'—changed in meaning between the early eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The resulting conflicts and confusions were severe, but it is significant that in the new situation of the nineteenth century the issues were never really joined on the ground of language, at any radical level, though it was precisely in relation to language that the newly conventional distinctions most needed to be challenged. What happened instead was an extraordinary advance in empirical knowledge of languages, and a wholly new way of analysing and classifying this knowledge in terms which set some of the basic questions aside. It is impossible to separate this movement from its political history, within the dynamic development of Western societies in a period of extending colonialism. Older studies of language had been largely contained within the model of the dead 'classical' languages (which still effectively determined 'grammar' in both its systemic and literary senses) and of the 'derived' modern vernaculars. European exploration and colonisation, meanwhile, had been drastically expanding the available range of linguistic material. The critical encounter was between the European and Indian civilisations: not only in available languages but in European contact with the highly developed methods of Indo-European scholars, with their alternative body of 'classical' texts. It was as an Englishman in India that William Jones learned Sanskrit and from an observation of its resemblance to the Indo-European (Aryan) and other 'families' of languages. This work, based on comparative analysis and classification, was procedurally very close to the evolutionary biology with which it is contemporaneous. It is one of the major periods of all scholarly investigation, empirically founding not only the major classifications of language families, including schemes of their evolutionary development and relationships, but also, within these schemes, discovering certain 'laws' of change and stable sound-change. In one area this movement was 'evolutionary' in a particular sense: in its postulate of a proto-language (proto-Indo-European) from which the major family had developed.
indeed, characteristically, found to be not objective enough. Assimilation of these even more alien languages to the categories of Indo-European philology—the natural reflex of cultural imperialism—was scientifically resisted and checked by necessary procedures which, assuming only the presence of an alien system, found ways of studying it in its own (intrinsic and structural) terms. This approach was a further gain in scientific description, with its own remarkable results, but at the level of theory it was the final reinforcement of a concept of language as an (alien) objective system.

Paradoxically, this approach had even deeper effect through one of the necessary corrections of procedure which followed from the new phase of contact with languages without text. Earlier procedures had been determined by the fact that a language almost invariably presented itself in specific past texts: finished monologic utterances. Actual speech, even when it was available, was seen as derived, either historically into vernaculars, or practically into speech acts which were instances of the fundamental (textual) forms of the language. Language-use could then hardly ever be seen as itself active and constitutive. And this was reinforced by the political relations of the observer—observed, where the 'language-habits' studied, over a range from the speech of conquered and dominated peoples to the 'dialects' of outlying or socially inferior groups, theoretically matched against the observer's 'standard', were regarded as at most 'behaviourist', rather than independent, creative, self-directing life. North American empirical linguistics reversed one part of this tendency, restoring the primacy of speech in the literal absence of 'standard' or 'classical' texts. Yet the objectivist character of the underlying general theory came to limit even this, by converting speech itself to a 'text'—the characteristically persistent word to orthodox structural linguistics. Language came to be seen as a fixed, objective, and in these senses 'given' system, which had theoretical and practical priority over what were described as 'utterances' (later as 'performance'). Thus the living speech of human beings in their specific social relationships in the world was theoretically reduced to instances and examples of a system which lay beyond them.

The major theoretical expression of this refined understanding of language came in the twentieth century, in the work of Saussure, which has close affinities to the objectivist sociology of
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Durkheim. In Simouzhe the social nature of language is expressed as a system (langue), which is at once stable and autonomous and founded in normatively identical forms; its utterances (paroles) are then seen as 'individual' (in abstract distinction from 'social') uses of 'a particular language code' through an enabling 'psychic-physical mechanism'. The practical results of this profound theoretical development, in all its phases, have been exceptionally productive and striking. The great body of philosophical scholarship has been complemented by a remarkable body of linguistic studies, in which the controlling concept of language-as-a-formal-system has opened the way to penetration of descriptions of actual language operations and many of their underlying laws.

