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To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.

—WITTGENSTEIN

Since the world expressed by the total system of concepts is the world as society represents it to itself, only society can furnish the generalized notions according to which such a world must be represented. . . . Since the universe exists only insofar as it is thought, and since it can be thought totally only by society itself, it takes its place within society, becomes an element of its inner life, and society may thus be seen as that total genus beyond which nothing else exists. The very concept of totality is but the abstract form of the concept of society: that whole which includes all things, that supreme class under which all other classes must be subsumed.

—DURKHEIM

1

ON INTERPRETATION

Literature as a Socially Symbolic Act

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 mythcritical, 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 anti-quarianism 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

¹ See "The Ideology of the Text," *Salmagundi*, No. 31–32 (Fall 1975/Winter 1976), pp. 204–246.

² This is to my mind the relevance of a theory of "modes of production" for literary and cultural criticism; see, for further reflections on this issue and a more explicit statement on the "historicist" tendencies of Marxism, my "Marxism and Historicism," *New Literary History*, 11 (Autumn, 1979), 41–73.

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 Necessity;³ only

³ "The realm of freedom actually begins only where labor which is in fact determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production. Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilized man, and he

if they are grasped as vital episodes in a single vast unfinished plot: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles: freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman—in a word, oppressor and oppressed—stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large or in the common ruin of the contending classes."⁴ 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

must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but, at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase. Freedom in this field can only consist in socialized men, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favorable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis." Karl Marx, *Capital* (New York: International Publishers, 1977), III, 820.

⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Communist Manifesto," in K. Marx, *On Revolution*, ed. and trans. S. K. Padover (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), p. 81.

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

⁵ See Michel Foucault, “The Retreat and Return of the Origin,” chap. 9, part 6, of *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1973), pp. 328–335; as well as the same author’s *Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), in particular, the introduction and the chapter on the “history of ideas”; Jacques Derrida, “the Exorbitant. Question of Method,” in *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 157–164; as well as his “Hors livre,” in *La Dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), pp. 9–67; Jean Baudrillard, “Vers une critique de l’économie politique du signe,” in *Pour une critique de l’économie politique du signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972); along with his *Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster (St. Louis: Telos, 1975); Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *The Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: Viking, 1977), pp. 25–28, 109–113, 305–308; Jean-François Lyotard, *Economie libidinale* (Paris: Minuit, 1974), especially “Le Désir nommé Marx,” pp. 117–188; and last but not least, Louis Althusser, et al., *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1970), especially “Marx’s Immense Theoretical Revolution,” pp. 182–193.

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 prelimited 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. My point in mentioning this example is to observe that the repudiation of an older interpretive system—Freudian rewriting, overhastily assimilated to hermeneutics in general and as such—is in *The Anti-Oedipus* coupled with the projection of a whole new method for the reading of texts:

The unconscious poses no problem of meaning, solely problems of use. The question posed by desire is not “What does it mean?” but rather “How does it work?” . . . [The unconscious] represents nothing, but it produces. It means nothing, but it works. Desire makes its entry with the general collapse of the question “What does it mean?” No one has been able to pose the problem of language except to the

extent that linguists and logicians have first eliminated meaning; and the greatest force of language was only discovered once a *work* was viewed as a machine, producing certain effects, amenable to a certain use. Malcolm Lowry says of his work: it's anything you want it to be, so long as it works—"It works too, believe me, as I have found out"—a machinery. But on condition that meaning be nothing other than use, that it become a firm principle only if we have at our disposal *immanent criteria* capable of determining the legitimate uses, as opposed to the illegitimate ones that relate use instead to a hypothetical meaning and re-establish a kind of transcendence.⁶

From our present standpoint, however, the ideal of an immanent analysis of the text, of a dismantling or deconstruction of its parts and a description of its functioning and malfunctioning, amounts less to a wholesale nullification of all interpretive activity than to a demand for the construction of some new and more adequate, immanent or antitranscendent hermeneutic model, which it will be the task of the following pages to propose.⁷

I

This Nietzschean and antiinterpretive current is, however, not without its equivalent in a certain contemporary Marxism: the enterprise of constructing a properly Marxist hermeneutic must necessarily confront the powerful objections to traditional models of interpretation raised by the influential school of so-called structural or Althusserian Marxism.⁸ Althusser's own position on the subject is spelled out in his theory of

⁶ Deleuze/Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 109.

⁷ From the present perspective, in other words, Deleuze and Guattari's proposal for an antiinterpretive method (which they call schizo-analysis) can equally well be grasped as a new hermeneutic in its own right. It is striking and noteworthy that most of the anti-interpretive positions enumerated in note 5 above have felt the need to project new "methods" of this kind: thus, the archeology of knowledge, but also, more recently, the "political technology of the body" (Foucault), "grammatology" and deconstruction (Derrida), "symbolic exchange" (Baudrillard), libidinal economy (Lyotard), and "sémanalyse" (Julia Kristeva).

