

# CRITICISM, LITERARY THEORY AND IDEOLOGY

Critique, théorie littéraire et idéologie

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## INTRODUCTION

In *Against the Stream*,<sup>1</sup> Gunnar Myrdal coined the term “opportunistic bias” to identify the explanatory models and concepts we use in drawing inferences and constructing the concepts we use in our quests for truth and in the directions of our research interests. We are also influenced by individual personality traits and the “mighty tradition in our discipline as well as the play of interests and prejudices in the society in which we live and work” (p. 53). Our “opportunistic” bias entails not only examining the ideological tendencies underpinning our research but investigating our hermeneutical stance. Since Wilhelm Dilthey, and more recently, Martin Heidegger and subsequently Hans-Georg Gadamer, we realize the extent to which we as researchers are tied to our social reality and the degree to which our social reality is inextricably bound to the social reality of the texts we study. In literary studies, all thought is socially and historically shaped and informed. According to Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, any adequate sociology of knowledge takes into account pre-reflective and pre-theoretical economies of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Our theories, thus shaped, surface as self-conscious legitimations of our time and the multiple realities surrounding us. They may be latent; they may be hidden in what and how we do our research. But we cannot separate ourselves from them or we choose not to. It is this problem of interpretation or hermeneutics that we seek to examine in this volume.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Comparative Literature (CL) as a discipline rose to prominence in the US in the years following the Second World War. It existed, of course, in Europe already. But it was the influx of refugees fleeing the Nazis that brought a cadre of literature scholars, mostly Europeanists and not primarily English literature experts (or English speakers) to America’s shores. There was a need to place them in academic positions. They

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<sup>1</sup> Myrdal, Gunnar, *Against the Stream: Critical Essays in Economics*. New York, Pantheon 1973.

<sup>2</sup> Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Anchor 1966.

brought with them their individual country's understanding of Comparative Literature, whether it be the *Stoffgeschichte* of the German language tradition and its concept of *Bildung* or the influence studies prevalent in France and Belgium. These approaches to Comparative Literature imposed an ambitious agenda on the discipline in the US, particularly in its demand for a breadth of knowledge in multiple repertoires and a facility with several languages and literary systems. Most significantly, this generation of comparatists crafted a field of study in the States in order to defy, reject, and repudiate the nationalisms from which they had fled. Comparative Literature became the haven for those espousing a universalism as well as a rejection of what parochial nationalisms had wrought in Europe. It was ideologically inflected from its early days in the US.

This historical situation of American CL as ideologically influenced was further strengthened by the subsequent influx of scholars fleeing Communist regimes in Eastern Europe in the post-World War II era. Due to these two migrations, CL thrived as a refuge for a polyglot highly trained (in European institutions) cadre of professionals with an extensive knowledge of the classical tradition, philology, cultural history, and three or four literatures with a specialization in at least one. It set high goals for its American students, as witnessed by the *Levin Report*<sup>3</sup> on professional standards (1965) presented to the American Comparative Literature Association. Yet, in this *Report*, there had been some concerns voiced on whether CL could really thrive in America without a continual influx of polyglot immigrants. This concern became more pressing in the 60s, with reforms made to the general education requirements in American universities and a subsequent watering down of the curriculum. Could American Comparative Literature maintain high standards of language, literatures and general *Bildung* after 1969? While these former standards might be aspirational, there was some trepidation in the profession that the center could no longer hold. The lack of necessary language skills among the American students, who were raised in the American educational system, was subsequently signaled by the ACLA's *Greene Report* of 1975 (in Bernheimer pp. 28-38). Most American students were not sufficiently trained in languages to study several literatures. A solution was found in the shift in many CL programs to an emphasis on theory, which could be read in translation. Moreover, it was deemed legit-

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<sup>3</sup> "The Levin Report" in Charles Bernheimer, ed. *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1997 pp. 21-27.

imate to study primarily those works of literature mentioned in a given theory, rather than seek a comprehensive command of some specific canon. As a senior professor explained to me at the time: you only read texts that a given theory finds applicable. Literature exists to prove the veracity of a given theory. This is the reason for all those studies of Lao Tzu, Rilke, and Mallarmé under Deconstruction and Kipling under Postcolonial Theory.

The language problem certainly contributed to the explosion of literary theory as a focus of CL in the US from the 70s onward. The salient point here is that there has always been an ideological component to CL and especially its theorizing in the US, abetted by systemic deficiencies in language learning among American students. Theories of literature and inadequate language learning in the US continue to shape the field, as witnessed by the recent institutionalization of World Literature taught in English translation as an “inclusive” and “democratizing” event. The desire to escape nationalism, that had informed those initial scholars fleeing nationalism and totalitarian regimes in the 30, 40s, 50s and 60s, was replaced (as the ACLA *Bernheimer Report* of 1993 notes) by the quest to incorporate “into the very fabric of the discipline” comparisons

between various cultural constructions . . . between Western cultural traditions, both high and popular, and those of non-Western cultures; between the pre- and post-contact cultural productions of colonized peoples; between gender constructions defined as feminine and those defined as masculine, or between sexual orientations defined as straight and those defined as gay; between racial and ethnic modes of signifying; between hermeneutic articulations of meaning and materialist analyses of its modes of production and circulation; and much more. The field now envisioned included the expanded fields of discourse, culture, ideology, race, and gender. (Bernheimer p.42)

It recognized that “old models of literary study according to authors, nations, periods, and genres . . . may no longer adequately describe our object of study” (*ibid.*). The study of literature now entailed the recognition of “understanding the role of a native tongue in creating subjectivity, in establishing epistemological patterns, in imagining communal structures, in forming notions of nationhood, and in articulating resistance and accommodation to political and cultural hegemony” (43). It was deemed important for the comparatist to accept the “responsibility of locating the particular place and time at which he or she studies these practices” (44). The positionality from which each comparatist speaks becomes paramount, sometimes even eclipsing the cultural product under study.