This achievement has an irony: relation to Marxism. On the one hand it repeats as important and often dominant tendency within Marxism itself, over a range from the comparative analysis and classification of stages of a society, through the discovery of certain fundamental laws of change within these systematic stages, to the question of a controlling 'social' system which is an absolute and necessary to 'individual' acts of will and intelligence. This apparent affinity explains the attempted syntheses of Marxism and structural linguistics which has been so influential a phenomenon of the mid-twentieth century. But Marxists have here in notice, first, that history, in its most specific, active, and connecting senses, has disappeared (as one tendency has been, theoretically excluded); from the account of its total social activity as language; and second, that the categories in which this version of system has been developed are the familiar bourgeois categories in which an abstract separation and distinction between the 'individual' and the 'social' have become so habitual that they are taken as 'natural starting-points.

In fact there was little specifically Marxist work on language before the twentieth century. In their chapter on Feuerabn in The German Ideology Marx and Engels touched on the subject as part of their influential argument against pure, directive consciousness. Reciprocating the 'moments' or 'aspects' of a materialist conception of history, they wrote:

"Only now, after having considered four moments, four aspects of the fundamental historical relationships, do we find that man also possesses consciousness, but, even so, not inherent, not 'pure' consciousness. From the start the 'spirit' is afflicted with the curse of being 'burdened' with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of 'agitated layers of air', sounds, in short of language.

"Consciousness is not as an 'individual' consciousness; language is practical consciousness, as it exists for other men, and for that reason it is really beginning to exist for me personally as well, for language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men." (19)"

So far as it goes, this account is wholly compatible with the emphasis on language as practical, constitutive activity. The difficulty arises, as it has also arisen in a different form in previous accounts, when the idea of the constitutive is broken down into elements which are then temporally ordered. Thus there is an obvious tension, in the thinking of Xico and Herder, of making language 'primary' and 'original'; but in the acceptable sense that it is a necessary part of the very act of human self-creation, and in the related and available sense of language as the founding element in humanity: "in the beginning was the Word". It is precisely the sense of language as an indivisible element of human self-creation that gives any acceptable meaning to its description as constitutive. To make it cohere all other connected activities is to claim something quite different.

The idea of language as constitutive is always in danger of this kind of restriction. Not only, however, in the direction of the isolated creative word, which becomes idealism, but also, as actually happened, to subjectivist materialism and positivism, where the 'world' or 'reality' or 'social reality' is categorically projected as the pre-existent formation to which language is simply a response. What Marx and Engels actually say, in this passage, points to simultaneity and totality. The fundamental historical relationships are seen as 'moments' or 'aspects', and man then 'also possesses consciousness'. Moreover, this language is material: the 'agitated layers of air', sounds, which are produced by the physical body. It is then not a question of any temporal priority of the 'production of material life' considered as a separate act.

The distinctively human mode of this primary material production has been characterized in three aspects: needs, new needs, and human reproduction—not of course to be taken as three different stages... but... which have existed simultaneously since the dawn of history and the first men, and still exist..."
This was indeed the situation in thinking about language. For the active emphasis of Vico and Herder had meanwhile been remarkably developed, notably by Wilhelm von Humboldt. Here the inherited problem of the origin of language had been remarkably restated. Language of course developed at some point in evolutionary history, but it is not only that we have virtually no information about this; it is mainly that any human investigation of so constitutively an active language as already there in itself and in its presumed object of study. Language has thus to be seen as a persistent kind of creation and re-creation: a dynamic presence and a constant regenerative process. But this emphasis, again, can move in different directions. It could reasonably have been associated with the emphases of whole, indissoluble practice, in which the ‘dynamic presence’ and the ‘constant regenerative process’ would be necessary forms of the ‘production and reproduction of real life’ similarly conceived. What happened instead, in Humboldt and especially after him, was a projection of this idea of activity into essentially idealist and quasi-social forms: either the ‘nation’, based on an abstract version of the ‘folk-mind’ or the (ahistorical) ‘collective consciousness’, or the ‘collective spirit’, the abstract creative capacity—self-creative but prior to and separate from material social practice, as in Hegel, or, persua- sively, the ‘individual’, abstracted and defined as ‘creative subjectivity’, the starting-point of meaning.