⁸ The issues raised in this section, unavoidable ones for any serious discussion of the nature of interpretation, are also unavoidably technical, involving a terminology and a

the three historical forms of causality (or "effectivity"), in a document so significant for contemporary theory that it is worth quoting at some length:

The epistemological problem posed by Marx's radical modification of Political Economy can be expressed as follows: by means of what concept is it possible to think the new type of determination which has just been identified as the determination of the phenomena of a given region by the structure of that region? . . . In other words, how is it possible to define the concept of a structural causality? . . .

Very schematically, we can say that classical philosophy . . . had two and only two systems of concepts with which to think effectivity. The mechanistic system, Cartesian in origin, which reduced causality to a *transitive* and analytical effectivity, could not be made to think the effectivity of a whole on its elements, except at the cost of extraordinary distortions (such as those in Descartes' "psychology" and biology). But a second system was available, one conceived precisely in order to deal with the effectivity of a whole on its elements: the Leibnitzian concept of *expression*. This is the model that dominates all Hegel's thought. But it presupposes in principle that the whole in question be reducible to an *inner essence*, of which the elements of the whole are then no more than the phenomenal forms of expression, the inner principle of the essence being present at each point in the whole, such that at each moment it is possible to write the immediately adequate equation: such and such an element (economic, political, legal, literary, religious, etc., in Hegel) = the inner essence of the whole. Here was a model which made it possible to think the effectivity of the whole on each of its elements, but if this category—inner essence/outer phenomenon—was to be applicable everywhere and at every moment to each of the phenomena arising in the totality in

"problematic" which largely transcends literary criticism. As they will inevitably strike certain readers as scholastic exercises within the philosophically alien tradition of Marxism, such readers may be advised to pass at once to the next section (below, p. 58), in which we return to a discussion of the various current schools of literary criticism proper. It should be added that not all the writers described as "Althusserians," at the level of historical generality which is ours in the present section, would accept that characterization.

question, it presupposed that the whole had a certain nature, precisely the nature of a "spiritual" whole in which each element was expressive of the entire totality as a "*pars totalis*". In other words, Leibnitz and Hegel did have a category for the effectivity of the whole on its elements or parts, but on the absolute condition that the whole was not a structure . . .

[The third concept of effectivity, that of structural causality,] can be entirely summed up in the concept of "*Darstellung*", the key epistemological concept of the whole Marxist theory of value, the concept whose object is precisely to designate the mode of *presence* of the structure in its *effects*, and therefore to designate structural causality itself. . . . The structure is not an essence outside the economic phenomena which comes and alters their aspect, forms and relations and which is effective on them as an absent cause, absent because it is outside them. The absence of the cause in the structure's "metonymic causality" on its effects is not the fault of the exteriority of the structure with respect to the economic phenomena; on the contrary, it is the very form of the interiority of the structure, as a structure, in its effects. This implies therefore that the effects are not outside the structure, are not a pre-existing object, element or space in which the structure arrives to imprint its mark: on the contrary, it implies that the structure is immanent in its effects, a cause immanent in its effects in the Spinozist sense of the term, that the whole existence of the structure consists of its effects, in short, that the structure, which is merely a specific combination of its peculiar elements, is nothing outside its effects.⁹

Althusser's first type of effectivity, that of mechanistic or mechanical causality, exemplified in the billiard-ball model of cause and effect, has long been a familiar exhibit in the history of ideas and in particular in the history of science, where it is associated with the Galilean and Newtonian world-view, and is assumed to have been outmoded by the indeterminacy principle of modern physics. This type of causality is generally the target of the loose contemporary consensus on the "outmoded" character of the category of causality as such; yet even this

⁹ Althusser et al., *Reading Capital*, pp. 186–189.

type of causal analysis is by no means everywhere discredited in cultural studies today. Its continuing influence may be observed, for instance, in that technological determinism of which MacLuhanism remains the most interesting contemporary expression, but of which certain more properly Marxist studies like Walter Benjamin's ambiguous *Baudelaire* are also variants. Indeed, the Marxist tradition includes models which have so often been denounced as mechanical or mechanistic—most notably the familiar (or notorious) concept of “base” (infrastructure and “superstructure”—for it to have no small stake in the reexamination of this type of causality.

