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Introduction

The essays assembled here are, with one exception, selected from among the twenty-nine papers presented at the conference on "Literature and Politics / Literary Politics" held at the Université Sainte-Anne on October 24-26, 1986.¹ There may be a certain appropriateness to the fact that a field of inquiry which has until recent years been systematically marginalized in Anglo-American and English-Canadian literary criticism should have been broached in this manner—at an institution whose marginality is signalled by its location on the stony shores of the Baie Sainte-Marie in south-west Nova Scotia; one, moreover, which exists to serve a marginalized people whose culture testifies most eloquently to the commerce between literature and politics.² Yet the vigorous response by literary scholars from across Canada to the concerns suggested by the title of this conference provides one indication, among many, that these are no longer confined to the margins of literary discourse. They have to an increasing degree become recognized as its informing context—as a context no longer in the reductive sense of an inert backdrop against which selected texts lifted from the flux of history by the process of canonization are made to speak their lines, but rather in the root sense of *contextus*: that which is inextricably interwoven into literary discourse as a part of its texture and a condition of its textuality.

This development can be understood in a variety of ways—as, for example, a consequence of that Derridean "logic of the margin" according to which any act of delimitation also entails a recollection of that which is evacuated, excluded, and defined as 'other'. The domain of the literary has by this token been haunted by the gender and class politics that it was arguably instituted to exclude: in effect, the literary text has been invaded by its margin, which, in Derrida's words, is not "blank, virgin, empty..., but another text, a weave of differences... without any present center of reference," where there recurs "everything—'history,' 'politics,' 'economy,' 'sexuality,' etc.—said not

to be written in books..." (*Margins*, xxiii). However, this Derridean logic, which is, characteristically, a logic of the 'always already,' would seem to be a narrative which has suppressed its own historical dimension—as may become evident if one stops to ask why a concern with these issues has not 'always already' been detectable within the literary academy.

For an explanation of the re-emergence of the political in literary-critical discourse I turn, then, from logic to narration—and in so doing am compelled to remember that the genre into which these introductory remarks fall, that of the discourse of legitimation, is itself inescapably a narrative one (cf. Lyotard 18-37). Until quite recently, literary studies in North America were customarily based upon two axioms, clearly enunciated by the New Critics, and perpetuated by later theorists like Northrop Frye. These axioms, of the autonomy and the organic unity of literary texts, were often taken to justify a neglect both of historical scholarship and of inquiry into the conditions surrounding the production, transmission, and reception of literary works—for if the meaning of a text is wholly contained within that text, and is recoverable through close study of its formal properties, the relevance of such pursuits is not immediately evident. During the past decade, however, these axioms have been successfully challenged by various critical theories, originating in Europe, which began to be adopted and developed by North American scholars in the late 1960s.

The most influential of these has of course been the post-structuralism of Jacques Derrida, whose work, though itself arguably both formalist and ahistorical in its implications, helped to redirect attention from textual substance to intertextuality and contextualism, and from an organic unity ensuring a plenitude of meaning, to discontinuities, ruptures, and contradictions which make meaning seem fugitive and unstable. Allying itself with the concerns of feminist theorists and critics, Derridean deconstruction has resulted in challenges to the ideologies implicit in the literary canon, and in the development of new means of exploring the ways in which texts are traversed and subverted by the discourses which they embody, or dismember. Other forms of French post-structuralism, notably those advanced at different stages of his career by Michel Foucault, have encouraged some North American critics to take up modes of analysis that are more historical in orientation, and more clearly focussed on ideological issues. A self-reflexive concern with the many-voiced, polytropic quality of literary texts, and with the cultural, ideological, and political conditions involved in acts of literary interpretation and creation, has been further encouraged by the belated translation into English by works by Walter Benjamin and Mikhail Bakhtin, and also

by the impact of other more recent theoretical tendencies, primarily German in origin—of post-Heideggerian hermeneutics (Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur) and of reception theory (Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss). Some of these writers (Benjamin, Bakhtin) have been directly, if perhaps ambivalently, affiliated to the tradition of Marxist aesthetics; the others have without exception engaged in different kinds of dialogue with a revitalized and eclectic Marxism which has become a significant force in literary theory during the past two decades, and the major contemporary exponents of which—Robert Weimann in Germany, Pierre Macherey in France, Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton in England, John Fekete in Canada, and Fredric Jameson and Frank Lentricchia in the U.S.—have in turn drawn freely upon post-structuralist thought in developing critical perspectives which throw into high relief the historical and ideological determinants of the institution of literature, of acts of interpreting, and of recent schools of interpretation.