The influence of these various projections has been deep and prolonged. The abstract idea of the ‘nation’ could be readily connected with major philological work on the ‘families’ of languages and on the distinctive inherited properties of particular languages. The abstract idea of the ‘individual’ could be readily connected with the emphasis on a praxis subjective reality and a consequent ‘source’ of meaning and creativity which emerged in the Romantic conceptions of ‘art’ and ‘literature’ and which defined a major part of the development of ‘psychology’.

Thus the stress on language as activity, which was the crucial contribution of this line of thinking, and which was a crucial correction of the inherent passivity, usually formalized in the metaphor of ‘reflection’, of positivism and objectivist materialism, was in turn reduced from specific activities (then necessarily social and material, or, in the full sense, historical) to
ideas of such activity, categorized as 'nation' or 'spirit' or the 'creative individual.' It is significant that one of these categories, the 'individual' test their projection as categories, and then their further projection as separate entities, separate 'bodies' of language-use, permitted a dissolution and specialization which for a long time presented the basic issue of the movement argument about language from becoming focused within a single area of discourse.

Marxism might have become this area of discourse, but it had developed its own forms of limitation and specialization. The most evident of these was a specialization of the whole material social process to 'labor,' which went on more and more narrowly conceived. This had its effect in the important argument about the origins and development of language, which could have been repressed in the context of the new science of evolutionary physical anthropology. What happened instead was an application of the abstract concept of 'labor' as the single effective origin. Thus, in a modern authoritative account:

First labor, then articulate speech, were the two chief stimuli under the influence of which the brain of the ape gradually changed into the human brain. (Fundamentals of Dialectical Materialism, ed. Schneitser, Moscow, 1907, 105)

This not only establishes an abstract, two-stage temporal development. It also converts both labor and language to 'stimuli,' when the real emphasis should be on connected practice. This leads to an abstraction of evolutionary stages:

The development of labor brought the members of the community close together, for it enabled them to extend their joint activity and to support each other. Labor relations gave rise to the need for primitive men to speak and communicate with each other.

([Ibid, 105])

This in effect an idealism of abstracted stimuli and needs. It is must be contrasted with a properly materialist theory, in which labour and language, as practices, can be seen as evolutionarily and historically constitutive:

The argument that there could be no language without all the structure of modern man is precisely the same as the old theory that human hands and implement-making and using possible, but the implements are thousands of years older than hands of the modern human form. Modern speech-producing structures are the result of the evolutionary suc-
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... of language, just as the uniquely human hand is the result of the evolutionary success of implements. (J. S. Watson and J. H. Lancaster, Current Anthropology, vol. 12, No. 3, 1971)