I would want to argue that the category of mechanical effectivity retains a purely local validity in cultural analysis where it can be shown that billiard-ball causality remains one of the (nonsynchronous) laws of our particular fallen social reality. It does little good, in other words, to banish “extrinsic” categories from our thinking, when the latter continue to have a hold on the objective realities about which we plan to think. There seems, for instance, to have been an unquestionable causal relationship between the admittedly extrinsic fact of the crisis in late nineteenth-century publishing, during which the dominant three-decker lending library novel was replaced by a cheaper one-volume format, and the modification of the “inner form” of the novel itself.¹⁰ The resultant transformation of the novelistic production of a writer such as Gissing must thus necessarily be mystified by attempts of literary scholars to interpret the new form in terms of personal evolution or of the internal dynamics of purely formal change. That a material and contingent “accident” should leave its trace as a formal “break” and “cause” modification in Gissing's narrative categories as well as in the very “structure of feeling” of his novels—this is no doubt a scandalous assertion. Yet what is scandalous is not this way of thinking about a given formal change, but rather the objective event itself, the very nature of cultural change in a world in which separation of use value from exchange value generates discontinuities of precisely this “scandalous” and extrinsic type, rifts and actions at distance which cannot ultimately be grasped “from the inside” or phenomenologically, but which must be reconstructed as symptoms whose cause is of another

¹⁰ Frank Kermode, “Buyers’ Market,” *New York Review of Books*, October 31, 1974, p. 3.

order of phenomenon from its effects. Mechanical causality is thus less a concept which might be evaluated on its own terms, than one of the various laws and subsystems of our peculiarly reified social and cultural life. Nor is its occasional experience without benefit for the cultural critic, for whom the scandal of the extrinsic comes as a salutary reminder of the ultimately material base of cultural production, and of the "determination of consciousness by social being."¹¹

It must therefore be objected, to Althusser's ideological analysis of the "concept" of mechanical causality, that this unsatisfactory category is not merely a form of false consciousness or error, but also a symptom of objective contradictions that are still with us. This said, it is also clear that it is the second form of efficacy Althusser enumerates, so-called "expressive causality," which is the polemic heart of his argument as well as the more vital issue (and burning temptation) in cultural criticism today. The counter-slogan of "totalization" cannot be the immediate response to Althusser's critique of "expressive causality," if for no other reason that totalization is itself numbered among the approaches stigmatized by this term, which range from the various conceptions of the world-views or period styles of a given historical moment (Taine, Riegl, Spengler, Goldmann) all the way to contemporary structural or post-structural efforts at modeling the dominant episteme or sign-system of this or that historical period, as in Foucault, Deleuze-Guattari, Yurii Lotman, or the theorists of consumer society (most notably Jean Baudrillard). Such a catalogue suggests, not merely that Althusser's critique may be construed much more widely than the work of Hegel, which is its central exhibit (and may find application in thinkers who are expressly non- or anti-Hegelian), but also that what is at stake here would seem significantly related to problems of cultural periodization in general and to that of the category of a historical "period" in particular. However, the more properly Marxist models of "expressive causality" denounced by Althusser are structured from a rather different perspective as involving the practice of mediation and as dramatizing still relatively idealistic conceptions of both individual

¹¹ The problem of mechanical causality imposes itself most vividly, perhaps, in film criticism, as a tension between the study of technological innovation and that of "intrinsically" filmic languages; but it can be expected to be an issue in most other areas of mass culture as well.

and collective praxis: we will return to these two reproaches later in the present chapter.

As for periodization, its practice is clearly enveloped by that basic Althusserian conceptual target designated as "historicism";¹² and it can be admitted that any rewarding use of the notion of a historical or cultural period tends in spite of itself to give the impression of a facile totalization, a seamless web of phenomena each of which, in its own way, "expresses" some unified inner truth—a world-view or a period style or a set of structural categories which marks the whole length and breadth of the "period" in question. Yet such an impression is fatally reductive, in the sense in which we have seen Deleuze and Guattari denounce the unifying operation of the Freudian familial reduction. On its own terms, therefore, the Althusserian critique is quite unanswerable, which demonstrates the way in which the construction of a historical totality necessarily involves the isolation and the privileging of one of the elements *within* that totality (a kind of thought habit, a predilection for specific forms, a certain type of belief, a "characteristic" political structure or form of domination) such that the element in question becomes a master code or "inner essence" capable of explicating the other elements or features of the "whole" in question. Such a theme or "inner essence" can thus be seen as the implicit or explicit answer to the now impermissible interpretive question, "what does it mean?" (The practice of "mediation" is then, as we shall see, understood as a more seemingly dialectical but no less idealistic mechanism for moving or modulating from one level or feature of the whole to another: a mechanism which, however, as in bourgeois

¹² Whatever the theoretical content of the debate on historicism, it should be understood that this term is also a political code word in the Althusserian corpus, and designates various Marxist theories of so-called "stages" in the transition to socialism: these range from Lenin's theory of imperialism and Stalin's distinctions between "socialism" and "communism" all the way to Kautsky and social democratic schemas of historical development. On this level, then, the polemic against "historicism" is part of the more general Althusserian offensive within the French Communist Party against Stalinism, and involves very real practical, political, and strategic consequences. (The classical structuralist and semiotic arguments against historicism are to be found in the concluding chapter ["History and Dialectic"] of Claude Lévi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), and A. J. Greimas, "Structure et histoire," in *Du sens* [Paris: Seuil, 1970]).

periodization, has no less the effect of unifying a whole social field around a theme or an idea.)