Such a narrative calls at once for amplification. Can one pass over in silence the fact that French post-structuralism has for many North American readers been mediated by such forceful writers as Paul de Man, Jonathan Culler, Geoffrey Hartman, Patricia Parker, and Edward Said? (In this context, one may also recall Julia Kristeva's remark that "Academic discourse, and perhaps American university discourse in particular, possesses an extraordinary ability to absorb, digest, and neutralize all of the key, radical, or dramatic moments of thought, particularly, a fortiori, of contemporary thought" [83].) Can one afford to neglect the manner in which the elegant aggressiveness of American neo-pragmatists like Stanley Fish and Richard Rorty, or the hard-edged polemics of more traditionally oriented theorists like A.D. Nuttall and Gerald Graff, have contributed to current theoretical debates? Can one, finally, fail to observe the masculinist bias of this narrative—its near-omission, until this moment, of any mention of the enormous impact of contemporary feminist writing, from Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* to the works of Luce Irigaray, Elizabeth Abel and Elaine Showalter, upon literary discourse?

If the most salient feature of this narrative is thus its inadequacy as even a potted history of recent developments in the field of literary studies, it may at least serve to indicate the degree to which that field has become fluid, exciting, conflicted—and often, confusing. One recent title, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, may seem emblematic of that confusion (as also, perhaps, of its author's desire to inherit the mantle of Moses). Other titles—*Politics and Poetic Value*, *Criticism and Ideology*, *Criticism and Social Change*, *Literature and Society*, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, *Literature Against Itself*, *The Politics*

of Interpretation, Against Theory, The Political Unconscious, Political Shakespeare, Postmodernism and Politics—the list could be extended—testify to the fact that a preoccupation with ideological and political questions has become one of the mainstream concerns of contemporary literary studies. Literary discourse, it would seem, has an inescapable (though often submerged) political dimension; and the struggles with one another of competing literary theories reveal another aspect of the interpenetration of literary and political discourse. Hence the title of this collection: *Literature and Politics/Literary Politics*.

I shall not pause here to comment on the play of ambiguities contained in that title, with its repetition and re-distribution of the two terms which it relates: John Fekete's essay of the same title, which was delivered as a plenary lecture at the conference, begins with a succinct explication of the possibilities and deceptions folded into those words. However, certain reflections prompted by this title impose themselves at this point. What would seem to be at issue, according to the foregoing narrative at least, is a paradigm shift within what Cornelius Castoriadis has termed "the social imaginary"—that dimension of the social world "which overdetermines the choice and connections of symbolic networks" and which is hence the source of those representations accepted as 'given' or indisputable, and the basis of discriminations between what does and does not matter (203, quoted from Thompson 23). Within this paradigm shift, in which "the structural allegory," as John Fekete has called it, remains a dominating force, one can see the basis of those noisy conflicts over theoretical issues which have been a feature of critical discourse during the last decade and more, and which constitute one aspect of 'literary politics.' The language of post-structuralism has from the outset been insistently political in character: in *De la grammatologie*, for example, Derrida held forth the promise of a liberation of semiology from "la répression logocentrique" (74); as I have remarked elsewhere, political overtones such as this were taken up and amplified in the early receptions of his work (Keefer 81). Yet the textual politics thus introduced may, as A.D. Nuttall has suggested, involve a theft as well as the bestowing of a gift (cf. Nuttall ch. 1). The prospect of an understanding of the discursive workings of human culture is a liberating one—most particularly so because what it insistently brings to light is the manner in which the slighting and silencing of one sex has unbalanced the whole. But as Fekete has remarked, the post-structuralist discounting of human agency through the reduction of the individual to "an absent otherness, a faded trace in the problematization of the human," seems "especially short-sighted" (xix), since discourse without agency is hard

to reconcile either with the possibility of willed social transformation or with the development of “a poetics of history, ... a narrative theory of the social imaginary that could convincingly identify domination ... [and] hold out intimations of something better” (xx). A similar blockage may be detectable in the refusal of many contemporary theorists to concede that mimesis can be at once discursive and referential. Richard Rorty has remarked acerbically that