Any constitutive theory of practice, and especially a materialist theory, has important effects beyond the question of origins, in restating the problem of the active process of language at any time: a restatement which goes beyond the separated categories of 'language' and 'reality'. Yet orthodox Marxism remained stuck in reflection theory, because this was the only plausible materialist connection between the received abstract categories. Reflection theory, in its first period, was itself specialized to crude stimulus-and-response models, adapted from positivist physiology. In its second period, in the later work of Pelevin, it added, as a way of dealing with the special properties of language, the concept of the second signal system, the first being the simple physical system of sensations and responses. This was better than nothing, but it assimilated language to the characteristics of a 'signal system', in 'relatively mechanistic ways, and was in practice unequal to problems of meaning beyond simple models of the associative. Setting out from this point, I. S. Vygotsky (Thought and Language, Moscow, 1934) proposed a new social theory, still meant the 'second signal system', in which language and consciousness are freed from simple analogies with physical perception. His work on the development of language in children, and on the crucial problem of 'inner speech', provided a new starting-point, within a historical-materialist perspective, but for a generation, in orthodox Marxism, this was neglected. Meanwhile the work of N. S. Marr, based on older models, tied language to the 'superstructure' and even to simple class bases. Dogmatic positions taken from other areas of Marxist thinking, limited the necessary theoretical developments. It is ironic that the influence of Marr was in effect ended by Stalin in 1950 with declarations that language was not part of the superstructure and that language did not have any essential class character but rather a 'national character'. Irony because though such declarations were necessary, in that context, they simply the factory of Marx led back to a much earlier stage, in which the status of 'reflection' and, very specifically, the status of the 'superstructure', had, in Marxist terms, needed question. By this time, however, linguistics had come to be dominated by a specific and distinctive form of

objectivism, which had produced the powerful systems of structuralism and semiotics. It was at this point that generally Marxist positions in other fields, especially in the popular form of objectively determined systems, were practically synthesised with theories of language which, from a fully Marxist position, needed to be profoundly opposed.

A tragic element in this history is that such theories had been profoundly opposed in the 1920s in LENINGRAD, where the beginnings of a school of Marxist linguistics, of a significant kind, had in fact emerged. It is best represented by the work of V. I. Volosinov, whose Marxism and the Philosophy of Language appeared, in two editions, in 1925 and 1930; the second edition has been translated into English (Mataje and Titunik, New York and London, 1973). Volosinov has been associated with M. M. Bakhtin, author of a study of Dostoevsky (Problems of the Great Russian Novel, 1929; new version, with new title, Problemi poetics Dostoevskogo, 1963); see also P. N. Medvedev's (author of Formal'nye metody v literaturovedении—Kritiko-teoreticheskie vvedeniya v sociologicheskuyu poeziyu—The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: a critical introduction to sociological poetics—1928). Sometime during the 1930s, Volosinov disappeared. Nearly half a century was then lost, in real terms, in the development of his exceptionally important reorientation of the argument.

Volosinov's decisive contribution was to find a way beyond the powerful but partial theories of expression and objective system. He found it in fundamentally Marxist terms, though he had to begin by saying that Marxist thinking about language was virtually non-existent. His originality lay in the fact that he did not seek to apply other Marxist ideas about language. On the contrary he recharted the whole problem of language within a general Marxist orientation. This enabled him to see 'activity' (the strength of the ideological emphasis in Hume) as social activity, and to think of the strengthened the new objective of linguistics in relation to this social activity and not as had theorists been the case, formally separated from. Thus in drawing on the alternative traditions, and in setting them side by side showing on connected radical weaknesses, he opened the way to a new kind of theory which had been necessary for more than a century.