Above and beyond the problem of periodization and its categories, which are certainly in crisis today, but which would seem to be as indispensable as they are unsatisfactory for any kind of work in cultural study, the larger issue is that of the representation of History itself. There is in other words a synchronic version of the problem: that of the status of an individual "period" in which everything becomes so seamlessly interrelated that we confront either a total system or an idealistic "concept" of a period; and a diachronic one, in which history is seen in some "linear" way as the succession of such periods, stages, or moments. I believe that this second problem is the prior one, and that individual period formulations always secretly imply or project narratives or "stories"—narrative representations—of the historical sequence in which such individual periods take their place and from which they derive their significance.

The fullest form of what Althusser calls "expressive causality" (and of what he calls "historicism") will thus prove to be a vast interpretive allegory in which a sequence of historical events or texts and artifacts is rewritten in terms of some deeper, underlying, and more "fundamental" narrative, of a hidden master narrative which is the allegorical key or figural content of the first sequence of empirical materials. This kind of allegorical master narrative would then include providential histories (such as those of Hegel or Marx), catastrophic visions of history (such as that of Spengler), and cyclical or Viconian visions of history alike. I read the Althusserian dictum, "History is a process without a *telos* or a subject,"¹³ in this spirit, as a repudiation of such master narratives and their twin categories of narrative closure (*telos*) and of character (subject of history). As such historical allegories are also often characterized as being "theological" and as we will have occasion shortly to return to that striking and elaborate hermeneutic which is the patristic and medieval system of the four levels of scripture, it may be useful to illustrate the structure of the master narrative with reference to that now archaic and cumbersome allegorical framework in which its operation is most clearly visible.

¹³ *Réponse à John Lewis* (Paris: Maspéro, 1973), pp. 91–98.

The medieval system may perhaps most conveniently be approached through its practical function in late antiquity, its ideological mission as a strategy for assimilating the Old Testament to the New, for rewriting the Jewish textual and cultural heritage in a form usable for Gentiles. The originality of the new allegorical system may be judged by its insistence on preserving the literality of the original texts: it is not here a matter of dissolving them into mere symbolism, as a rationalistic Hellenism did when, confronted with the archaic and polytheistic letter of the Homeric epic, it rewrote the latter in terms of the struggle of the physical elements with one another, or of the battle of vices and virtues.¹⁴ On the contrary, the Old Testament is here taken as historical fact. At the same time, its availability as a system of figures, above and beyond this literal historical reference, is grounded in the conception of history itself as God's book, which we may study and gloss for signs and traces of the prophetic message the Author is supposed to have inscribed within it.

So it is that the life of Christ, the text of the New Testament, which comes as the fulfillment of the hidden prophecies and annunciatory signs of the Old, constitutes a second, properly allegorical level, in terms of which the latter may be rewritten. Allegory is here the opening up of the text to multiple meanings, to successive rewritings and overwritings which are generated as so many levels and as so many supplementary interpretations. So the interpretation of a particular Old Testament passage in terms of the life of Christ—a familiar, even hackneyed, illustration is the rewriting of the bondage of the people of Israel in Egypt as the descent of Christ into hell after his death on the cross¹⁵—comes less as a technique for closing the text off and for repressing aleatory or aberrant readings and senses, than as a mechanism for preparing such a text for further ideological investment, if we take the term *ideology* here in Althusser's sense as a representational structure which allows the individual subject to conceive or imagine

¹⁴ I here draw heavily on Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale* (Paris: Aubier, 1959–1964, 4 vols.); for the distinction between a tripartite and a quadripartite system of levels, see in particular Vol. I, pp. 139–169, and also pp. 200–207.

¹⁵ For further examples of such allegorical topoi, see Jean Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers*, trans. Wulston Hibberd (London: Burns & Oates, 1960).

his or her lived relationship to transpersonal realities such as the social structure or the collective logic of History.