There are, alas, people nowadays who owlshly inform us “philosophy has *proved*” that language does not refer to anything nonlinguistic, and thus that everything one can talk about is a text. This claim is on a par with the claim that Kant proved that we cannot know about things-in-themselves. Both claims rest on a phony contrast between some sort of nondiscursive unmediated vision of the real and the way we actually talk and think. Both falsely infer from “We can’t think without concepts, or talk without words” to “We can’t think or talk except about what has been created by our thought or talk.” (154-5)

The domain of the political is of course very much a matter of that which is created by our thought or talk. (To say that it is also a matter of that which speaks or ‘thinks’ itself through us, and which thus effectively creates us as social beings, is to recognize the existence of challenges to traditional notions of the political precisely analogous to those which have shaken author-centred notions of the literary.) But one may also fairly claim that whatever one comprehends by ‘literary politics’ is less liable to reduction to the level of intra-professional squabbling once it is conceded that literary discourse is both referential and cognitive as well as self-referential.

The reminder that there is always and inescapably a *hors-texte* provides an additional reason for recognizing the inadequacy of the narrative I have provided here: for while the first half of my title links two terms, ‘literature’ and ‘politics,’ the narrative which pretends to legitimize that connection can hardly be said to have strayed beyond the former term. Needless to say, it is that category which is privileged here—and yet there may be some irony to the fact that a narrative which begins by proclaiming the dethroning of literary notions of autonomy then proceeds as though literature itself were an autonomous domain.

This defect, which I will not attempt to repair, is more than counter-balanced by the first three essays collected here. The first of these, Gillian Thomas’s meditation on the ways in which the threat of nuclear annihilation has disrupted our capacity to read the texts which we transmit to our students in anything like the way earlier generations did, and on the widespread failure of the academy even to acknowledge this radical discontinuity, introduces considerations important

in any re-evaluation of the intersections of the literary and the political. Arun Mukherjee's essay springs more directly out of pedagogical concerns. In her study of "Ideology in the Classroom," the experience of teaching a Margaret Laurence story brings to a focus the complicity of the literary institution (against which, in this case, both text and teacher struggle in vain) in the perpetuation of gender, class, and neo-colonial oppression. The next essay, by Robert Holton, exposes the historical roots of this complicity through a skilful and ideologically alert reconstruction of the heavily-politicized origins of the discipline of English literature. Here, then, are three major aspects of the historical, functional, and psychological linkage of literature and politics.

John Fekete's essay, which follows these, offers a sustained analysis of the interpenetration of those two terms in modern and postmodern theorizing about literature. With exemplary precision and breadth of reference, he moves, after a careful preliminary situating of the various issues at stake, to a methodical exploration of the central question of autonomy (one aspect of which has been alluded to above), and from thence to an "overview of the political architecture of the institution of critical practice" which is remarkable as much for its generosity and openness as for its taxonomic inclusiveness. Alan Kennedy's response to this essay, while acknowledging these qualities, takes issue with Fekete on several matters, suggesting, for example, that his proposals for a value-inflected criticism amount to a kind of "anti-foundational foundationalism" which generates a number of interesting paradoxes. Distinguishing his own position from that of "the classic deconstructors, the boa deconstructors," Kennedy nonetheless shows an equal capacity for swallowing adversarial positions, his concluding argument being that Fekete's emphasis on "resistance" makes his position "covertly deconstructive."

The first five essays here are thus concerned, in different ways, with the politics of the academic institution of literature; in the nine which follow, the emphasis falls predominantly upon the conjunctions of literature and politics at various historical moments, and upon what James Quinlan here calls the "textual body"—in short, upon the political inflections of given literary texts more distinctly than upon the institutional modalities of their reception and transmission.

Dena Goldberg is concerned with two Renaissance plays which rewrite a story, derived from Livy, of rape and tyranny—and of the overthrow of tyranny. Restoring these plays to their ideological contexts in early Elizabethan and in Jacobean England, she shows how each uses the Roman story to make a statement of direct political relevance to a time of crisis, and to do so without the prurience that

characterizes Shakespeare's handling of the same motifs. If Webster's version of the Appius and Virginia story is clearly a specimen of what Jonathan Dollimore calls "radical tragedy," the unpublished play-texts discussed by Reavley Gair in his essay, and situated by him in relation to the moralist poetics of Ben Jonson, respond to the crisis of the pre-Civil War years from the opposite end of the political spectrum. Working from manuscript sources in the National Library of Wales, Gair restores to view a writer who is of interest both as one struggling voice in an age of open conflict, and also for his family connections: himself a follower of Jonson, his father knew the editors of Shakespeare's First Folio, and his grandfather was the addressee of Shakespeare's "The Phoenix and the Turtle."

