

Review Essay

Althusser and History

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Bennett, Tony. *Outside Literature*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Sprinker, Michael. *Imaginary Relations: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Theory of Historical Materialism*. New York: Verso, 1987.

Though the authors of both these books are sympathetic to the traditional Marxist desire to politicize the aesthetic, they recognize the validity of poststructuralism's challenge to the base-superstructure model that underwrites so much of Marxist aesthetics. It is their sympathy with this project that prompts them to offer their respective analyses of the vexed dichotomy of aesthetics and history. Michael Sprinker wants to keep both terms of this dichotomy in play and proposes to renegotiate the space between them so that the aesthetic is no longer considered merely a superstructural reflection of the base, history. To this end he argues for an aesthetics that escapes historical determination and transforms ideology, and yet still remains a quantifiable part of history insofar as it can be studied formally in the "material poetic structure" of the work of art. Tony Bennett, on the other hand, argues that the aesthetic is a "philosophical" concept that has no place in literary criticism; he suggests that literature should be considered, not as a "special kind of writing," but as "a historically specific, socially organized and maintained field of textual uses and effects" (142). In the end, neither author is entirely successful in negotiating the difficulties posed by the dichotomy of history and the aesthetic. Sprinker is unable to reconcile the formalism of aesthetics with the historical specificity of the work of art, and Bennett's reliance on the self-identity of academic institutions throws doubt on his ability to separate altogether the aesthetic from literary studies. Both projects, it seems to me, would have benefited from an extensive genealogy of the aesthetic that would fix, at least provisionally, its history and clarify its status in literary institutions.

Michael Sprinker acknowledges the bourgeois character of traditional Marxist aesthetics. He claims that "[c]lassical Marxism shares with bourgeois aesthetics the conviction that in art one attains freedom, and that this freedom consists, among other things, in the liberation from ideological determination and historical determinacy" (13). However, unlike "various post-Marxists" (a category in which we might include Bennett), Sprinker does not believe that Marxism's complicity with bourgeois aesthetics makes Marxism irrelevant. Rather, the author suggests, "What is often dismissively

termed 'bourgeois aesthetics' may well contain the key to a properly materialist theory of art" (15). Sprinker rightly criticizes the Marxist/bourgeois aesthetic for its idealism, which encourages its partisans to ignore the specificity of the work of art, and for its reliance on a model of "reflection," which fails to account for art's intervention in history, or, in Jauss's terms, art's "revolutionary character."

Bennett shares Sprinker's dissatisfaction with the reliance of Marxist aesthetics on reflection. But where Sprinker primarily faults this model for its subordination of the aesthetic to history, Bennett questions its tendency to accept "history" as a pre-discursive given and calls attention to the institutional nature of historical and sociological knowledge. For Bennett, the object pursued in each discipline (history is studied in history curriculums, literature in literature curriculums, etc.) does not exist, a priori, outside the institution. Instead, each discipline produces its own object(s) of knowledge in accordance with different, and apparently separable, rules that determine what counts as "true" within a given disciplinary domain. Bennett argues that such a system of knowledge production poses certain problems for Marxist literary criticism. He claims that though "many of the concepts which define the Marxist tradition—the concepts of class, of relations of production and social formation, for example"—are essentially socio-economic in character, they have been used by critics to master the literary text, resulting in an unfortunate mingling of two incompatible sets of assumptions (8). Such attempts at totalization on the part of literary critics, Marxist and otherwise, have established historical knowledge as the ultimate referent of the literary text, where issues of interpretation of the latter must finally be determined by history. According to Bennett, however, literary texts, like historical texts, form part of the archive of an always provisional past instead of being merely a reflection or representation of a fixed historical reality. This means that literary critics ranging from Louis Althusser to Ian Watt who consider history (or sociology) as a "set of real conditions and relations" to which literature must ultimately refer (42) are making a fundamental category mistake, using the discursive rules of one discipline to validate the object of another.

Besides its commitment to history as the real, Marxist literary theory is, for Bennett at least, incapacitated by yet another institutional category error, one that leads in the direction of Sprinker's other major complaint against the Marxist aesthetic, its idealism. According to Bennett, Marxist literary critics have not only used their ill-gotten socio-economic and historical tenets to master the literary text, they have also been such poor stewards as to allow these concepts to "become entangled with aesthetics through the attempt to construe Marxism as capable of providing an alternative theorization of literature *on the terms established by aesthetic discourse*" (8 [my emphasis]), a discourse that Bennett considers essentially "philosophical," rather than "literary," in character.