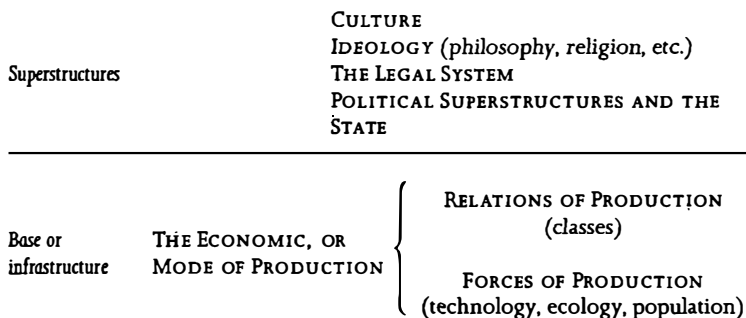
In the present instance, the movement is from a particular collective history—that of the people of Israel, or in other words a history culturally alien to the Mediterranean and Germanic clientele of early Christianity—to the destiny of a particular individual: the transindividual dimensions of the first narrative are then drastically “reduced” to the second, purely biographical narrative, the life of Christ, and such reduction is not without its analogies with that attributed by Deleuze and Guattari to the repressive simplification the Freudian family triangle brings to the lived richness of daily life. But the results are quite different: in the case of the four levels, it is precisely this reduction of the alien collective to the valorized individual biography which then permits the generation of two further interpretive levels, and it is precisely in these that the individual believer is able to “insert” himself or herself (to use the Althusserian formula), it is precisely by way of the moral and anagogical interpretations that the textual apparatus is transformed into a “libidinal apparatus,” a machinery for ideological investment. On the third or moral level, for example, the literal and historical fact of the bondage of the people of Israel in Egypt can be rewritten as the thralldom of the believer-to-be to sin and to the pre-occupations of this world (“the fleshpots of Egypt”): a bondage from which personal conversion will release him or her (an event figured doubly as the deliverance from Egypt and the resurrection of Christ). But this third level of the individual soul is clearly insufficient by itself, and at once generates the fourth or anagogical sense, in which the text undergoes its ultimate rewriting in terms of the destiny of the human race as a whole, Egypt then coming to prefigure that long purgatorial suffering of earthly history from which the second coming of Christ and the Last Judgment come as the final release. The historical or collective dimension is thus attained once again, by way of the detour of the sacrifice of Christ and the drama of the individual believer; but from the story of a particular earthly people it has been transformed into universal history and the destiny of humankind as a whole—precisely the functional and ideological transformation which the system of the four levels was designed to achieve in the first place:

ANAGOGICAL	political reading (collective "meaning" of history)
MORAL	psychological reading (individual subject)
ALLEGORICAL	allegorical key or interpretive code
LITERAL	historical or textual referent

The system of the four levels or senses is particularly suggestive in the solution it provides for an interpretive dilemma which in a privatized world we must live far more intensely than did its Alexandrian and medieval recipients: namely that incommensurability referred to above between the private and the public, the psychological and the social, the poetic and the political. While the relationship the Christian scheme projects between anagogical and moral is not available to us today, the closure of the scheme as a whole is instructive, particularly in the ideological climate of a contemporary American "pluralism," with its unexamined valorization of the open ("freedom") versus its inevitable binary opposition, the closed ("totalitarianism"). Pluralism means one thing when it stands for the coexistence of methods and interpretations in the intellectual and academic marketplace, but quite another when it is taken as a proposition about the infinity of possible meanings and methods and their ultimate equivalence with and substitutability for one another. As a matter of practical criticism, it must be clear to anyone who has experimented with various approaches to a given text that the mind is not content until it puts some order in these findings and invents a hierarchical relationship among its various interpretations. I suspect, indeed, that there are only a finite number of interpretive possibilities in any given textual situation, and that the program to which the various contemporary ideologies of pluralism are most passionately attached is a largely negative one: namely to forestall that systematic articulation and totalization of interpretive results which can only lead to embarrassing questions about the relationship between them and in particular the place of history and the ultimate ground of narrative and textual production. At any rate, it was clear to the medieval theorists that their four levels constituted

a methodological upper limit and a virtual exhaustion of interpretive possibilities.¹⁶

Taken at its most wide-ranging, then, the Althusserian critique of expressive causality may be seen to strike beyond its immediate target in so-called Hegelian idealism, at the implicit or explicit theodicy that must emerge from interpretations that assimilate levels to one another and affirm their ultimate identity. Yet Althusser's work cannot be properly evaluated unless it is understood that it has—like so many philosophical systems before it—an esoteric and an exoteric sense, and addresses two distinct publics at once. We will return later to the coding system by which an ostensibly abstract philosophical proposition includes a specific polemic position taken on issues within Marxism itself: in the present instance, the more general attack on allegorical master codes also implies a specific critique of the vulgar Marxist theory of levels, whose conception of base and superstructure, with the related notion of the “ultimately determining instance” of the economic, can be shown, when diagrammed in the following way, to have some deeper kinship with the allegorical systems described above:



That this orthodox schema is still essentially an allegorical one

¹⁶ Thus, even the mystically tempting alternative of seven levels of meaning was found in practice to reduce itself to mere variations on the original four: e.g., the interpretive identification of the people of Israel with the church—the allegorical rewriting of the Old Testament in terms of church history—was judged in practice to be a variant on the second or allegorical level, insofar as the life of Christ was also, secondarily, an allegory of the history of the church (De Lubac, Vol. II, pp. 501–502).

becomes clear whenever it is prolonged into interpretation. Here Lukács' essays on realism may serve as a central example of the way in which the cultural text is taken as an essentially allegorical model of society as a whole, its tokens and elements, such as the literary "character," being read as "typifications" of elements on other levels, and in particular as figures for the various social classes and class fractions. But in other kinds of analysis as well—the orthodox "ideological analyses" of philosophical positions or legal measures, or the demystification of the structure of the state in class terms—a movement of allegorical decipherment takes place in which the conception of class interest supplies the functional or link between a super-structural symptom or category and its "ultimately determining" reality in the base.