Much of his effort went to recovering the full emphasis on
which it indicates or expresses. The relation within the sign between the formal element and the meaning which this element carries is thus inevitably conventional (that is, far agreeing with orthodox semiotic theory), but it is not arbitrary and, crucially, it is not fixed. On the contrary, the fusion of formal element and meaning (and it is this fact of dynamic fusion which makes retention of the 'binary' description misleading) is the result of a real process of social development. In the actual activities of speech and in the continuing development of a language, indeed signs can exist only when this active social relationship is posited. The usable sign is the fusion of formal element and meaning—-is a product of this continuing speech-activity between real individuals who are in some continuing social relationship. The 'sign' is in this sense their product, not simply their past product, as is the recorded account of an 'always-given' language system. The real communicative 'products' which are usable signs are, on the contrary, living evidence of a continuing social process, into which individuals are born and within which they are shaped, but to which they then also actively contribute, in a continuing process. This is lost once their socialization and their individuation: the connected aspects of a single process which the alternative theories of 'system' and 'expression' had divided and dissociated. We then find not a 'stable' 'language' and 'society', but an active social language. Not (to glance back at positivist and orthodox materialist theory) is this language a simple 'reflection' or 'expression' of 'material reality'. What we have, rather, is a grasping of this reality through language, which as practical consciousness is saturated by and saturates all social activity, including productive activity. And, since this grasping of history and beyond any active conception and continuous (as distinct from the abstract encounters of 'man' and 'his world', of 'consciousness' and 'reality', of 'language' and 'a real existence'), it occurs within an active and changing society. It is of and to this experience—the last middle term between the abstract entities, 'subject' and 'object', on which the propositions of idealism and orthodox materialism...
are erected—that language speaks. Or to put it more directly, language is the articulation of this active and changing experience; a dynamic and articulated social presence in the world.
Yet it remains true that the mode of articulation is specific. This is the part of the truth which formalism had grasped. The articulation can be seen, and in some respects has been seen, as both formal and systematic. A physical sound, like many other natural elements, may be made into a sign, but its distinction, Voloshinov argued, is always evident. A sign does not simply exist as part of reality—it reflects and reflects another reality.
What distinguishes it as a sign, indeed what made it a sign, is in this sense a formal process: a specific articulation of meaning. Formalist linguistics had emphasized this point, but it had not been discovered that the process of articulation is necessarily also a material process, and that the sign itself becomes part of a (socially created) physical and material world: “whether in sound, physical mass, colour, movement of the body or the like.” Signification, the social creation of meanings through the use of formal signs, is then a practical material activity: it is indeed, literally, a means of production. It is a specific form of that practical consciousness which is inseparable from all social material activity. It is not, as formalism would make it, and as the idealist theory of expression had from the beginning assumed, an operation of and within consciousness, which then becomes a state or a process separated, a priori, from social material activity. It is, on the contrary, at once a distinctive material process—the making of signs—and, in the central quality of its distinctiveness as practical consciousness, is involved from the beginning in all other human social and material activity.

Formalist systems can appear to meet this point by referring it to the ‘already-given’, the ‘last-instance determination of the economic structure’, as in some current versions of structuralist Marxism. It is to avoid this kind of reduction that we must consider Voloshinov’s crucial distinction between a ‘sign’ and a ‘signal’. In reflexive theories of language, whether positivist kinds of materialism, or such theories as psychological behaviourism, all ‘signs’ are in effect reduced to ‘signals’, within the simple models of ‘object’ and ‘consciousness’ or ‘stimulus’ and ‘response’. Meanings are created by (repeated) recognition, of what are then in effect ‘signals’ of the properties of an object or the character of a stimulus. ‘Consciousness’ and ‘response’ then ‘contain’ (for this is what meaning now is) those properties or that character. The assigned passivity and mechanism of such accounts have often been recognized. Indeed it was against such passivity and mechanism that formalism had most to contribute, in its insistence on the specific (formal) articulation of meanings through signs.
But it has been less often noticed that quite different theories, based on the determinate-character of system of signs, depend, ultimately, on a comparable idea of the fixed character of the sign, which is then in effect a displacement of fixed content to fixed form. Positivist argument between these rival schools has allowed us to overlook the fact that the conversion of the ‘sign’ (as the term itself always made possible and even likely) into either fixed content or fixed form is a radical denial of active, practical consciousness. The sign, in either case, is moved in the direction of a signal, which Voloshinov distinguishes from a sign by the fact that it is intrinsic to limited and invariant. The true quality of a sign (one would have preferred him to say, of a signifying element of a language) is that it is effective in communication, a genuine fusion of a formal element and a meaning that it indeed shares with signals; but also that as a function of continuing social activity it is capable of modification and development: the real processes that may be observed in the history of a language, but which the privileged priority of synchronistic analysis had ignored or reduced to a secondary or accidental character.