Taking us to another moment of crisis, one which was also seen by contemporary commentators as a kind of political apocalypse, Kathryn Chittick's study of "Literature and Politics in 1833" provides an intriguing reconstruction of the ideological and institutional changes taking place in the world of letters during that 'interregnum' which preceded the rise to prominence of the great Victorians. Thomas Carlyle, whose remarks on this "time of unmixed evil" introduce Chittick's discussion of the political and literary cross-currents of the period of the first Reform Bill, is also the subject of L.M. Findlay's incisive analysis of the poetics and politics of gender in *The French Revolution*. Focussing on "the interplay of mythic and historical constructions of gender whereby Carlyle communicates the reality of political convulsion and the need for its containment," Findlay allows the relationship between Jane and Thomas Carlyle to serve as a bitterly ironic commentary on this patriarchal stance. Another aspect of the same problematic is brought to light by Marjorie Stone's nuanced exposition of the remarkably complex functions of cursing in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's political poetry: the rhetorical choices which this poet confronted—of confining herself to conventionally female speech acts, of disguising her own sex, or of asserting it—all entailed one or another form of alienation and suppression.

The last four essays are concerned with writers of this century. D.L. Macdonald's exploration of Wallace Stevens' use of the *Memoirs* of Victor Serge discloses, in the intertextual relationship between the poet and the revolutionary, "the man of mutability and the man of integrity," an unexpected "middle ground in the vision of despair." J.A. Wainwright is concerned in his essay, not with Hemingway's obviously political major novels, but rather with one of his early stories, analysis of which reveals gender complexities that authorize a strongly feminist reading, and, by implication, cast doubt upon the canonical receptions of this writer's work. A different aspect of the

issue of reception is powerfully foregrounded in Patricia Clements' study of the relationships between Nancy Cunard—poet, editor, and political activist—and the representations of her by male artists, most of whom sought through a violent re-imposition of conventional categories of the feminine to punish her for her transgressions of racist and sexist prohibitions. Clements' concluding paragraphs outline a struggle between these polemical allegories and a recalcitrant reality which sought, and here finds, an alternative textual embodiment. Between this pattern and that of the last essay in this collection, James Quinlan's study of Milan Kundera's *The Joke*, the reader may detect certain resonances. Here also a political allegory is at work, the initial impact of which in the movement against Stalinism can be traced with precision, and the key moments of which involve asymmetrical encounters between naked man and clothed woman, naked woman and clothed man. However, its author subsequently disowned this allegory, making the plot serve instead as a prefiguration of its own receptions—thus, one might say, attempting to re-clothe the text and to strip the reader of her power over it. In this classically postmodern gesture one might well see an image of the manner in which the political realities faced by contemporary interpreters and writers have become elusive, decentred, disseminated.

"Spare me your Stalinism, please," Kundera writes, "*The Joke* is a love story." Yet even were one to concede to the novelist this degree of interpretive authority over his own work, the readjustment would not make the text any the less political, as the perspectives established by these essays will reveal.

NOTES

1. The exception is L. M. Findlay's essay on Carlyle, a version of which was presented at the 1985 Learned Societies conference in Montréal. The conference on "Literature and Politics/Literary Politics" was made possible by a generous grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I am grateful also for the financial and organizational support provided by the Université Sainte-Anne.
2. Victims in 1755 of one of this country's inaugural political crimes, the Acadians of Nova Scotia still retain a popular memory of their ancestors' deportation that is mediated and shaped as much by Longfellow's *Evangeline* as by the truculent gaiety of Antonine Maillet. Through an erasure and reimagining of "le grand dérangement" that exemplifies "the power of fictive constructs to displace or usurp historical reality" (Kulyk Keefer 41), Longfellow's mythic text has for a century mobilized meaning for the perpetuation both of patriarchal domination within Acadian society and of submissiveness to the anglophone cultural and economic order which interpenetrates it (cf. Roy ch 2).

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