What our preceding discussion of the medieval levels suggests, however, is that this is by no means the whole story, and that to grasp the full degree to which this schema projects an essentially allegorical operation, we must enlarge its master code or allegorical key to the point at which the latter becomes a master narrative in its own right; and this point is reached when we become aware that any individual mode of production projects and implies a whole sequence of such modes of production—from primitive communism to capitalism and communism proper—which constitute the narrative of some properly Marxian "philosophy of history." Yet this is a paradoxical discovery: for the very work of the Althusserian school, which has so effectively discredited the Marxian versions of a properly teleological history, is also that which has done most, in our time, to restore the problematic of the mode of production as the central organizing category of Marxism.¹⁷

The conception of the political unconscious outlined in this book is

¹⁷ See in particular Etienne Balibar, "The Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism," in *Reading Capital*, pp. 199–308; Emmanuel Terray, *Marxism and "Primitive" Societies*, trans. Mary Klopfer (New York: Monthly Review, 1972); and Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst, *Pre-capitalist Modes of Production* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975). The classical Marxist discussions are to be found in Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), pp. 471–514; and Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (Moscow: Progress, 1968). I discuss the relevance of the concept of mode of production for cultural study in my forthcoming *Poetics of Social Forms*.

an attempt to cut through this particular dilemma by relocating it within the object. A minimal defense of the procedures of expressive causality will then take much the same form as did our previous discussion of mechanical causality: we can view both as local laws within our historical reality. The idea is, in other words, that if interpretation in terms of expressive causality or of allegorical master narratives remains a constant temptation, this is because such master narratives have inscribed themselves in the texts as well as in our thinking about them; such allegorical narrative signifieds are a persistent dimension of literary and cultural texts precisely because they reflect a fundamental dimension of our collective thinking and our collective fantasies about history and reality. To such a dimension correspond not only those cobwebs of topical allusion which the ahistorical and formalizing reader attempts desperately to brush away—that dry and intolerable chitinous murmur of footnotes reminding us of the implied references to long-dead contemporary events and political situations in Milton or Swift, in Spenser or Hawthorne; if the modern reader is bored or scandalized by the roots such texts send down into the contingent circumstances of their own historical time, this is surely testimony as to his resistance to his own political unconscious and to his denial (in the United States, the denial of a whole generation) of the reading and the writing of the text of history within himself. An exhibit like Balzac's *Vieille Fille* then implies a significant mutation in such political allegory in the literature of the capitalist period, and show the virtual assimilation of the footnote-subtext of an older web of political allusion into the mechanism of narrative, where the meditation on social classes and political regimes becomes the very *pensée sauvage* of a whole narrative production (see below, Chapter 3). But if this is where the study of "expressive causality" leads, then to switch it off at the source entails the virtual repression of the text of history and the political unconscious in our own cultural and practical experience, just at the moment when increasing privatization has made that dimension so faint as to be virtually inaudible.

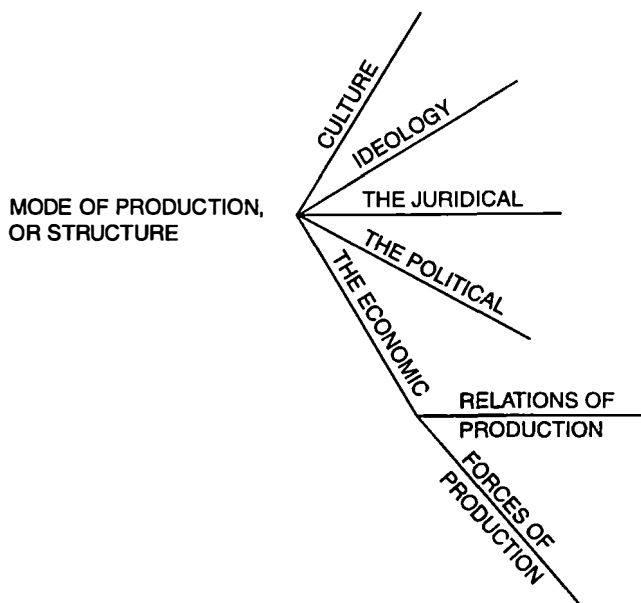
This analysis of the function of expressive causality suggests a provisional qualification of Althusser's antiteleological formula for history (neither a subject nor a telos), based as it is on Lacan's notion of the

Real as that which "resists symbolization absolutely"¹⁸ and on Spinoza's idea of the "absent cause." The sweeping negativity of the Althusserian formula is misleading insofar as it can readily be assimilated to the polemic themes of a host of contemporary post-structuralisms and post-Marxisms, for which History, in the bad sense—the reference to a "context" or a "ground," an external real world of some kind, the reference, in other words, to the much maligned "referent" itself—is simply one more text among others, something found in history manuals and that chronological presentation of historical sequences so often called "linear history." What Althusser's own insistence on history as an absent cause makes clear, but what is missing from the formula as it is canonically worded, is that he does not at all draw the fashionable conclusion that because history is a text, the "referent" does not exist. We would therefore propose the following revised formulation: that history is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious.