Indeed since it exists, as a sign, by its quality of signifying-relationship—both the relation between formal element and meaning (its internal structure) and the relations between the people who in actually using it, in practical language, ‘make’ a sign—it has, like the social experience which is the principle of its formation, both dialectical and generative properties. Characteristically it does not, like a signal, have fixed, determinate, invariant meaning. It must have an effective nuance of meaning but in practice it has a variable range, corresponding to the endless variety of situations within which it is actively used. These situations include new and changing as well as recurrent relationships, and this is the reality of the sign as dynamic fusion of ‘formal element’ and ‘meaning’—‘form’ and ‘content’—rather than as fixed, ‘already-given’ internal significance. This variable quality, which Voloshinov calls multi-accentual, is
of course the necessary challenges to the idea of 'correct' or 'proper' meanings, which had been powerfully developed by orthodox philosophy from its studies of dead languages, and which had been taken over both into social-class distinctions of a 'standard' language flanked either by 'dialects' or by 'universal', and into literary theories of a 'correct' or 'objective' reading. But the quality of variation—not random variation but variation as a necessary element of practical consciousness—leans heavily also against subjective accounts of the sign-system. It is one of the decisive arguments against reduction of the key fact of social determination to the idea of determination by a system. But, while it thus bears heavily against all forms of abstract objectivism, it offers a basis also for a vital reconsideration of the problem of 'sociality'.

The signal, in its fixed invariance, is indeed a collective fact. It may be received and repeated, or a new signal may be invented, but in either case the level at which it operates is of a collective kind: that is to say, it has to be recognized but it need not be internalized, at that level of sociality which has excluded (as reductive versions of the 'social' commonly exclude) active participation by conscious individuals. The signal, in this sense, is fixed, exchangeable, collective property: characteristically it is easily both imported and exported. The true signifying element of language arising from the beginning has a different capacity: to become an inner sign, part of an active practical consciousness. Thus, in addition to its social and material existence between actual individuals, the sign is also part of a verbally constituted consciousness which allows individuals to use signs of their own initiative, whether in acts of social communication or in practice which, not being manifestly social, can be interpreted as personal or private.

This view is thus radically opposed to the construction of all acts of communication from pre-determined objective relationships and properties, within which no individual initiative, of a creative or self-generating kind, would be possible. It is thus a decisive theoretical rejection of mechanistic, behaviourist, or Saussurean versions of an objective system which is beyond individual initiative or creative use. But it is also a theoretical rejection of subjective theories of language as individual expression, since what is internally constituted is the social fact of the sign, bearing a definite though never fixed or invariant social meaning and relationship. Great strength has been given, and continues to be given, to theories of language as individual expression, by the rich practical experience of 'inner signs'—inner language—in repeated individual awareness of 'inner language activity', whether we call them 'thought' or 'consciousness' or actual verbal composition. These 'inner' activities involve the use of words which are not, at least at that stage, spoken or written to any other person. A theory of language which excludes this experience, or which seeks to limit it to some residual or by-product or rehearsal (though it may often be these) of manifest social language activity is again reductive of social language as practical consciousness. What has really to be said is that the sign is social but that in its very quality as sign it is capable both of being internalized—indeed here to be externalized, if it is to be a sign for communicative relation between actual persons, initially using only their own physical powers to express it—and of being continually available, in social and material ways, in manifest communication.

This fundamental relationship between the 'inner' and the 'material' sign—a relationship often experienced as a tension but always lived as an activity, a practice—needs further radical exploration. In individual developmental psychology Vygotsky began this exploration, and at once discerned certain crucially distinguishing characteristics of 'inner speech', themselves constitutive rather than, as in Vološinov, merely transferred. This is still within the perspective of a historical materialist theory. The complex relationship, from another direction, needs specifically historical exploration, for it is in the movement from the production of language by human physical resources alone, through the material history of the production of other resources and of the problems of both technology and mutation then involved in them, to the active social history of the complex of communicative systems which are now so important a part of the material productive process itself, that the dynamics of social language—its development of new means of production within a basic means of production—must be found.