Though I remain skeptical of its excision of the aesthetic from literary criticism, *Questioning Literature* does, I feel, deserve credit for its carefully

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executed dissection of (especially Marxist) literary critical practice as well as its thoughtful demystification of the aesthetic which, it will be readily agreed, has often served to perpetuate classist, racist, and sexist politics. Throughout, Bennett's main concern is to replace a critical praxis that treats the literary text as a "special kind of writing" to be deciphered "in terms of the underlying realities [it] express[es]" (141), with one in which literature "emerges . . . as a distinctive [though not subordinate] sphere of social action that is centrally implicated in and imbricated with the constitution and function of political and ideological relations of power and its contestation" (108). In his attack on literary practice, Bennett manages to circumvent some of the problems of previous Marxist or post-Marxist critiques. For instance, he neatly avoids the problems encountered in Terry Eagleton's somewhat dubious attempt to dismantle "literature" by targeting, not "literature" itself, but the commitment of literary criticism to an aesthetics that, he claims, leads only to the critical malaise of indeterminacy (or, as he puts it, "the black-hole effect").¹

Though in basic agreement with Bennett's formulation of literature as "a socially differentiated field of textual uses and effects" (which, by now it is no doubt obvious, owes a great deal to Foucault), I am troubled by his tendency to overstate the fixity of disciplinary boundaries, the more so because it authorizes his dismissal of the aesthetic. The problem with Bennett's formulation is perhaps not so much that there are no boundaries operating among and between the disciplines—clearly, there are—but that these boundaries are more vexed than he wants to admit. Despite occasional acknowledgments of limited interaction between disciplines, he is, finally, committed to a model in which a given discipline is treated as a homogeneous entity governed by specific and specifiable rules proper only to itself. Such a position leads Bennett to oversimplify concepts like the aesthetic which he treats as if its history were coeval only with that of philosophy. Closer scrutiny of the various disciplines in which Bennett's critique is invested would be necessary in order to establish the convergences, the interactions, the common assumptions, and the outright contradictions that would ultimately delineate the praxis he proposes. And I believe that such a praxis would also be less apt to dismiss concepts like the aesthetic which have more complicated institutional histories than Bennett allows for.

Bennett's formulation of the aesthetic as incompatible with literary studies is the most salient difference between his *Outside Literature* and Michael Sprinker's *Imaginary Relations*. Where Bennett sees the aesthetic as a philosophical concept, Sprinker conceives of it as a *formal* category that cuts across disciplinary boundaries, especially those between literature and philosophy. As a formal category, the aesthetic is at odds, not with literary criticism, but with history itself. So conceived, this formalist aesthetic pushes literary analysis away from the specificity of the work of art (hence Sprinker's criticism of the idealism of Marxist aesthetics) and at the same time, because it relies on a model of reflection, "forecloses 'the possibility of grasping the revolutionary character of art'" (96). This opposition of

formalism and history organizes the central problematic of *Imaginary Relations* and brings together a series of readings in which Sprinker explores the tensions and contradictions inherent in Marxist aesthetics and attempts to reconcile, under the aegis of the aesthetic, both formalism and materialism.

At first, Sprinker seems to take a skeptical stance toward the aesthetic as he mounts a series of arguments that deconstruct previous attempts (by such figures as Ruskin, Henry James, Hopkins and Nietzsche, and R.S. Crane) to establish the categorical purity of the aesthetic. Though his discussion of aesthetic theories is by no means exhaustive (indeed, it is somewhat diffuse), Sprinker's analysis does go some distance towards demonstrating that the aesthetic, taken as a purely formal category, is insupportable. His further discussions of Lukács, Jauss, and Riffaterre establish the need to balance the formalism of Marxist aesthetics with a theory of reception powerful enough to account for the apparent interaction between the work of art and history. Sprinker's commitment to reception theory is, I believe, unfortunate, because it is complicit with materialist accounts which represent history as, to use Bennett's phrase, a "set of real conditions and relations." This materialism leads him to an aesthetics that privileges the particular work of art and its relation to a social or historical context over a more general inquiry into the nature of the aesthetic. Sprinker never quite resolves the tension between this aspect of his project and his commitment to de Man's notion of the aesthetic as "a mode of cognition." His adoption, at times, of de Man's more commodious, and I would argue, more suggestive version of the aesthetic, allows him to make rather broad claims. He writes, for instance, that "the category of the aesthetic is intimately involved in the Marxist theory of history at every moment of its development" (13). Here, instead of being determined by history, the aesthetic actually determines how history itself is conceptualized within Marxist theory. Thus, for the de Manian Sprinker, models of history are themselves implicated in the aesthetic structures that they seem to account for.