Such a reformulation acknowledges the powerful Althusserian objections to expressive causality and to interpretation generally, while making a local place for such operations. What we have not yet considered is whether Althusser's position is anything more than a negative and second-degree critical one, a kind of correction of the ever-possible illusions of the Hegelian code, or whether his concept of a properly "structural causality" has content in its own right and implies specific interpretive possibilities distinct from those already outlined. We may perhaps best convey the originality of his model by restructuring the traditional Marxist conception of levels (represented above) in a different way (see following page). This diagram will have served its purpose if it immediately brings out one striking and fundamental difference between Althusser's conception of "levels" and that of traditional Marxism: where the latter either conceived, or in the absence of rigorous conceptualization perpetuated the impression, of the "ultimately

¹⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre I: Les Écrits techniques de Freud* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p. 80; and compare this other remark, on Newton's laws: "Il y a des formules qu'on n'imagine pas; au moins pour un temps, elles sont assemblées avec le réel" ("Radiophonie," *Scilicet*, No. 2–3 [1970], p. 75).

determining instance" or mode of production as the narrowly economic—that is, as one level within the social system which, however, "determines" the others—the Althusserian conception of mode of production identifies this concept with the structure as a whole. For Althusser, then, the more narrowly economic—the forces of production, the labor process, technical development, or relations of production, such as the functional interrelation of social classes—is, however privileged, not identical with the mode of production as a whole, which assigns this narrowly "economic" level its particular function and efficiency as it does all the others. If therefore one wishes to characterize Althusser's Marxism as a structuralism, one must complete the characterization with the essential proviso that it is a structuralism for which only one structure exists: namely the mode of production itself, or the synchronic system of social relations as a whole. This is the sense in which this "structure" is an absent cause, since it is nowhere empirically present as an element, it is not a part of the whole or one of the levels, but rather the entire system of relationships among those levels.



This conception of structure should make it possible to understand the otherwise incomprehensible prestige and influence of the Althusserian revolution—which has produced powerful and challenging oppositional currents in a host of disciplines, from philosophy proper to political science, anthropology, legal studies, economics, and cultural studies—as well as to restore its political content, easily lost in translation and disguised by the coded fashion in which its battles have been fought. The insistence on the “semi-autonomy” of these various levels—which can so easily strike the unwary as a scholastic quibble, but which we have now been able to grasp as the correlative of the attack on Hegelian expressive causality in which all those levels are somehow “the same” and so many expressions and modulations of one another—may now be understood as a coded battle waged within the framework of the French Communist Party against Stalinism. As paradoxical as it may seem, therefore, “Hegel” here is a secret code word for Stalin (just as in Lukács’ work, “naturalism” is a code word for “socialist realism”); Stalin’s “expressive causality” can be detected, to take one example, in the productionist ideology of Soviet Marxism, as an insistence on the primacy of the forces of production. In other words, if all the levels are “expressively” the same, then the infrastructural change in forces of production—nationalization and the elimination of private property relations, as well as industrialization and modernization—will be enough “more or less rapidly to transform the whole superstructure,” and cultural revolution is unnecessary, as is the collective attempt to invent new forms of the labor process.¹⁹ Another crucial example can be found in the theory of the state: if the state is a mere epiphenomenon of the economy, then the repressive apparatus of

¹⁹ See, for a discussion of the ideological consequences of “expressive causality” in the Stalin period, Charles Bettelheim, *Class Struggles in the USSR*, Vol. II, trans. Brian Pearce (New York: Monthly Review, 1978), esp. pp. 500–566. Commenting on “the affirmation made in [Stalin’s] *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* that changes in production ‘always begin with changes and developments in the productive forces, and in the first place, with changes and development of the instruments of production,’” Bettelheim observes that such formulations “make the totality of social relations and practices the ‘expression’ of the ‘productive forces.’ ‘Society’ is here presented as an ‘expressive totality,’ which is not contradictory, and the changes in which seem to depend upon ‘development in production.’ The central role played by the revolutionary struggle of the masses in the process of social change does not appear here” (Bettelheim, pp. 516, 514).

certain socialist revolutions needs no particular attention and can be expected to begin to "wither" when the appropriate stage of productivity is reached. The current Marxist emphasis on the "semi-autonomy" of the state and its apparatuses, which we owe to the Althusserians, is intended to cast the gravest doubts on these interpretations of the "text" of the state (seen as simply replicating other levels), and to encourage attention both to the semi-autonomous dynamics of bureaucracy and the state apparatus in the Soviet system, and to the new and enlarged apparatus of the state under capitalism as a locus for class struggle and political action, rather than a mere obstacle which one "smashes."²⁰ These illustrations should make clear that, in all the disciplinary fields enumerated above, a dilemma emerges analogous to that of cultural studies proper: is the text a free-floating object in its own right, or does it "reflect" some context or ground, and in that case does it simply replicate the latter ideologically, or does it possess some autonomous force in which it could also be seen as negating that context? It is only because we are all so irredeemably locked in our disciplinary specializations that we fail to see the similarity of these issues; and the obvious place for Marxism to reassert its claim to being an interdisciplinary and a universal science lies within this particular problematic. Indeed, the privileged status of cultural studies might be conveyed by the way in which such textual and interpretive problems are in them more immediately visible and available for study and reflection than in more apparently empirical sciences.