Meanwhile, following Vološinov, we can see that just as all social process is activity between real individuals, so individuality, by the fully social fact of language (whether as 'outer' or 'inner' speech), is the active constitution, within distinct, physical, individual beings, of the social capacity which is the means of realiza-
of the initial abstract definition of the sign. The highly complex relationships of (theoretically) invariable units can never be substantive relationships; they must remain as formal relationships. The internal dynamics of the sign, including its social and material relationships as well as its formal structure, must be seen as necessarily connected with the social and material as well as the formal dynamics of the system as a whole. There have been some advances in this direction in recent work (Rossi-Landi, 1975).

But there has also been a move which seems to reopen the whole problem in Chomskyan linguistics which may be a decisive step towards a conception of system which emphasizes the possibility and the fact of individual initiative and creative practice which earlier objectivist systems had excluded. But at the same time this conception stresses deep structures of language formation which are certainly incompatible with ordinary social and historical accounts of the origin and development of language. An emphasis on deep constitutive structures at an evolutionary rather than a historical level, can of course be reconciled with the view of language as a constitutive human faculty: exerting pressures and setting limits, in determinate ways, to human development itself. But while it is retained as an exclusively evolutionary process, it moves, necessarily, towards refined accounts of systemic evolution. Development by constituted systems and structures (the constitution now at once perempting and limiting variations) rather than actual human beings in a continuing social process. Here Vygotsky's work on inner speech and consciousness is theoretically crucial.

If we compare the early development of speech and of intellect—which, as we have seen, develop along separate lines both in animals and in very young children—with the development of inner speech and of verbal thought, we must conclude that the later stage is not a simple continuation of the earlier. This extension is a relational system, including its formal aspect as grammar, is in any case inevitable. Isolation of 'the sign', whether in Saussure or Voloshinov, is at best an analytical procedure, at worst an evasion. Much of the important work on relations within a whole system is therefore an evident advance, and the problem of the variability of the sign can appear to be contained within the variability of its formal relations. But while this kind of emphasis on the relational system is obviously necessary, it is limited by the consequence...
3. Literature

It is relatively difficult to see 'literature' as a concept. In ordinary usage it appears to be no more than a specific description, and what is described is itself, as a rule, highly valued because it is a virtually immediate and emotive transfer of the specific values of particular works and kinds of work to what operates as a concept but is still firmly believed to be actual and practical. Indeed the special property of 'literature' as a concept is that it claims this kind of importance and priority in the concrete achievements of many particular great works, as against the 'abstraction' and 'generality' of other concepts and of the kinds of practice which they, by contrast, deflect. Thus it is common to see 'literature' defined as 'full, central, immediate human experience', usually with an associated reference to 'minute particulars'. By contrast, 'society' is often seen as essentially general and abstract: the summaries and averages, rather than the direct substance, of human living. Other related concepts, such as 'politics', 'economics', or 'ideology', are similarly placed and devalued, as mere hardened outer shells compared with the living experience of literature.

The nature of the concept, in this familiar form, can be shown in two ways: theoretically and historically. It is true that one popular version of the concept has been developed in ways that appear to protect it, and in practice to often protect it against any such arguments. An essential abstraction of the 'personal' and the 'immediate' is carried so far that, within this highly developed form of thought, the whole process of abstraction has been dissolved. None of its steps can be retraced, and the abstraction of the 'concrete' is a perfect and virtually unbreakable circle. Arguments from theory or from history are simply evidence of the incalculable abstraction and generality of those who are putting them forward. They can then be contemptuously rejected, often without specific reply, which would be only to fall to their level.

This is a powerful and often forbidding system of abstraction, in which the concept of 'literature' becomes actively ideological. Theory can do something against it, in the necessary recognition (which ought hardly, to those who are really in contact