Where part I of *Imaginary Relations* challenges the scope of the aesthetic, part II (entitled "Marxism") offers a more sustained attempt to work through, on a more theoretical level, the problems endemic to Marxist accounts of the aesthetic. In this section Sprinker makes his way through the work of Fredric Jameson, Jean-Paul Sartre and Perry Anderson in order to prepare a space for the "properly materialist theory of art" suggested in the first chapter. Such a theory must somehow account for the interaction between the aesthetic and ideology, and qualitatively differentiate the work of art from mere ideological representation. After dispensing with these Marxist theorists Sprinker is finally led to piece together and elaborate on the occasional aesthetics of Louis Althusser, relying, finally, on what he refers to as "alienation-effect" to bring together the aesthetic and history. In the most general terms, this properly aesthetic effect is the mechanism that both transforms the materials of ideologies" that constitute the work of art, and

produces new ideology, and therefore new subjects, through interaction with its audience. Sprinker's account of this transformation is inspired by Althusser's contention that "consciousness does not accede to the real through its own internal development, but by the radical discovery of what is *other than itself*" (quoted 278). If consciousness is structured by ideology, the unconscious becomes the site of the "*other than itself*." Transformation, then, is made possible because the work of art and its audience interact in such a way that the former *becomes* the consciousness of the latter and allows for transformation of ideology and hence for movement outside the closed circle of ideological-historical determination.

The author's discussion of the "alienation-effect" recalls his earlier emphasis on the importance of *Rezeptionsästhetik*. He argues for a two-pronged approach to the aesthetic, where the work of art is the object of two modes of investigation: the one a "science of the history of ideology," studies the ways in which works of art are used ideologically to maintain dominant social relations, the other seeks to understand "scientifically" the poetic structures of a given work of art. It seems to me that two major problems haunt this project. The first is one of justification. Sprinker problematically contends that Marx (and Althusser) argue not for a teleology of modes of production but for a differentiating of different forms of the same object, a variation on a theme, so to speak, or elaboration through time. But this model provides no ground for privileging any "new ideology" produced by the work of art. By taking the teleology out of Marxism, Sprinker leaves himself no means of justifying the ideological transformation initiated by the aesthetic object. And we are left to wonder why this transformation was so important to begin with. The second problem is that instead of debunking the nature of the aesthetic, the version of formalism that Sprinker embraces in the end relegates the aesthetic to the unaccountable processes of the unconscious and so reinstates the same mystification of the aesthetic that he admits has plagued Marxist accounts of art all along. In order to secure the aesthetic, Sprinker must efface it. It seems to me that both these problems stem from Sprinker's inability to reconcile reception theory with formalism. Being understandably unwilling to locate the site of the aesthetic solely in a reader or in a text, Sprinker seems nonetheless to give priority to "the materiality of the work of art (i.e., its formal properties as a product of aesthetic practice . . .)" (272). Partly because of his ultimate abandonment of a broader vision of the aesthetic, the connection which Sprinker insists upon between the two categories of formalism and historical determination remains, finally, largely rhetorical.

Though his discussion of the aesthetic as it pertains to the work of art falls short of its stated goal (the "clarification of concepts"), Sprinker does point, in his more *de Manian* moments, to another more promising arena in which aesthetic theory might be applied—the problem of how to account for historical change in general. This problem is eventually framed within a context that Bennett ultimately rejects, Kant's formulation of the aesthetic (in *Critique of Judgement*), in which the aesthetic mediates between being-

in-the-world (practical Reason) and rational understanding (pure Reason). While Bennett claims that “theories of the aesthetic logically presuppose an already elaborated theory of knowledge,” it seems to me that Sprinker holds out the possibility that the reverse might instead (or also) be true. The possibility, once recognized, of deconstructing this dichotomy suggests a way out of the materialist dilemma in which Sprinker finds himself. If the aesthetic is not the product of an epistemology but rather enables epistemological distinctions, then the aesthetic would be implicated in the very structure of history itself. Pushing this more comprehensive notion of the aesthetic through a rigorous genealogy might produce a useful map of the relation between the aesthetic and the disciplines in which it operates. Unfortunately, Sprinker approaches this insight obliquely and fails to develop or explore this larger epistemological issue, so that it becomes difficult to assess his own attitude towards it. But it is nonetheless clear that Sprinker’s materialism does not offer the only venue in which to exploit the tension between history and the aesthetic.

Ultimately, any analysis that establishes the relation of the aesthetic to historical change needs to involve a more detailed study of the aesthetic. Instead of falling back on the “materiality” of the work of art, such a study would examine the structural necessity of the aesthetic to concepts of history. Instead of pragmatically excluding the aesthetic as a pure disciplinary concept, a genealogy of “the aesthetic” might determine its disciplinary commitments, accidental and otherwise. After all, one need not be a proponent of a “history of ideas” to suspect that concepts like the aesthetic have histories that cannot be contained within a single discipline.

Note

1. Like Stephen Heath, Bennett maintains that regardless of how vehemently Eagleton denounces literature as a category, he is still writing from a position “inside” the institutional confines of literature—for all Eagleton’s efforts, “literature” will not simply disappear in a puff of logic.