On the other hand, the issue of the academic disciplines serves to dramatize the ambiguity of the Althusserian position. For in its insistence on the semi-autonomy of the levels or instances—and in particular in its notorious and self-serving attempt to reinvent a privileged place for philosophy proper, in a tradition in which the latter was supposed to have been overcome and subsumed by the "unity of theory and practice"—the Althusserian conception of structure has often seemed to its adversaries to constitute a renewed defense of the reified specialization of the bourgeois academic disciplines, and thereby an essentially

²⁰ Here, the form taken by "expressive causality" is "the conception of the state as agent of the monopolies in state monopoly capitalism"; see in particular Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, trans. Timothy O'Hagan (London: New Left Books, 1973), esp. pp. 273–274.

antipolitical alibi.²¹ It is true that a somewhat different Althusser has himself (in the seminal essay "Ideological State Apparatuses") taught us that in this society what look like ideas require vigilant demystification as the messages of so many institutional or bureaucratic infrastructures (for example, the University). But his critics turn this view against him by reading his own system of semi-autonomous levels as a legitimization of the French Communist Party, henceforth one more inert institution among others within the bourgeois state. It would be frivolous to try to choose between these antithetical evaluations of the Althusserian operation (anti-Stalinist or Stalinist); rather, they mark out a space in which that operation is objectively and functionally ambiguous.

We can, however, locate the source of this ambiguity. It is to be found in an area strategic for any literary or cultural analysis, namely in the concept of *mediation*: that is, the relationship between the levels or instances, and the possibility of adapting analyses and findings from one level to another. Mediation is the classical dialectical term for the establishment of relationships between, say, the formal analysis of a work of art and its social ground, or between the internal dynamics of the political state and its economic base. It should be understood from the outset that Althusser himself assimilates the concept of "mediation" to expressive causality in the Hegelian sense; that is, he grasps the process of mediation exclusively as the establishment of symbolic identities between the various levels, as a process whereby each level is folded into the next, thereby losing its constitutive autonomy and functioning as an expression of its homologues. Thus, state power is seen as the mere expression of the economic system that underlies it, as is the juridical apparatus in a somewhat different way; culture is seen as the expression of the underlying political, juridical and economic instances, and so forth. Starting from this point, the analysis of mediations aims to demonstrate what is not evident in the appearance of things, but rather in their underlying reality, namely that the same essence is at work in the specific languages of culture as in the organization of the relations of production. This Althusserian attack on mediation is central, insofar as its targets are no longer limited to Hegel

²¹ Jacques Rancière, *La Leçon d'Althusser* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), chap. 2; and E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory* (London: Merlin, 1978), pp. 374–379.

and the Lukácsian tradition, but also include thinkers such as Sartre and (more guardedly) Gramsci.

But the concept of mediation has traditionally been the way in which dialectical philosophy and Marxism itself have formulated their vocation to break out of the specialized compartments of the (bourgeois) disciplines and to make connections among the seemingly disparate phenomena of social life generally. If a more modern characterization of mediation is wanted, we will say that this operation is understood as a process of *transcoding*: as the invention of a set of terms, the strategic choice of a particular code or language, such that the same terminology can be used to analyze and articulate two quite distinct types of objects or "texts," or two very different structural levels of reality. Mediations are thus a device of the analyst, whereby the fragmentation and autonomization, the compartmentalization and specialization of the various regions of social life (the separation, in other words, of the ideological from the political, the religious from the economic, the gap between daily life and the practice of the academic disciplines) is at least locally overcome, on the occasion of a particular analysis. Such momentary reunification would remain purely symbolic, a mere methodological fiction, were it not understood that social life is in its fundamental reality one and indivisible, a seamless web, a single inconceivable and transindividual process, in which there is no need to invent ways of linking language events and social upheavals or economic contradictions because on that level they were never separate from one another. The realm of separation, of fragmentation, of the explosion of codes and the multiplicity of disciplines is merely the reality of the appearance: it exists, as Hegel would put it, not so much in itself as rather for us, as the basic logic and fundamental law of our daily life and existential experience in late capitalism. The appeal to some ultimate underlying unity of the various "levels" is therefore a merely formal and empty one, except insofar as it supplies the rationale and the philosophical justification for that more concrete and local practice of mediations with which we are here concerned.

Now what must be said about the Althusserian conception of structure in this respect is that the notion of "semi-autonomy" necessarily has to relate as much as it separates. Otherwise the levels will simply become autonomous tout court, and break into the reified space of the